

## Introduction

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Methinks I see these things with parted eye,  
 When everything seems double.

~Hermia, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.1.187–8<sup>1</sup>



Shakespeare is well known for attempting to enhance his audience's experience by recourse to what Samuel Johnson called 'quibbles' and what we commonly call puns. Puns occur when language reaches points of poly-signification, when the minds of audiences following a distinct strand of information find themselves simultaneously settled into two or more concurrent realms of coherence. Puns permit audiences to follow one road to two cities, to equate polarities, to hear with parted ears.

A central concern of this book is how Shakespeare puns with his *actors*. Like words, actors often carry two or more simultaneously pertinent associations or identities, allowing spectators to perform the logically impossible act of perceiving two entirely separable actions as one. For instance, they see David Tennant working at his job as an actor in the same moment that they see Hamlet coping with his situation in Elsinore. Such theatrical conventions as disguise, cross-dressing, impersonation, and plays within plays all manifest the fundamental pun or paradox of the actor: that actors plainly are not the characters they present, and they are those characters too. But nothing enlivens this paradox like doubling, wherein actors take on more than one role in the same play.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Except where otherwise indicated, citations are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016). All citations from *King Lear*, however, are drawn from the conflated text in the Norton's 2nd edition (2008).

<sup>2</sup> By 'doubling' I mean multiple employments for actors (tripling, quadrupling, etc.) that allow spectators to recognize the actor through the persona. Not every spectator will recognize every actor playing a secondary role, of course. But just as audiences of *Measure for Measure* recognize the Duke in the friar's habit, though other characters do not, so actors that double in

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My book's central premise is that Shakespeare's plays were designed to be more engaging, more pleasurable, sometimes even more credible for audiences when played by ten or 12 actors than they can be when played by 20. I suggest that just as Shakespeare transformed extant plots and stories into masterworks, so he adopted and improved upon the theatrical convention of doubling, orchestrating possibilities for thematic patterning and resonance between or among characters through the unifying agent of a single actor who doubles in those roles. So, if a production of *Hamlet* redeploys the actor who played Polonius as First Gravedigger, then the philosophical and comic exchanges between the 'antically disposed' Hamlet and a comparatively sober Polonius are revived and reversed by the graveside conversation between Hamlet and the Polonius *actor*, the latter having taken Hamlet's former comic literalism as his own, in his new role of Gravedigger. Doubling fosters replications and patterns within the plays, but does so by relying on the audience's ongoing experience of reality alongside its attention to fiction. Because it triggers mainsprings of theatrical attraction by layering the actor-character's core duality, and makes urgently present the potential for theatrical collapse, doubling should be understood as an integral part of Shakespeare's theatrical vision. Indeed, the centrality of doubling to Shakespeare's art has never been fully explored, either on stage or in the academy.

One of my fundamental assumptions in writing this book is that audiences are attracted to actors because they act. Though that idea may seem obvious or redundant, we sometimes overestimate the degree to which our interest in theatre depends on our commitments to *fiction*; that is, to the characters, to their aims and obstacles, to their role in advancing a plot, to the ideas they express. I maintain, though, that the chief contribution actors make to the theatre is the simple, subtle, continuous assertion that they are people that they are not. This essential duplicity allows audiences to experience pun-like pleasure in tracking separable identities and independent realms of coherence at one point of perception, each vying for primacy, each implicitly questioning and threatening the other, even while combining to perpetuate an illusion that is more valuable for the resulting instability. The ever-present *reminder* of the actor – a reminder that the narrative and its characters are illusory and ephemeral, constantly imperiled by the actors themselves – along with the audience's inability to avoid intrusions of the 'real' world (over which the fictional one maintains an ever-tenuous provenance), accounts for a major share of theatrical

secondary roles will often be recognized in those roles. I discuss below the critical divide created by what Alan Armstrong has called 'candid doubling'. See 'Doubling in *The Comedy of Errors*', in *Shaping Shakespeare for Performance: The Bear Stage*, ed. Catherine Loomis and Sid Ray (Lanham: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), pp. 189–202. The phrase 'candid doubling' first appears on p. 189.

attraction. As J.B. Priestley explains in *The Art of the Dramatist*: ‘Everybody and everything on the stage have double character; they are seen in the strange light and shadow of belief and disbelief; they belong to a heightened reality that we know to be unreal.’<sup>3</sup> Every spectator receives every actor with Hermia’s ‘parted eye, / When everything seems double’ (4.1.187–8), since the actor exists in the real world as a fellow human being, while simultaneously participating in an alternate, imaginary realm.

The actor’s duplicity and the theatre’s unreality are essential to all theatrical experience, but no plays exploit them so extensively and so variously as Shakespeare’s do. Among the most famous examples is the character of Rosalind in *As You Like It*, originally performed by a male. Rosalind, already merging reality and unreality, man and woman, dresses as Ganymede, an ambiguously gendered page, who then ‘pretends’ to be Rosalind (while in men’s clothing) for Rosalind’s lover Orlando. The audience may see Rosalind as less authentic than the actor portraying her, yet more authentic, in the context of the fiction, than Ganymede, since Ganymede is Rosalind’s façade. However, Ganymede enacts *another* ‘Rosalind’ who is, it follows, more *and* less deceptive than Ganymede him/herself. Ganymede thus resides inside and outside Rosalind, and the audience sees all in one, all at once. The thickly layered effect is analogous to watching a child assemble Russian nesting dolls, building multiplicity and dimension into a single point of perception.

Furthermore, as Marjorie Garber and others have pointed out, Ganymede is more than the sum of its parts, since it conjoins maleness and femaleness, while versions of the dramatis personae it encompasses subscribe to a single gender.<sup>4</sup> Ganymede thus more aptly, perhaps more authentically, represents the (male) actor-as-Rosalind than either Rosalind herself, or the actor alone. The spectator watches *As You Like It* ‘with parted eye’, since the transvestite; the actor; Rosalind; and Rosalind-twice-removed are joined in a single face. Shakespeare here seizes upon the prime animator of all theatricality – the duality of the actor – and confers upon it a third and fourth dimension. Dr. Johnson famously deplored the ‘malignant power’ that puns held over Shakespeare’s mind: how ‘A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it.’<sup>5</sup> If Rosalind may be admitted among the other puns, this was not a bad bargain.

<sup>3</sup> J.B. Priestley, *The Art of the Dramatist* (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 72–8.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson. Volume VII. Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 74. In *Quotation Marks*, Garber dedicates a chapter to ‘Fatal Cleopatra’, describing the protean

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Doubling roles allowed Shakespeare to achieve Rosalind-like effects from most of his actors and in nearly every moment of his plays. In performance, doubling enables audiences to experience contradictions and inconsistencies that paradoxically affirm the authenticity of characters, allowing heroes to re-emerge as villains, men to become women, and fools to become wise. Frequently, such transitions and oscillations complement, intensify, and/or counteract developments in the plots themselves. Doubling roles can also create analogues outside the fictional frame for plots and characters otherwise animated by inconsistencies. For example, the plot of *Macbeth* prescribes audiences the generic duty to welcome the fall of a usurping tyrant and the rise of a rightful king, though it endows Macbeth with kingly attributes while granting Malcolm all the majesty of wallpaper.<sup>6</sup> Though morally repulsive, Macbeth attracts; though victimized and full of virtues, Malcolm repels. Shakespeare thus puns with his characters, thrusting spectators into a realm where contradictory possibilities cohere. Similar tensions arising from simultaneous attraction and repulsion can be manifested if the actor playing old Hamlet's Ghost returns as Claudius; if Othello's white wife returns as a whore named Bianca; if Angelo is really exchanged for Claudio by having one actor portray both. As a result of such choices, the stage personae in Shakespeare's plays grow more life-like in their complexity, alternately (even simultaneously) cruel and kind, innocent and guilty, masculine and feminine. This heightened experience of 'realism', though, is brought about by more aggressive assertions of artifice.

### Establishing Realism and Credibility through Artifice

In *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider suggests that theatricality, the admission of artifice in the artefact, brings us closer to the way things really are than realism does, providing a sense of the real that everyday 'reality' cannot, since reality is always already a citation of something else:

[A]ny enactment might be recognized as re-enactment – recognized as a matter of againness – through the manipulation of give-away signs of theatricality. Here a wiggle of a hand or a wink of an eye are theatrical gestures that give a scene away, prompting the recognition that seemingly discrete acts are never temporally singular nor straightforward but double, triple, or done 'a million times before'.<sup>7</sup>

nature of Cleopatra, and of many other characters. She suggests that for Shakespeare 'character' is a kind of paradox with 'two equal and opposite connotations' (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 211–30.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Booth raises the Macbeth/Malcolm problem in 'The Shakespearean Actor as Kamikaze Pilot', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36 (1985), pp. 553–70.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 32.

For Schneider, performance and theatricality illuminate a limitless cycle of duplications, wherein everything reaches back to some original that itself reaches back to some other. Because it shows awareness of its own manufacture, performance can seem more real than reality, which is comparatively blind to its own 'againness'. Thus artifice that acknowledges itself as such – that preserves and accentuates its inconsistencies – may present audiences with a more potent means to access the 'real' than naturalism or emotional truth.

Shakespeare seems to have intuited that the audience is the locus of reality in the theatre, and that its experience of the real is synonymous with its experience of the instability of his fictional worlds. If, as Bill Worthen has argued, 'the site of drama is the site of acting', the 'drama' initiated by actors may be one of ever-present or impending exposures of artifice – essentially their unavoidable failures at convincing acts of mimesis intensify an experience fundamentally charged by the audience's doubts about whether events will continue or fall apart in the present performance.<sup>8</sup> During a 2008 performance of *King Lear* in New York City's Battery Park, for instance, the actress playing Goneril sprinted off-stage, rounded a magnolia tree, tripped, and fell face-first on the concrete walk. The exit was the last one scripted for her character, just moments before her death offstage. This Goneril actor drew most of the audience's attention away from Edmund's confession as she limped away in the care of Gloucester (already deceased), and she did not return for the bows. The absence of that injured actor haunted the close of the performance even more than the death of Cordelia. Moments like this one are neither easily contrived, nor, strictly, desirable. Yet all productions of all plays are animated by similar potentials.

Our awareness of the theatre's potential to fail, constantly advertised by the slippage inherent in acts of representation and intensified by Shakespeare's recurrent efforts to undermine his illusions, makes us cling to them more fiercely, as if involved in personal dramas wherein our continued access to the fiction is at stake. The more the illusion flirts with its ruin, the more engaged in it the audience grows. This paradox in spectatorship operates not merely because of the theatre's unreality, but because each audience's flirtations with that unreality bring out a sense of the real, and a performance of the real, in that audience. In this context, an actor may thrive in each role he performs precisely insofar as he can be perceived as fractured or imperfect. Marc Robinson hints at this when he argues that the most interesting modern plays 'fail at "effacing the medium", a failure that directs spectators to the drama of "disclosing" as much as to anything disclosed'.<sup>9</sup> A 'drama of

<sup>8</sup> W.B. Worthen, *The Idea of the Actor: Drama and the Ethics of Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Marc Robinson, *The American Play 1787–2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 117; the quoted phrase is Worthen's.

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disclosing' is one in which the audience participates as a protagonist; at stake is the question of how, indeed whether, the production will succeed at all.

The ongoing potential for drama at and beyond the margins of fiction, and the vital role that the fractured identities of stage figures plays in our experience of realism, indicate that directors and actors might do well to resist logical impulses to impose sense and consistency on characters whose inconsistencies are part of their attraction. Furthermore, artists might improve their productions by exploiting what Schneider calls 'give-away signs of theatricality'. Some opportunities loudly assert themselves (e.g. Hermione's statue, Dover's cliff, even Crab the dog), but most appear in the natural course of portraying characters, since so many contradict the emotional templates they initially, or most forcefully, suggest. In his essay on character and subjectivity in *Faultlines*, Alan Sinfield suggests that Shakespeare's characters often cannot be understood 'as essential unities'; rather, for Shakespeare, 'character is a strategy ... one that will be abandoned when it interferes with other desiderata'.<sup>10</sup> Sinfield cites Desdemona as an example of a character that encompasses a 'disjointed sequence of positions', each in conflict with the last, arguing that such characters resist being received as psychologically whole or unified.

Doubling can complement and extend the dimensionality of characters as well as actors, routinely multiplying the contrarities of character that Sinfield describes. Actors doubling roles can create implicit comparisons between characters; reconcile opposing voices, interests, or loyalties; offer *self-reflections* about *other* characters in the fiction; and introduce the density of structural patterning usually witnessed at the level of line, scene, or plot to (and across) characters. Doubling thus allows for thematic and theatrical enhancement, while making the illusion both more engaging and more credible by announcing its ephemerality. Moreover, doubling roles allows actors to seem to divide themselves *as actors*, in a manner similar to the central fracture that produces the actor-as-character. Since actors participate in the 'real' world of the audience, their double employment resembles but *is not* the double employment (acting or cross-dressing) of the actor-as-character. Nor does it quite parallel the adoption of roles by characters within fictions. The double-cast actor, such as one playing Ghost/Claudius, gains dimension inside the fiction (because the first character he portrays is implicitly linked and compared to the second) and outside of it (because his portrayal of the first – technique, voice, bearing, etc. – is intimately related

<sup>10</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 78. Tiffany Stern makes a related argument, suggesting that Shakespeare's characters were generic types in service to the plot rather than individualized personas, noting the frequency with which speech prefixes distinguish characters by such titles as 'King, Queen, Bastard, Fool', etc. See *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Play* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 61–7.

to and yet often different from that of the second), thus rendering two discrete but unified versions of the actor-as-character. Analogous to Ganymede, who wears Rosalind within and without, the actor playing multiple roles in one play has divided duties in and out of the fiction, and the spectator sees three or more in one.

### Doubling from Medieval to Modern Times

Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that the Holy Trinity is something of a high-water mark in western culture for thinking about the unthinkable – another way of describing the superordinary feats of mind that figures like Rosalind, or actors doubling Claudius/Ghost or Desdemona/Bianca, make possible for spectators.<sup>11</sup> The idea that the ‘son of man’ can simultaneously be the ‘son of God’, as well as a spirit that connects the two and pervades the universe, is markedly like the idea that opposites such as Claudius and old Hamlet – a pair, the play informs us, distinguishable by looks, moral behaviour, and ontological status – can be unified by a common actor, yet a third identity.<sup>12</sup> Setting aside its theological or metaphysical implications, it may be that the historical fascination with the trinity owes something to the simple desire of those who entertain it to resolve a riddle: to experience (repeatedly) their own capacities to harmonize multiple and contradictory personas at a single point of perception or understanding. Spectators who see actors doubling roles also see three faces in one, a lone figure that asserts two supplementary metaphysical realities. Like religious believers, spectators undertake a temporary exercise in faith by accepting a logical fallacy animated by its riddle-like interest and ongoing instability, and that interest grows when actors play additional roles.

It is not surprising that English theatre owes much to liturgical precedents like the *Quem Queritis*, whose crowning moment comforts and delights audiences by assuring them that Christ is present *because* he is absent from the tomb. If manifesting the divine was good theatre, manifesting a divine presence through an absence may have been better, particularly for audiences

<sup>11</sup> In Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Several critics have thought about Elizabethan theatricality and its engagement with Catholic theology and devotional practice. Anthony Dawson writes on how the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale* engages spectators in a dialectic of faith and disbelief, describing audience engagement as analogous to Eucharistic participation; see *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 11–37. Gail M. Gibson originated the phrase ‘incarnational aesthetic’ in *The Theatre of Devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), while Sarah Beckwith suggests that Shakespeare’s theatre ‘represents ... the resistance of (religion’s) historical concerns in the incarnation of performance’, in ‘Stephen Greenblatt’s *Hamlet* and the Forms of Oblivion’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 33 (2003), 261–80, p. 275.



weaned on such riddling ideas as letting the (living) 'dead bury their dead' (Luke 9:60). Christian paradoxes helped early playwrights intuit, as priests and pastors had before them, how engagement could be enhanced when one physical body simultaneously indicates two or more metaphysical realities. Just as the Dionysian theatre took shape when two actors emerged from the chorus and created a three-part conflict from a unified source, and just as Jesus was thought to inhere valences of man, God, *and* Holy Spirit in one face, so too – as early playwrights came to understand – if two identities were good for actors, then three (or more) were better.

Though doubling roles has not received the critical attention it warrants, it has always been a prominent consideration in the theatre. For the ancient Greeks, masks allowed actors to take on multiple characters, foregrounding the illusion in the act of its construction. The fixed countenances of masks allowed spectators to piece out performances with their thoughts, the masks serving as blank slates upon which spectators could mentally inscribe expressions momentarily suited to the speaker, without losing sight of the generic position, or disposition, of the character. But while masks may have facilitated voice projection and presented larger (and more visible) features, they also let the best actors do more acting. Noh drama, *Commedia*, and early Mystery plays sometimes used masks for similar ends. These lead the way for Bunraku and puppet theatres, the latter further complicating the actor/character by dividing the actor's voice from the site of representation (the puppet).<sup>13</sup>

Medieval drama thrived in England because of a belief that nearly anything could be represented on a small wagon or scaffold.<sup>14</sup> Its comfort with an openly artificial style of representation influenced Tudor and Elizabethan playwrights, giving rise to a fascination with disguise plays and those featuring actors, scenes, and plays – *within* scenes and plays.<sup>15</sup> This fascination was greater as a result of England's single-gendered theatre, which added dimension to the actor/character on another axis. All-male casts built hierarchies of truth within frameworks of falsehood, allowing audiences to harmonize stage figures with the metaphysical realities they represented, while remaining aware that the gap between actors and characters was wider for those playing female roles than it generally was for those playing males. Doubling roles became conventional for practical reasons – the pool of qualified actors was limited, and adding

<sup>13</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, 'On the Puppet Theater', in *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. David Constantine (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004), pp. 411–16.

<sup>14</sup> See Peter Travis, *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the prevalence of disguise and its theatrical effects, see Peter Hyland, *Disguise on the Early Modern English Stage* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).



actors to a troupe meant sharing profits with them – but it created opportunities for playwrights to complicate the actor's paradox still further, exposing the reality of the actor while increasing his range and capacity to signify, and creating tacit links between characters that could potentially support a play's thematic ends.

As a modern theatrical practice, of course, doubling is hardly 'fringe'. It has proven consistently popular with audiences and a rich source of theatrical power for companies producing Shakespeare's plays. Peter Brook's 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the Lords and Ladies of Athens doubled their counterparts in the faerie world, is among the most admired and influential in history.<sup>16</sup> Most contemporary companies double roles, at least as an expedient, and some have explored doubling's potential to inform and comment on the play in question, including Cheek by Jowl, the American Shakespeare Center, Propeller, and Shakespeare's Globe.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, modern films suggest a continuing desire to see actors play multiple roles. Bollywood, the prolific film industry of Mumbai, has produced a huge number of films that cast single actors as pairs of twin brothers or sisters, a ghost of a princess and a living princess-to-be, a father and his son, many of these resembling Shakespeare's plots in their efforts to exploit dualities of situation, setting, character, and actor.<sup>18</sup> These films are so numerous as to make up a genre, and it is considered something of a rite of passage for Bollywood actors to star opposite themselves, such as when Priyanka Chopra played each of 12 eligible women in *What's Your Raashee?* (2009).<sup>19</sup>

Major stars such as Amitabh Bachchan and Hema Malini have played multiple roles, arguing for the appeal of seeing the best actors do more acting, as well as for seeing fictions flaunt their own fictionality through double-casting. Significantly, Bollywood films are known for routinely interrupting their plots

<sup>16</sup> See Jeremy Lopez, 'Dream: The Performance History', in *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Critical Guide*, ed. Regina Buccola (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 44–73.

<sup>17</sup> Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod formed Cheek by Jowl in 1981. The company has been influential in using prominent casting choices (e.g. Adrian Lester as Rosalind) to highlight artifice, and to complement or undercut the thematic import of the plays. Ralph Cohen and Jim Warren founded Shenandoah Shakespeare Express (later the American Shakespeare Center) in 1988, a touring troupe that typically used casts of 12 actors. Edward Hall began Propeller Theatre Company in 1997, using small, all-male casts and frequent doubling. Shakespeare's Globe opened in 1997 with Mark Rylance as artistic director and lead actor. Under Rylance, the Globe made experiments with 'original practices', some using all-male or all-female casts. Though Rylance tended to employ larger casts than the others, he occasionally doubled major roles like Posthumus and Cloten in *Cymbeline* (2001).

<sup>18</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema*, ed. Govind Nihalani Gulzar and Saibal Chatterjee (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2003), Introduction.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.



Figure I.1 In *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), Alec Guinness stars as all eight members of the D'Ascoyne family, including Lady Agatha.

with spontaneous (yet highly choreographed) songs and dances, another intrusion of artifice that can contribute to engagement. English-language films have also frequently featured actors playing multiple roles, including *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Alec Guinness plays nine roles, including 'Lady Agatha'), *Coming to America* (a young Eddie Murphy plays four, including an old, white, Jewish man), and *Cloud Atlas* (Tom Hanks, Halle Berry, and most of the other cast members play more than one role).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, a wide array of popular films – *Tootsie* (1982), *Victor Victoria* (1982), *Joe versus the Volcano* (1990), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Face/Off* (1997), *Cockpit* (2012), and *Dallas Buyer's Club* (2012) among others – double roles or otherwise exploit the actor's

<sup>20</sup> Among contemporary examples, the science-fiction series *Orphan Black* (2013–17) has the lead character play several identical figures, achieving similar effects to doubling despite the premise of cloning explaining the actor's reappearance. *Westworld* (2016–) reverses the trope, creating a fictional world populated by androids who can be substituted for one another in the same fictional roles. Meanwhile, many popular YouTube channels use technology to allow one actor to alternate between characters or appear as more than one character simultaneously.