

Introduction

This Element is about Shakespeare, in a variety of the senses given by a term the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) classes as an adverb, adjective, preposition and interjection, and that can gesture towards the exactitude of the meaning itself (what is *Hamlet* really about?), positioning (out and about) and airy approximation (this performance ends at *about* half-past ten). In particular I take my cue from W. B. Worthen's observation that 'the massive cultural and literary authority of Shakespeare's writing' has for a long time encouraged or forced both the common understanding of and critical discourse around Shakespeare performance 'as a genre finally *about* the Shakespearean text, as merely another interlocutor with Shakespeare's literary designs' (*Shakespeare Performance Studies* 2). Certainly this was the position adopted by many of the key proponents of the first wave of Shakespeare performance criticism that arose in the 1960s and 1970s; tracing the chronology of the field in his introduction to the compendious state-of-the-art collection *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Performance*, James C. Bulman notes that, for all their openness to innovation and experiment and their allegiance to the theatrical, it tended to measure 'the value of a performance by its representation of and fidelity to a presumably fixed and authoritative Shakespearean text'. Bulman writes of how this prevailing (and, in its time, transformative) view was challenged on a number of counts: first in the 1980s by politicised and theorised work that sought to at least problematise the authority of the text and its originator, and to locate performance as a culturally overdetermined and ideologically inflected phenomenon, 'radically contingent on a host of factors, from the material conditions of performance, to the medium for which the play was adapted, to the impact of political, economic, and social forces on audience reception' ('Introduction' 2). Quite often the investigation of Shakespeare performance would find that a production or performance practice that purported to be about one thing turned out to be about something quite different.

The second challenge to Shakespeare-centred performance scholarship stemmed from the simultaneously emerging field of performance studies, which addressed the broadest spectrum of performative behaviour and activity, and which at first wanted little to do with plays, let alone Shakespeare – 'the string quartet of the 21st century; a beloved but extremely limited subgenre, a subdivision of performance', as one of the movement's founders, Richard Schechner, once put it ('A New Paradigm' 8). Well into that century we see that once-maligned subgenre continue to thrive, and Shakespeare performance studies, as Worthen styles it, fully accommodates the interdisciplinary mix of race studies, 'the social sciences, feminist studies, gender studies, history,

psychoanalysis, queer theory, semiotics, ethology, cybernetics, area studies, media and popular culture theory, and cultural studies' (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 2), a 'theoretical heterodoxy', as Barbara Hodgdon characterises it ('A Kind of History' 7), that has enabled a rethinking of the Shakespeare in/as/for/through performance dyad in ways that do not automatically privilege the first component, in ways that create commentary that is about much more than Shakespeare and Shakespeare performance.

The pages that follow explore how performances are 'about' Shakespeare in other ways than being explicative of or determined by their scripts. Arguably, as no performance can ever become coextensive with the work it hopes to animate, being 'about' is a condition of *all* Shakespeare performances, which for all their manoeuvres of approach and retreat, circumnavigation and direction by indirection, inhabit the domain of the adjacent, the proximate and the approximate. My examples are drawn from recent and more distant theatre history, primarily in the United Kingdom, and address practices of translation and rehearsal as well as performance, and the behaviour of audiences as well as actors. Section 1 regards modern stage representations of Falstaff in the light of the relationship between character construction and prosthetic elaboration, and between 'comic' and 'serious' acting. Focusing on Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and National Theatre (NT) productions, placing Falstaff within histories of class and gender identity, and in particular normative and extra-normative bodies, the section traces actors' paradoxical attempts to make the role 'real' via the mechanisms of manifest fakery. Falstaff in some respects offers a limit case of the work of layering, both psychological and, in this instance, physical, that actors perform upon and around the cues offered by the text; as a fat man in history, the role exists relationally, positioned and repositioned amid the shifting cultural valences of body shape and size.

This concern with the relational nature of Shakespearean performance is further developed in Section 2, which responds to the recent 'cognitive turn' in Shakespeare studies and the humanities more broadly by drawing upon entrainment studies (the science of synchrony) to investigate the dynamics of actor-audience interaction in the febrile environment of the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe. It explores the question of what Globe Shakespeare is 'about' by arguing that the bodily transactions and energies that circulate about its stage are demonstrably and spectacularly in excess of the nominally 'Shakespearean' occasions they mark. Commentators on the Globe have frequently asked whether the performances it hosts are really 'about' Shakespeare or something else altogether (community participation, ersatz heritage, populist entertainment), and the section responds to this enquiry by focusing on the experience of a schools-oriented production of *Romeo and Juliet* that suggests

that for many in its audiences, the answer lies elsewhere. The problem of whether a given performance is or isn't Shakespeare has also bedevilled the reception of the works in translation, and though there are numbers of those who believe that only Shakespeare in English will do, the fact that many of the most innovative and exciting performances today are in words other than Shakespeare's poses the issue of the canon's ongoing viability with particular intensity. Section 3 considers the significance of an essential mechanism of global Shakespeare performance that has been surprisingly overlooked: the surtitle. Following an outline history of the role of translation technologies in the international Shakespeare performance network, the section examines both the cognitive and the cultural processes involved in reading-and-seeing. Thomas Ostermeier's Schaubühne Berlin production of *Richard III* provides a case study, by means of a close scrutiny of some moments in the German text, the English surtitle script (Shakespeare's text in forty characters per slide) and the French text (a translation of the German) used for the 2016 Avignon Festival performance.

The three sections sample some of the diverse ways in which Shakespeare and performance adjudicate the interplay between the three terms of my subtitle: bodies (of performers and audience, and also of evidence and knowledge), spaces (physical, institutional and cultural) and texts, which range from the scripts of the plays themselves to the multiple co-texts and intertexts that accompany them, and which here include translations, surtitles, reviews, archival records, actors' testimonies and much else. Adopting a multimodal approach to a diverse range of materials, this Element seeks to demonstrate why Shakespeare matters, not just in the sense of being an enduring, pervasive and significant cultural phenomenon but also, perhaps more contentiously, as a force for good. The Shakespearean performance criticism of the past few decades has been wary of such claims, and of many aspects of the mainstream practices addressed in these pages. My concern, nonetheless, is with the ways in which Shakespearean performances continue to generate opportunities for transgression and transformation, as in the bodily metamorphoses tracked in Section 1, and for the co-creation of actor and audience communities, however provisional, transitory and fractured these may be. Whether at the very local level of the yard of Shakespeare's Globe, as documented in Section 2, or on the global stage of international Shakespearean touring, as examined in Section 3, Shakespeare's works continue to matter as much for the conversations, connections and arguments that they catalyse as for themselves. In the current climate of toxic, inward-looking nationalisms the boundary-breaking urgency of Shakespeare could not be more timely. Examining what lies around and about Shakespeare, we begin to discover what Shakespeare may be about.

1 Falstaff's Body Parts I and II

It is there in the title – *Year of the Fat Knight* – and in the image on the front cover, which depicts a red-faced, whiskered, grinning Antony Sher pointing at a bulbous, brown and cream ceramic wine jug, which he holds aloft as a synecdoche of his prosthetically enlarged self. It is there throughout Sher's text which, like its predecessor *Year of the King* (1984) and its successor *Year of the Mad King* (2018), chronicles the preparation, rehearsal and performance of a Shakespearean role, in this instance the Falstaff of the two parts of *Henry IV*, for Greg Doran's RSC production in 2014. Like Richard III in the former book and Lear in the latter, Falstaff is both an opportunity to embrace and a challenge to fear, and this time there is a very particular problem to address from the outset: Falstaff is fat; not just slightly fat in the way of the middle-aged-spread, mildly overweight Sher but *really* fat (which translates as *unreally* fat), in the sense that, as the actor and director agree, 'Every Falstaff has to wear a fat suit' (*Fat Knight* 7). The figure that haunts Sher's early imaginings of the role (and which is jokingly referenced in that cover image) is of 'some Toby jug from the souvenir shop' (31), the role's literally unthinkable ('out of the question') means of realisation 'a wig from stock and some generalised padding' (44). Even as he discusses the mandatory fat suit with the production designer, Sher insists that he is 'not going to approach it as a comic role, but as a character part. "So the fat suit simply needs to make me look as fat as *I* could feasibly be"' (64).

The task, as Sher conceives it, is to close the gap between the caricature or cartoon and the three-dimensional reality of what he calls character acting, and to bring Falstaff into line with the broadly Stanislavskian demands and priorities of (most) modern Shakespearian acting. Cyril Connolly (as quoted by Charles Spencer in a scathing review of David Warner's unconvincingly fat-suited portrayal for the RSC in 2007) once wrote that 'inside every fat man is "a thin one wildly signalling to be let out"' (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2007); this has been the rule, not the exception, with respect to the majority of Falstaffs on the modern British stage, as the role is, almost invariably, allocated to ectomorphic rather than endomorphic actors. This is the assumption Oliver Ford Davies, for example, makes when he writes that since it 'seems important' that 'Falstaff is fat', the actor 'might want to wear padding from the start of rehearsals' and that this involves the cooperation of the wardrobe department, since 'they can't make a start on the costume without knowing the shape of the belly'. Ford Davies defines this approach as a form of 'behaviourism': once actors 'have found the "look" – the costume, the hair, the shoes, the walk – they feel they are some way to discovering the character' (*Performing Shakespeare* 70–1). For Ford Davies, as for Sher, even the realest of Falstaffs is a figure constituted and

defined by prosthetics, exteriority, supplementation, layers and surfaces. Desmond Barrit, an actor not shy of describing himself as larger than average, felt compelled, when he played Falstaff for the RSC in 2001, to physically expand to fit the production's gargantuan conception of the role: 'Most of my own weight is around the middle, so I needed some padding around the shoulders, and plenty of layers, to fill the costumes out' ('Falstaff' 130). The assumption that a fat Falstaff is a prosthetic fabrication, and the implication that herein lies at least part of his serio-comic appeal, is implicated in the politics of the non-normative body and in attitudes shaped not only by immediate considerations of gender, class and race but also by the concerns and pressures of an epoch in which prosthesis, both as practice and as preoccupation, looms large, and where, as Celia Lury summarises, 'the classifications of genre – of gender, class, race, sexuality and age or other natural and social categories – no longer inhere in the individual as they did in plural or synthetic culture; instead, they are seen as the effects of (mechanical and perceptual) prosthesis' (*Prosthetic Culture* 17). I return to the broader cultural implications of the prosthetic Falstaff in the final part of this section; I examine its theatrical provenance in two stages: first, by means of a brief history of the character on the post-war English stage and, second, via a close inspection of the most memorable and wayward Falstaff of the period, Michael Gambon's, for the NT in 2005.¹

The Fat Knight Returns

The modern Falstaff is, as Peter Thomson notes, almost invariably a 'character' part, 'played for laughs by a "serious" actor' ('Comic Actor' 150). The tradition extends as far back as the 1930s, when the music-hall comic George Robey reinvented himself in the role at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1935, a performance J. C. Trewin praised as 'seldom externalized' (*English Stage* 151); ten years later at the Old Vic, Ralph Richardson created a legendary Falstaff 'whose principal attribute', according to Kenneth Tynan, 'was not his fatness but his knighthood'; this was 'not a *comic* performance' (*He That* 48–9). The two performances mark an accelerated shift of equilibrium whereby the *Henry IV* plays became, from the post-war period until relatively recently, Hal-centric rather than Falstaff-dominated (McMillin, *Henry IV*). The shift was initiated in

¹ The major professional productions during the period are: Old Vic, 1945 (Falstaff: Ralph Richardson); Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1951 (Antony Quayle; who also played the role in the BBC/Time Life Television Shakespeare version of 1979); RSC, 1964 (Hugh Griffith); RSC, 1975 (Brewster Mason); RSC, 1981 (Joss Ackland); English Shakespeare Company, 1986 (John Woodvine); RSC, 1991 (Robert Stephens); RSC, 2000 (Desmond Barrit); NT, 2005 (Michael Gambon); RSC, 2007 (David Warner); Shakespeare's Globe, 2010 (Roger Allam); RSC, 2014 and 2016 (Antony Sher); Donmar Warehouse, 2014 (Ashley McGuire); Shakespeare's Globe, 2019 (Helen Schlesenger).

1951, with the Festival of Britain production of the Histories directed by Anthony Quayle at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. Quayle played his Sir John as markedly less benign than those of his predecessors, but his physical conception of the part and his style of delivery ran on traditional lines that contrasted sharply with the low-key, intense, determinedly naturalistic approach taken by Richard Burton's Hal. As his biographer Melvyn Bragg documents, Burton arrived on the first day of rehearsals 'word-perfect and with the part already sewn onto him like a skin', and from the outset was 'always watching, always using the lines to cut out a space for himself', whilst using this space to conduct covert psychological warfare through his other-ranks relationship with his officer-class superior: 'Falstaff's laughs, his command, were undercut by Burton's proud Prince. The established actor whose plays they ought to have been was out-manoeuvred' (*Rich* 71–2). Bragg's epidermal imagery suggests a Method-style suturing of text, character, actor's persona and performing body to produce Hal as authentic and real; Quayle's fat knight, meanwhile, is conspicuously a product of theatrical artifice, a second skin worn brazenly on top of his natural body rather than integral to it.

The contrast between the performers' personal styles is evident in Angus McBean's posed production photographs included in the volume published to commemorate the 1951 season: Burton (already looking more the Brandoesque movie star than the stage actor) broods, cryptic and expressionless, immersed in both character and historical role, his posed stillness silently reproaching the ferocious mugging of his stage companions. Most prominent among these is Quayle, a not-yet-forty-year-old larded with Leichner, whiskers and padding, whose pointed extravagance of gesture and facial expression in every photograph insistently mark his performance with theatricality; not only is he faking it, but he shows himself enjoying himself faking it (Figure 1). This was in some ways a Falstaff cut from the traditional cloth of manifest artifice, with 'padded belly, the swollen legs and the slightly too clownish pink and white paint on his face', but also containing the seeds of its own demise: beneath the paint and the padding, 'modernity is gnawing' (*Manchester Guardian*, 4 April 1951).

By 1964 modernity was no longer satisfied merely to gnaw at Falstaff; thanks to Peter Hall's revolutionary reforms at Stratford, whereby the bloated and moribund Shakespeare Memorial Theatre (SMT) became the sleekly styled new-look RSC, it attempted to swallow him entire. Presented as part of the extended *The Wars of the Roses* Histories cycle, Hall's *Henry IV* plays contained at their centre a Falstaff, in the diminutive shape of the Welsh actor Hugh Griffith, whose showy individualism, firebrand mannerisms and old-school vocal relish were not only out of time with the cool, intellectualised detachment



Figure 1 Antony Quayle as Falstaff, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1951;
 Photo: Angus McBean

of the rest of the cast, but also enacted his character's resistant role in the scheme of the production. Robert Speaight was captivated by Griffith's eyes: '[H]ow they roved! How they rolled! How they flashed – beacons of anarchy in an England which was trying to reduce itself to order' ('Shakespeare in Britain' (1964) 383). The Eastcheap tavern was, the *New Statesman's* Ronald Bryden recorded, one of the last remaining 'corners of the old peasant England' to linger on in an 'iron age of war and despotism' (24 April 1964). Between them, Speaight and Bryden allegorised Griffith's role in the production. Cast solely to play Falstaff rather than as a member of the ensemble, Griffith was a living monument to the SMT era (he had played John of Gaunt, Owen Glendower and the Archbishop of Canterbury for Quayle in 1951), a strutting archive of the Shakespearean style that Hall was determined to extirpate from the Stratford stage, yet which stubbornly survived as a vital alternative to the rational, intelligent and efficient technologies of acting that he hoped to put in its place. For Bryden, Griffith's Falstaff was 'a stage-conception as formal and artificial as Punch or Dame Twankey, impossible to imagine outside a theatre', but in the context of Hall's Jan Kott-via-E. M. W. Tillyard reading of the plays, and of a company acting style increasingly inflected by semi-Brechtian realism, 'the anarchy he represented', Speaight mused, 'was more than the kingdom

could afford', and 'because he is so much larger than life . . . in the end life will have no room for him'.

Internalising the anorexic imperatives of a 1960s Shakespeare determined to cut out the excessive and the superfluous, the process of taming, regulating and toning down (and up) was under way; a decade on, with a considerably leaner RSC now under the direction of Trevor Nunn and Terry Hands, Brewster Mason, as Falstaff in Hands's 1975 productions of *Henry IV* and *Merry Wives of Windsor*, was singled out for praise by Speaight, this time in 'a company where the tendency is to overact', for his 'refreshing . . . under-emphasis' ('Shakespeare in Britain' (1975) 18); as Stephen Gilbert put it, there was 'no fraud . . . not a gigantic performance, rather a precise character creation' (*Plays and Players*, July 1975). Joss Ackland in Nunn's production, which inaugurated the RSC's occupancy of London's Barbican Theatre in 1981, cultivated interiority even more assiduously, presenting, to Benedict Nightingale, 'a man with a mind and even a philosophy' (*New Statesman*, 18 October 1982). Affirming said mind over theatrical body, Ackland was 'not made up and stuffed into a caricature' but given merely tokenistic padding, his Thatcher's-Britain stomach looking 'no more grotesque than that of many City aldermen' (John Barber, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 June 1982), creating the impression of 'a largish, distinguished-looking citizen who does not seem to be over-indulging in either food or drink' (Milton Shulman, *Evening Standard*, 10 June 1982). This credible shrinking man fitted the characterisation of 'a hard, brutal, earthbound realist' (Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 11 June 1982), but as Shulman, lamenting the loss of the Quayle and Griffiths tradition, complained, sacrificing both bodily and theatrical excess to realism drained Falstaff of life and comic appeal: 'If Falstaff is not a caricature, he is a dull dog, indeed.'

Downbeat downsizing reached its limit in 1991, in Robert Stephens's performance for the RSC in Adrian Noble's production. Likened by Billington to 'a bloated porpoise with the strange daintiness of the truly fat' (*Guardian*, 18 April 1991), Stephens carried his bulk with a sense of authenticity that transcended theatricality; that of the 'truly' fat; distinct from the mendacious would-be fatness of stage prosthetics or of mimicry. Giving a 'towering performance' (John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 21 April 1991), and laden with the 'weighty charm' of 'a big man who makes the theatre a small room' (Kate Kellaway, *Observer*, 2 June 1991), Stephens offered a bleakly unsentimental portrait of a ruined, bitter and alcohol-soaked man, 'veering melancholically between bouts of hedonistic indulgence and darkly scathing fits of insecurity' (Michael Coveney, *Observer*, 21 April 1991). At its darkest, Stephens's Falstaff inhabited the world of tragedy rather than comic history, not least in his delivery of the 'honour' monologue (*Part 1*, 5.1.127–39), which he 'snarled out like an

indictment, a piece of self-directed misanthropy that would not disgrace Hamlet' (Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 18 April 1991).

More Layers

Stephens's Falstaff's channelling of Hamlet straddled dichotomies: between the comic and tragic, between external display and enacted interiority and, not least, between the Shakespearean canon's iconic thin and fat men. The almost unanimously positive critical reception hinged on a realism defined in terms of what he was not, what he did not do: 'not gross' (Malcolm Rutherford, *Financial Times*, 18 April 1991), 'not the usual roly-poly', refusing 'to adhere to the usual fat, jolly jesterlike stereotype' (Carole Woddis, *What's On*, 5 June 1991), and 'totally uningratiating . . . funny, but never ridiculous' (Kellaway, *Observer*). The implication is that Shakespearian realism is, in this instance and perhaps others, in part an effect of theatrical negation. Stephens's realist, self-contained Falstaff provides a strong contrast to the equally acclaimed Michael Gambon, in Nicholas Hytner's production for the NT in 2005, which presented the spectacle of an actor simultaneously constructing and dismantling Falstaff as a character, by turns conforming to and flouting the protocols of embodied enactment, and both affirming and subverting distinctions between the organic and the prosthetic. Theatre history is well served by this production: not only is it extensively documented in the NT Archive and Victoria and Albert Museum Theatre and Performance Collections, and by an eyewitness account of the rehearsal process by Bella Merlin (*Rogue's Company*), it was also the subject of a television documentary which offered a fly-on-the-wall record of Gambon and cast in rehearsal.² These records are of interest for what they reveal of process and of the labour that locates Shakespearean character at the intersection between the 'real' and the fabricated. The two-hour documentary follows one day's rehearsals, during which director and cast work on two tavern scenes, *Part 1, 2.4*, and *Part 2, 2.4*. Gambon is the focus, so these are well chosen in that they allow him to showcase his full range as a performer (including a brilliant inset play sequence, which amongst other things, sees him mischievously spoofing the production's Henry Bolingbroke, David Bradley); they are also particularly suited to the production's and the television documentary's realist idiom. With their demotic tone and high prose content, the scenes lend themselves particularly well to a vernacular acting style that is tacitly Stanislavskian and whose terms of reference are effortlessly contemporary; what happens on

² The NT Archive includes not only the standard fixed-camera video recording, but also a multi-camera, broadcast-quality recording made for the V&A Performance Collections. The *South Bank Show* documentary was broadcast on ITV1 on 5 May 2005.

the rehearsal floor appears to be the combination of immediate, unmediated, encounter with the text and the strategic accessing of character backstories constantly in development.

Consider, for example, the exploration of the account Gambon's Falstaff gives to Hal (Matthew Macfadyen) of his encounter with the mysteriously multiplying men in buckram (*Part 1*, 2.4.143–88):

Gambon [as Falstaff]: 'Seven, by these hilts, or I am a villain else.' Hytner [stepping forward]: The last time we were doing this I think that one was, was more, um, disingenuous: in buckram, in buckram; are you sure? Are you sure? Gambon: [affecting bafflement] 'In buckram?' Hytner: Yeah, yeah, yeah; it's as if – Gambon: [indignant]: 'In buckram!' [looks at Hytner, finds confirmation] 'Seven, by these hilts, or I am a villain else.' Hytner [nodding]: Yeah, great, yeah. Macfadyen: And 'buckram' means 'white lycra'. Hytner [laughs]: For our purposes, yes. Gambon: 'So [*sic*] these four came all afloat and mainly thrust at me. I made no more ado, but took all their seven points in my target, thus.' Macfadyen: 'Seven? There were but four even –' Hytner [interrupting]: I think you should save the Ninja Turtles stuff for the end [general laughter] . . . it's very good, but, uh, save it up.

Hytner's interjection is prompted by the moves Gambon executes to re-enact his dispatch of imagined assailants, as described by Michael Corder: '[H]e adroitly spears several with his sword, then spins on his foot and immobilizes another with a back-kick, spins again and repeats the trick in a different direction, then kills a few more with his sword before blithely continuing with his narrative.' Corder suggests that he 'has obviously been studying films like *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, and indeed *Kill Bill*'; thereby Barbara Hodgdon remarks, 'writing Jet Li, Lucu Liu, or Uma Thurman over "Shakespeare"' ('Stars' 46); in the context of a setting suspended somewhere between the fifteenth century and the twenty-first, kung fu manoeuvres are no more or less anachronistic or seemingly than everything else in Gambon's wide-ranging and gloriously eclectic gestural repertoire. Dancing around and about text and character, at one level, Gambon wittily executes the actor's basic task: to produce both as legible behaviour, which in the rehearsal situation involves moving elegantly between demonstration, exposition, quotation and paraphrase, habitually practising physical and also intellectual analogies that animate the archaic by referencing the local, the immediate and the contemporary. If this physical and vocal work exemplifies the ways in which, as Worthen puts it, "'Shakespeare" appears to enable the body to recapture itself' (*Authority* 99), its context and key is contemporary culture: Shakespeare animates and is animated by the bodies of everyday knowledge and popular reference. It is in this vein that "'buckram" means "white lycra"' (the peasant fabrics of Falstaff's