Introduction: Shakespeare in culture

Let but a Briton step upon the stage,
Whence will he draw the glass for every age?
To one lov'd fount of magic he will go;
With one lov'd name his head and heart will glow;
One only volume will his hand unroll;
SHAKESPEARE, the mighty master of the soul!
(Samuel Egerton Brydges, 'Prologue for Shakespeare's Henry IV', 1830)[1]

This is a book about one of the most widespread and significant ways in which the plays of William Shakespeare have participated in English-speaking culture over the four centuries since they were written. It offers the first ever sustained examination of the contexts and styles in which people who are not theatrical professionals have chosen to perform Shakespeare's plays for themselves and their immediate communities, in locations ranging from aristocratic drawing rooms to village halls, and from military encampments to rain-swept cliffsides. This is an area which earlier studies of Shakespeare's reception and dissemination – including my own – have substantially overlooked, and they have been mistaken in doing so. While amateur productions generally have shorter runs than professional ones, over time they have been far more numerous, and at several important points in theatrical history the geographical scope and social inclusiveness of the amateur theatre have dwarfed those of the commercial and subsidized playhouses. In the immediate post-war years, for example, some provincial English cities had as many as fifty competing amateur dramatic societies, and even the small Yorkshire town of Mirfield, birthplace of Patrick Stewart, was home to six: once asked by an American interviewer whether his working-class parents had been surprised that he had become interested in the classical theatre, Stewart replied that given his home town's investment in drama they would have been more surprised if he had not.[2] The word 'investment' is crucial here: the long history of how Shakespeare has been

performed by amateurs is a story of how successive groups of people have committed themselves to incorporating these plays into their own lives and their own immediate societies, and it makes visible a whole range of responses to the national drama which other reception histories have missed. This is not another book about the societies which Shakespeare's plays depict, then, but a study of the ones which they have helped to convene. Within the changing modes of amateur production, I will be arguing, the place and meaning of Shakespeare's work for successive generations of Anglophones has been continually renegotiated between his time and our own, and this book represents a first attempt at outlining the cultural history of this pervasive and enduring response to his canon and to his canonicity.

AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL

That history begins, as far as surviving written records are concerned, on a single date back in Shakespeare's own lifetime, namely 5 September 1607. In London that season the King's Men were performing Shakespeare's *Pericles*, during which the stage of the Globe had to imitate the deck of a ship, but some thousands of miles to the south the deck of a ship was instead imitating the stage of the Globe. 5 September 1607 was a memorable day all round for the crews of the *Red Dragon* and the *Hector*. Bound for the East Indies on the third-ever voyage organized by the East India Company, the galleons had already had an eventful journey. Separated from the third ship that had sailed with them, they had been blown off course towards Brazil, and they had then been becalmed for so long in the doldrums that their supplies had run dangerously low. Now, replenishing their stores along the coast of West Africa so as not to have to turn back towards England, they were moored at the mouth of the Mitombo river, in what has since become Freetown harbour in Sierra Leone. The overall commander of the expedition and captain of *Red Dragon*, William Keeling, had on 4 September received the brother-in-law of the local king, Buré, together with three followers, onto his ship. This African royal emissary, christened Lucas Fernandez, was a former resident of the Portuguese-governed Cape Verde islands, where he had been brought up as a Catholic and educated in European languages; Keeling refers to him in his journal simply as 'the interpreter'. He would soon encounter a major challenge to his skills as such, the task of providing, for his three

companions, the first-ever simultaneous translation of a Shakespearean performance, quite possibly into both Portugese and the local African language, Temne:

> September 5. I sent the interpreter, according to his desire, aboard the *Hector*, where he broke fast, and after came aboard me, where we gave the tragedy of Hamlet; and in the afternoon we all went ashore together, to see if we could shoot an elephant; we shot seven or eight bullets into him, and made him bleed exceedingly, as appeared by his track, but being near night we were constrained aboard, without effecting our purposes on him.[3]

Three diplomatic presents: a meal, a bloody but inconclusive elephant hunt and, in the interim, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The first-ever recorded production of a Shakespeare play outside Europe was not performed by professional actors in a commercial playhouse, but as part of an exchange of gifts, so that 5 September 1607 saw the beginning not only of the history of Shakespeare in Africa but of the recorded history of Shakespeare in non-professional performance. As if determined to underline his crew's historic status as the first honorary amateur dramatic society ever to play the work of William Shakespeare, Captain Keeling had his men perform another script by the same author to entertain his colleague, the master of the *Hector*, on 29 September – 'Captain Hawkins dined with me, when my company acted King Richard the Second' – and half a year later, on 31 March 1608, they repeated *Hamlet*. Recording this event, Keeling noted his reasons for allowing it, echoing some of the East India Company's standard instructions for the maintenance of discipline: 'I invited Captain Hawkins to a fish dinner, and had Hamlet acted aboard me; which I permit, to keep my people from idleness and unlawful games, or sleep.'[4]

However odd *Richard II* may look as a play chosen to keep mariners too busy to think about mutiny (the main potential danger which might make any captain fear 'idleness'), there were good reasons why *Hamlet* might recommend itself to a sea-captain in quest of material for shipboard performance by his crew, quite apart from those which might make it suitable for professional command performances at court back home. Quite apart from his salty offstage adventures encountering pirates in the North Sea, the Prince himself recognizes drama, and especially tragedy, as something which ought at very least to keep the discerning awake, as he makes clear in his derisive comment on Polonius' theatrical tastes – 'he's for a jig, or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps' (2.2.503–4).[5] But in the world of *Hamlet* drama has social uses far beyond this, and they are

not confined to the professional Players. Even the supposedly undiscriminating Polonius is a veteran of the amateur stage, having played Julius Caesar while at university, and Hamlet, with the possible exception only of Nick Bottom the weaver, is the most passionate exponent of amateur theatricals in the Shakespeare canon, serving as actor, director and even playwright. He insists on performing most of Aeneas' account of the killing of Pyrrhus when the players arrive at Elsinore, gives them detailed notes before the performance he arranges before the court and contributes his own speech of some dozen or sixteen lines to *The Murder of Gonzago*, a.k.a. *The Mousetrap*. It is not entirely surprising that this level of enthusiasm, like so much else within *Hamlet*, should have spilled over from the play into the culture at large and inspired generations of readers to give their associates a taste of their own quality by treating *Hamlet* just as its protagonist treats the death of Pyrrhus. It is true that the Players are themselves full-time, and that Hamlet's discussion of the rivalry with child-actors in the city which has forced them to go on tour reveals a shrewd sense of the economics of the public stage. But here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare – unlike contemporaries such as Beaumont and Fletcher – refrains from depicting either commercial playwrights or purpose-built theatres. Participation in dramatic performance within the Shakespeare canon is not primarily a business matter for professionals.

In fact, just like the 1607 shipboard *Hamlet*, theatrical events depicted by Shakespeare take place not on a solely commercial basis but within a gift economy. The Pageant of the Nine Worthies in *Love's Labour's Lost*, 'Pyramus and Thisbe' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the morris-dance in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* are subordinated to the surviving codes and practices of feudalism, presented strictly as the dutiful offerings of commoners to their social superiors, and even the troupes who arrive at the Lord's house in the induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* and at Elsinore in *Hamlet* offer 'service' to individual patrons rather than services to all paying comers. While doing so they are not treated as independent contractors working solely for a cash fee, moreover, but are adopted as temporary members of these respective households. The Lord in *The Taming of the Shrew*, hearing the actors' trumpet, at first expects 'some noble gentleman that means, / Travelling some journey, to repose him here', and even when he discovers that it is merely the actors (offering what they describe as their 'duty') he provides a similar sort of feudal hospitality: '... give them friendly welcome every one. / Let them want nothing that my house affords' (Ind, 73–4, 101–2). Hamlet too welcomes actors as members of his household, requesting that Polonius should see

them 'well bestowed' (2.2.524–5). Acting, in Shakespeare's plays, is primarily a food gig, whether you do it for a living or not. It is striking in this connection that Shakespeare's most elevated vision of the theatre – his brief glimpse of a Platonic super-drama able to do full justice to human history – does not feature professionals at all:

> O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
> The brightest heaven of invention:
> A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
> And monarchs to behold the swelling scene. (*Henry V*, Prol, 1–4).

However one reads the metaphor here, no one, presumably, would be paid for any of this, or have to do it for a living. What is being imagined seems much closer to the court theatricals which King James would patronize a few years later, when princes really did act before monarchs, albeit with some incidental help from more experienced players such as the in-house royal servants, Shakespeare's troupe, the King's Men. This arrangement has an even closer corollary within the Shakespeare canon, in that Prospero, like James, uses his own resident servants – Ariel and his fellow spirits – when he wants to host a theatrical entertainment in act 4 of *The Tempest*. As at court, at the very top of the social pyramid of favours and obligations, theatre in Shakespeare's time, even commercial theatre, takes place under the sign of gift and patronage. In fact Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, probably became the King's Men on the accession of James as a gift themselves, their services passed on to the new monarch from the old Chamberlain as a display of loyalty to the new regime and in hope of future preferment.[6] William Shakespeare was not what we would call an amateur, certainly, but as the liveried nominal servant of an aristocrat and then a king he was not exactly what we would now describe as professional either, and it should not be too surprising that in performance his plays have gone on appearing on both sides of the boundary between those who do it for love (to spell out the etymology of the word 'amateur') and those who do it for money.

Back-dating a modern sense of where that boundary lies and what it means into Shakespeare's own time is of course an unhistorical thing to do, and to describe the crew of the *Red Dragon* as an 'honorary amateur dramatic society' is consciously to misapply nomenclature which did not exist until the nineteenth century to a group of performers from the early seventeenth. Self-identified amateur companies could not come into being until other groups of actors had codified their working practices

and financial arrangements into regulatory patterns, common to other skilled occupations, to which the word 'professional' would only be applied in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in practice the terms 'amateur dramatic society' and 'amateur dramatic club' were only widely used from the Victorian period onwards. Back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, since there was no designated guild for full-time actors (and the social status of players admitted to the membership of existing guilds was at best ambiguous), there was no correspondingly clear non-guild status for occasional performers. If this means that strictly speaking it would be anachronistic to describe any part-time performers in Shakespeare's time as amateurs, it also implies that it would be equally misleading to describe early modern full-time performers as professionals. Although the received history of the English stage has usually wished to identify Shakespeare's period as the era which saw the emergence of the theatrical profession as such (what in 1962 Muriel Bradbrook influentially called *The Rise of the Common Player*), the desire to represent Shakespeare and his colleagues as thoroughgoing self-established professionals may reflect not so much the state of the Elizabethan stage as that of twentieth-century universities, where the first generations of full-time academic theatre historians were perennially anxious to distinguish themselves from the mere dilettantes and enthusiasts who had hitherto chronicled the development of English drama.

Indeed, the more one examines the categories of 'professional' and 'amateur' across theatrical history the more precarious and complicated they appear to be, even without tracing modern Western drama back to its pre-professional religious roots in ancient Athens or medieval Europe. Any study of amateur drama is therefore confronted at its outset with the vexed problem of how to define it. Before the 'amateur dramatics' of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for instance, there were 'private theatricals'. These were typically performances staged at aristocratic country houses before invited audiences, but given by casts which might well include London professionals hired for the occasion alongside high-born volunteers, and the question of exactly how the professional status of famous and experienced actors was to be negotiated against the social status of their inexperienced but often titled colleagues was never a simple one. The attempt to distinguish amateur performance from professional simply by noting whether hard cash changes hands, either at a box office or between managers and players, usually fails. It is not true that professionals are simply those who make theatre for money, as opposed to those who make theatre for love alone: today plenty of professional companies

are run on a not-for-profit basis, and plenty more which intend to make profits do not but are in practice lovingly subsidized out of the savings of their personnel. ('I have never been able to understand why anybody should think that those who devote their entire lives to the most insecure and heartbreaking profession in the world,' wrote an exasperated Norman Marshall in 1947, 'should be considered less sincere than those to whom acting is merely a pastime for the winter evenings.')[7] Some mainstream amateur companies raise more money from ticket sales than do many nominally professional fringe companies, and a high percentage of aspiring actors whose CVs describe them as professional can in fact make ends meet only by holding day-jobs outside the theatre even while appearing in productions. Without the benefit of hindsight, it has never been easy to distinguish between a young waiter with a serious amateur interest in the theatre and an apprentice actor with a part-time job in catering. Although the line between gentlemen and players is as fiercely policed today around the edges of the modern theatrical profession as it ever was in Victorian cricket, with the majority of career actors condescending nervously to their amateur colleagues as a pool of unqualified blackleg labour willing at a moment's notice to do their work for no pay, most professional actors have performed as amateurs in their youth, and even the major metropolitan playhouses have at different times been willing to violate the supposedly sacred distinction between professional and amateur – as in the case of anonymous unpaid try-outs ('The Part of Hamlet will be played by a Gentleman, making his first appearance on any Stage!', as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London playbills routinely declared), or the nineteenth-century vogue for members of Society appearing as amateurs with professional companies (pioneered by the rakish Colonel William Berkeley, of whom more in my second chapter).

Nominally amateur productions, meanwhile, have often employed full-time professional personnel, whether as principal actors (as in the case of some Augustan private theatricals, in a pattern which survives in the semi-professional American 'summer stock' system, whereby professional actors arrive in provincial towns to perform summer seasons with supporting casts of local volunteers), as musicians, or as directors. In one standard practice for the classic English amateur dramatic society of the first half of the twentieth century, a practice which in many instances persisted as late as the 1960s, the subscriptions of the members who took acting roles in the society's productions were used to pay the salary of a full-time professional 'producer', a figure who supervised the rehearsal and mise-en-scène of every single show the society mounted, and who occupied

much the same position as the resident 'professional' within a golf club. These societies had often evolved from groups which originally confined themselves to private play readings, and whose members turned to acting in public themselves only after a period of instead either commissioning benefit performances at a local professional theatre or buying in professional performers to act their chosen plays on their own premises. What we would now recognize as amateur dramatic societies in many instances emerged only from semi-public theatrical activity associated with local literary societies (such as the Manchester Athenaeum), and the question of whether such performances – given by professional actors hired by a private patron or club – would count as amateur or professional remains moot (as is that as to which of the two designations would give them more prestige or respectability). Even performances given by a self-sustaining professional company in a professional theatre, but given for charity rather than gain, are also only questionably 'commercial', as are any number of subsidized 'community theatre' projects into which local volunteer performers may be organized by paid professional administrators and directors.[8] Once one starts examining the permeable boundaries of what might count as non-professional performance, it is surprising what a high percentage of theatrical activity over the last four centuries might fall within them.

The category 'amateur' being as unstable as it is, and perpetually defined against the changing and equally shaky category of 'professional', there can be no seamless unitary history of amateur performance, let alone an exhaustive one, and this book does not purport to offer such a thing. Teleological stories about the seemingly inevitable chronological 'evolution' of British and American drama, which are precarious enough when applied to the metropolitan professional stage, look even more so when applied to the comparatively intermittent activities of different amateur groups. Whereas Olivier knew about Irving, and Irving about Garrick, for instance, most of the non-professional casts I will be writing about knew little if anything of their amateur predecessors' existence or styles of playing, but produced the performances they did largely in imitation of or reaction against the professional productions of their own times and places and the recent repertories of their own local groups. Equally, while the history of professional performance has left detailed records, many of which have by now been laboriously and usefully catalogued and sometimes even interpreted by generations of theatre historians, amateur performance (although some societies do possess rich and excellently preserved archives) leaves more diffuse and scattered traces: blandly

approving reviews in local newspapers mainly anxious to mention all the people involved who would wish to be thanked; letters; diary entries; collections of programmes in sheds; folders of fading and sometimes unlabelled photographs; passing references in volumes of otherwise untheatrical memoirs. It has also given rise to very little published history and criticism as such, instead inspiring how-to books, official and semi-official reports, compilations of amusing stories about embarrassing onstage accidents, enthusiasts' magazines (often short-lived), and privately published accounts of individual clubs. Revealing as this evidence can be, it does not add up to the unbroken chronicle of a single continuous phenomenon, and it lends itself best not to any one totalizing perspective but to the detailed investigation of discrete incidents, contextualized by reference to contemporary professional productions, to other contemporary non-professional performances and to social and cultural history more generally. The surviving visual records of amateur performance, I should add, are also of very variable quality, so that the case histories I will be exploring are illustrated here with pictures whose technical accomplishment is not to be compared with those found in the biographies of professional thespians famous enough to have been painted by Zoffany or photographed by Angus McBean.

Faced with the large and complicated field of amateur theatre, of which no single history has been published since the 1960s,[9] I have chosen to address only the amateur performance of Shakespeare. Despite the centrality of Shakespeare to the amateur repertory asserted by my epigraph, it should be recognized that this decision produces a necessarily skewed and partial view of the non-professional stage, since many important amateur theatres have never produced his work, much preferring more recent and newly commissioned material.[10] I have further confined myself, reluctantly, to amateur performances given in English, and although I devote the whole of my third chapter and part of my conclusion to the expatriate amateur players, civilian and military, who have followed the example of the *Red Dragon*, my focus is primarily on Britain and Ireland and, to a lesser extent, North America. This is in part simply a pragmatic decision aimed at producing a manageable-sized study of a long period of cultural history. It is also prompted, however, by divergences between different national traditions of amateur theatre. It would evidently make good sense, for example, to write a pan-European history of the enthusiasm for private theatres displayed by internationally connected aristocrats right across the Continent from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, often seen as part of a general withdrawal of the upper classes from the public

sphere, which peaked in France, Switzerland, Italy and parts of what is now Germany as well as in Britain during the 1770s and 1780s. But once the more parochial middle classes started to get in on the act in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, distinct national cultures of non-professional performance evolved, and among them those of Great Britain and its former transatlantic colonies are more than sufficiently varied, complex and conspicuous to be going on with.[11]

What has motivated me to write this book has been less a paucity of extant historical and analytical accounts of amateur drama in general (lamentable though this is) than a persistent inattention among scholars to the importance of non-professional activity within the reception of Shakespeare in particular. The sole major exception which proves this rule has been the admission that the amateur casts directed by William Poel and Nugent Monck carried out important late Victorian and early twentieth-century experiments in the recreation of Elizabethan staging practices.[12] My guiding interest through the case-histories presented here, then, is less the importance of Shakespeare in the history of the amateur theatre since the early modern period, great though it is, than the importance of the amateur stage within the history of Shakespeare more broadly over the same period. The chapters which follow, though arranged in a broadly chronological fashion, are really extended semi-independent essays on different traditions within the amateur performance of Shakespeare, namely the domestic, the civic, the expatriate and the outdoor. The book's structure shares a pattern of departure and return with Shakespearean comedy: from looking at how Shakespeare's plays operated within the dynamics of families in country houses, it moves outwards to examine the roles they have played in articulating the public life of towns and cities, and then explores how they have served to dramatize national identity outside Britain entirely, before coming back to the English countryside to see how issues of heritage and collective history continue to inflect the plays' amateur performance today.

Despite their diversity and their historical and geographical scope, these chapters are bound together by a number of recurring questions. How has the ever-changing status of the Shakespeare canon stimulated and enabled different groups of people to mount their own non-commercial performances across time? What has this enormous range and variety of theatrical activity carried out in Shakespeare's name meant to its participants and its spectators, and what issues of gender, class and status have the plays helped them to articulate? With what other kinds of drama have Shakespeare's plays been equated or contrasted in non-professional