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Introduction

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1   The word "actor" as we understand it now emerged in Shakespeare's time.[1] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as designating "[a] person who acts a part on stage", it was used for the first time in this specific sense by William Painter in his *Palace of Pleasure* (1566): "To whom may be giuen a Theatre of the world, and stage of humaine miserie, more worthily, than to him that hath with comely gesture, wyse demeanor, and orderly behauiour, bene an actor in the same?" (*OED* 4). Right from the beginning, then, the term was related to the idea of the world as a stage.

2   "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players" (2.7.139-40), Jaques famously says in As You Like It, suggesting that playing is inherent to life itself. Throughout their dramatic production, Shakespeare and his contemporaries were keen on showcasing the omnipresence of actors while also stressing the instability of their status. As a theatrical practitioner himself, Shakespeare wrote primarily for his company (the Lord Chamberlain's Men and then the King's Men under James I), and his rhythmic language was specifically designed for being projected from a stage. Ian McKellen significantly declared in 1982: "I appreciate him as a craftsman rather than just a man of the world. It's the man of the theatre that I respond to—the person who puzzled at home and wrote his words down, and yet understood that words themselves are not enough and that you need actors to present them."[2]

3   It is thus hardly surprising to find so many metadramatic and metatheatrical allusions in his plays in particular, and on the early modern stage in general. From the mechanicals in A Midsummer Night's Dream (where Bottom's "monstrous" [3.1.99] transformation during a rehearsal "literalizes the antitheatricalists' metaphorical claims that participation in the theatre has satanically zoomorphic effects")[3] to the travelling actors in Hamlet, instances of mise en abyme of the theatrical world abound, emphasising the motif of theatrum mundi. Together, they call for a reflection on the uncertain boundaries between stage and life and on the material conditions surrounding the acting profession. Given the prominence of stage allusions in Shakespeare's drama, it is hardly surprising to find that his work was transmitted to us thanks to the work of two actors of his company, John Heminges and Henry Condell,

who were at the origin of the publication of the thirty-six plays of the 1623 Folio. Without them, Shakespeare would certainly not have the international aura that makes his name iconic today.

4   Early modern playwrights seldom missed an opportunity to play on the uncertainty generated by boy actors performing female parts, given that women were excluded from the professional stage until the Restoration. While sometimes joking on the male actors' cross-dressing, they also subtly rely on the permeability of gendered identities in the theatre to reconfigure desire. "Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness, / Wherein the pregnant enemy does much," young Viola cries out when disguised as a page boy in Twelfth Night. If the disguise complicates identities and enmeshes the heroine in a love tangle, it also conjures up hitherto unknown feelings in her and helps enact what Stephen Greenblatt has called "self-fashioning," namely the shaping of one's social and sexual identities.

5   Richard Burbage, Edward Alleyn, Robert Armin, William Kemp, Nathan Field—all these actors used to attract considerable crowds and to inspire the greatest playwrights of the time in their shaping of unforgettable characters. Yet, dramatists did not always judge actors kindly for, contrary to poets, their means of livelihood bore the mark of infamy. "The Statute [controlling all vagabonds and itinerant entertainers] hath done wisely to acknowledge [the common player] a rogue errant, for his chief essence is a daily counterfeit", one reads in the sixth edition of Overbury's *Characters*.[4] In Macbeth, Shakespeare emphasises the frailty of the "poor player, / Who struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more" (5.5.24-26) and he constantly reminds us of the ephemeral quality of performance. In Hamlet, he derides those who overplay or strive to "bellow" their cues (3.2.2) and finds fault with clowns who adlib at the expense of the playtext—a practice which continued well into the seventeenth century, since in the 1630s, William Prynne criticized the clowns who "adde many obscene lascivious jests and passages of their owne […] to delight the auditors".[5] In his Sonnets, Shakespeare portrays mediocre, imperfect actors overwhelmed by stage fright, who forget their lines and spoil the part.[6] However, we know today that, in addition to tremendous physical skills,[7] a Renaissance actor's ability to learn his lines was exceptional. Grammar school education particularly cultivated this skill in children from an early age by making them learn by heart whole passages from the classics. Acting styles were steeped in such rhetoric. Speech acts and passions that were played out on stage were associated with a particular rhetorical form and style, providing a whole repertory of speech codes playwrights used and subverted.

6   What was a good actor, then? There was no clear answer, but Thomas Heywood, himself an actor, said that

> Actors should be men picked out personable, according to the parts they present; they should be rather scholars, that though they cannot speak well, know how to speak, or else to have that volubility that they can speak well, though they understand not what, and so both imperfections may by instructions be helped and amended; but where a good tongue and a good conceit both fail, there can never be good actor.[8]

7   Heywood here emphasizes the actor's "individuality of appearance and behaviour" and, according to him, "both a good tongue and a good conceit (or intelligence, as we would say) would be an excellent combination".[9] Scholars such as Paul Menzer have also suggested that good actors were those who, "without ever having to employ physical gestures that risked inauthenticity or illegibility, […] could signify through their

stillness an intensely coiled, passionate interior."[10] Paradoxically then, emotional intensity was probably conveyed by restrained gestures: early modern decorum was often linked to the management of passion. "Inhibition", Menzer asserts, "can be exhibition", and this must have been true in Elizabethan and Jacobean playhouses.[11]

8   Now, while early modern playwrights themselves nowhere claimed that the most competent actor is the one who can best regulate his emotions, contrary to Diderot's claim in his *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (published posthumously in 1830), some of their characters seem to be born actors well versed in the arts of audience manipulation and of the creation of illusion. They are hypocrites in the everyday sense as well as in the etymological sense of the term — from the Greek term, ὑποκριτής, hupokrités, which means "stage actor" or "one who recites". In the open, public playhouses of the time, "actors would have had to enlarge their performances" and to promote a "heightened kind of acting". As Charles Marowitz reminds us, "we have to try to visualize as many as two or three thousand spectators, in a largely open space, with contingent sounds from both within and without, attending to a group of players who are conveying some of the greatest subtleties ever created by a practicing playwright."[12] By contrast, in private playhouses, actors had to adapt themselves to the local conditions. The surviving court playing venues, namely Hampton Court, St. James' Windsor, and the Queen's House Greenwich, give us an idea of how small the platforms were, all the more so as '[s]caffolds holding several hundred spectators would have taken up a considerable amount of space".[13] This shows that actors were highly qualified, all the more so as the play-boys went through a long apprenticeship: "[s]even years is usually cited as typical", Robert Barrie explains, "but frequently the terms were for as long as twelve or thirteen years".[14] Yet, this statement needs to be qualified as "[t]he percentage of adult players who came up through the apprentice ranks appears to have been small".[15]

9   Adult players of course had their flaws and memory sometimes failed them. In spite of the players' imperfections which Shakespeare and his contemporaries now and then call attention to, thus showing the play's seams, playwrights also defended those who brought their own worlds to the stage. Actors certainly needed their support at a time when Puritan pamphleteers were beginning to make themselves heard and to threaten the profession. In An Apology for Actors (1612), Thomas Heywood praised the dignity of actors in response to the attacks of such critics as John Northbrooke in his *Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Vaine Plays and Enterludes* (1577), Stephen Gosson in the *Schoole of Abuse* (1579), or John Rainold in *Th'Overthrow of Stage Plays* (1599). An actor had to be multi-talented. He had to memorize, play, sing, dance, improvise, and adjust to the changing material conditions of the stage. Despite very limited rehearsal time, early modern actors were able to produce meaning almost instinctively, and a playwright's success ultimately depended on the players' ability to perform their plays. This is what Stanley Wells's *Great Shakespeare Actors: Burbage to Branagh*[16] brilliantly demonstrates. Even today, it is mostly up to actors to update the potentialities of the Shakespearean text and to make characters from the past our contemporaries. For most players today, Shakespeare is every actor's dream· Playing early modern parts nowadays allows actors to reflect on their own acting style. The actor and his text were indeed front and centre in the creative process, in the writing, directing and stage business of early modern companies, which constantly needed to adapt to the changing material conditions of the stage. Such practices may help today's theatrical practitioners explore the multiple

possibilities that are offered to them as they move from page to stage, from collaborative writing to collaborative performance.

10   This special issue devoted to Shakespeare and actors aims at bringing together Shakespeare scholars, theatre historians and experts in performance studies in order to discuss the ways in which early modern drama still enriches our understanding of the actor's profession and place today in a world which sometimes seems to be nothing but a stage.

11   The first part, devoted to "Text and Performance", focuses on theatre-related documents and includes articles by Arlynda Boyer, Abigail Rokison, and Gabriella Reuss. Starting from the fact that printed texts and performed plays generally differ in a number of ways, Boyer aims at analysing "the theatrical texts that are obscured by performance", and she convincingly shows how "Shakespeare playtexts plus actors' marginalia" can sometimes "add up to a third text". Rokinson follows up on Boyer's argument by paying particular attention to the "acting" editions of Shakespeare's plays. She somewhat provocatively remarks, for instance, that scholarly editions do not suit the need of contemporary professional productions. "The time is surely ripe", she concludes, "for rethinking the nature of the acting edition so that it is informed by modern textual scholarship, but un-cluttered by extensive bibliographical and academic material". As to Gabriella Reuss, she studies how annotated Shakespearean performance texts, so widespread in the history of British theatre, affected Shakespearean reception in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, Macready's promptbooks are a case in point, and Reuss successfully demonstrates that "acting copies" were then "an invaluable asset that contained an abundance of information for any novice in the acting profession".

12   In a second part entitled "The Art of Rhetoric and Mnemonics", William E. Engel and David Wiles address the technical competencies of the early modern actor. In his essay, Engel focuses on mnemotechnical cues, reminding us of the early modern use of adages as valuable memory aids and, more broadly, also wonders how memory shapes identity. The power of proverbs, he contends, is particularly remarkable in a play such as *Henry V*, where the French are regularly derided for their ostentatious behaviour as well as for their highly artificial, stilted language. David Wiles similarly dwells on rhetoric but he contends that early modern punctuation, often dismissed as arbitrary by critics, can convey strategic indications for an actor's performance. The punctuation of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy in Q2 (1604), in particular, "is consistent with a rhetorical approach based upon persuasion", he explains.

13   In the next part, "Embodiment", Ilana Gilovich, Tiffany Stern and Russell Jackson investigate Shakespearean performance *per se*. Gilovich sheds fresh light on contemporary one-person productions and pays specific attention to the 2013 *Macbeth* produced by the Lincoln Centre Festival. In this production, Alan Cumming constructed gendered bodies for the various characters he impersonated, from Duncan to Lady Macbeth, and Gilovich notes that his performance "repeatedly signal[ed] the absence or suffocation of reproductive bodies". Tiffany Stern then explores the tragic genre and asks how staging in Shakespeare's time enhanced the genre and meaning of a given play. She examines three aspects associated with tragedy: tragic curtains, tragic walks, and tragic ways of speaking. Her focus on the tonal range of early modern actors is especially fascinating and it usefully reminds us that walking and speaking were "at the heart of a great performance". By contrast, Russell Jackson deals with film actors in an

essay where Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*, in which he was involved as literary advisor, is given pride of place. He insists on the possible coexistence of several approaches in a film and he also aptly recalls that "the spoken word is not cinema's primary means of expression": as a result, "the impact of some major Shakespeare films does not depend on it".

14   In the fourth and last part, "The Status of Actors", Miranda Fay Thomas and Melissa Merchant question and redefine the role and function of the Shakespearean actor. Thomas looks at the casting practices at Shakespeare's Globe from 2016 to the present day, and she is especially interested in "non-British, non-white, non-cisgender male, and/or disabled practitioners". She considers Emma Rice's *Twelfth Night* in 2017 and Michelle Terry's *Hamlet* in 2018 as two emblematic productions that question stereotypes about gender and sexuality. Merchant studies popular culture representations of the Shakespearean actor (as in the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, for example) and she analyses three common tropes: Shakespeare as a bad actor, the acting profession as inspiring and glamorous, and theatrical transvestism as a source of fun.

15   All in all, this rich and diverse collection shows that each period recreates its own Shakespeare and reappropriates his plays. Shakespeare's texts have always been digested, transformed and modernized by actors throughout the ages. They have been distorted, dismembered and decontextualized, they have been rewritten, they have been cut. "I think what you leave out is more important than what you put in", Judi Dench explains.[17] Together with the rise of immersive or interactive theatre, today's participatory media have encouraged new types of audiences to discover Shakespeare as a playwright responding to shifting and challenging notions. They use him both as a means to engage with art and as a tool to discuss issues related to gender and identity. Doing so, they often allow minorities to gain a voice and, most importantly, they give access to plays that, until very recently, were considered as the exclusive mark of the elite. Internet has now become a world stage—a phenomenon which has been even increased by the Covid pandemic, which has generated the (hopefully temporary) closure of many theatres worldwide. Versatile as ever, Shakespeare's actors effectively allow to bring Shakespeare to the fore and effectively contribute to his democratization. Still today, "it is the actor's privilege and challenge [...] to exceed the expectations that have been created by [Shakespeare's] language".[18] Because they constantly reinvent the Shakespearean legacy, they should certainly be regarded as Shakespeare's best collaborators.

NOTES

1. In the fourteenth century, an actor was "[a] person who instigates or is involved in a legal action" (*OED* †1. *Law*). By the end of the fourteenth century, it could also be "[a] guardian, a steward" (*OED* †2). In the early fifteenth century, an actor started to designate "[a] thing which or person who performs or takes part in an action; a doer, an agent".

2. See the website "McKellen on Stage and Film – Summer 1982. On Acting Shakespeare". As first published in Shakespeare Quarterly. Adapted from Interviews conducted by Timothy Hallinan

and John F. Andrews. URL: https://mckellen.com/writings/8204shakesq.htm (date accessed: 31 January 2021).

3. Janna Segal, "The Court Theatre Response to the Public Theatre Debate in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" in *Performances ay Court in the Age of Shakespeare*, ed. Sophie Chiari and John Mucciolo, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 74 (64-76).

4. Sir Thomas Overbury (and others), *Characters* (1622), ed. Donald Beecher, Ottawa, Dovehouse Editions, Barnabe Riche Society Publications 15, 2003, p. 379.

5. William Prynne, *Histriomastix*, London, 1633, p. 930. Quoted in Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, (2009), 2012, p. 247.

6. See Sonnet 23, l. 1-2: "As an unperfect actor on the stage, / Who with his fear is put besides his part [...]".

7. See Evelyn Tribble, *Early Modern Actors and Shakespeare's Theatre: Thinking with the Body*, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017. Tribble explains that "early modern actors who cultivated the seeming miscellany of mental and physical skills ascribed to them built a form of *kinesic* intelligence that undergirded their entire practice (10-12).

8. Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors*, London, 1612, sig. E3^r.

9. John H. Astington. *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare's Time. The Art of Stage Playing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 5.

10. Paul Menzer, "The Actor's Inhibition: Early Modern Acting and the Rhetoric of Restraint", *Renaissance Drama*, New Series, Vol. 35, Embodiment and Environment in Early Modern Drama and Performance, 2006, p. 92 (83-111).

11. *Idem*, p. 94.

12. Charles Marowitz, "Shakespearean Acting: 'Cue for Passion'", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Fall 1999, 6 (5-7).

13. William B. Long, "How Did They Do It? Problems of Staging Plays at Court" in *Performances at Court in the Age of Shakespeare*, ed. Sophie Chiari and John Mucciolo, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 201 (193-202).

14. Robert Barrie, "Elizabethan Play-Boys in the Adult London Companies", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Tudor and Stuart Drama (Spring, 2008), 238 (237-57).

15. *Idem*, 251.

16. Stanley Wells. *Great Shakespeare Actors: Burbage to Branagh*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

17. Quoted by Kathryn Prince, "Judi Dench" in *Gielgud, Olivier, Ashcroft, Dench: Great Shakespeareans*, Volume XVI, ed. Russel Jackson, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 161.

18. Jeremy Lopez, "Imagining the Actor's Body on the Early Modern Stage", *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, vol. 20, 2007, p. 192 (187-203).

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