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# Shakespeare and the Embodied Voice<sup>1</sup>

(in memory of George Rylands: 1902-1999)

Willie Jones

## Abstract

It has been generally supposed that if Shakespeare had a theory of drama at all, he would simply have taken for granted the assumptions of his time: that an artist attempts to offer as realistic (as mimetic) a picture as possible of the (hi)story he is presenting. Shakespeare's practice, however, indicates that he worked, and worked quite deliberately, with a very different theory of drama. He knew that realism, naive or otherwise, is not what a theater offers its audience: the living theatre uses words and the acts which words symbolize to simulate actions which rely on the words for their life\*, while the words are newly embodied and the works are newly enacted each time actors perform a play. Shakespeare was a man of the theatre, working with the individual bodies of actors and their individual voices to *embody*, as if for the first time, the tale that they would, with their bodies and voices, have to tell: the world of Shakespearean drama is self-enclosed, self-created, self-generating; it is also highly rhetorical. This essay was originally a clothes-horse on which to hang a number of lengthy extracts from the plays themselves, intended (in performance) to show how conscious Shakespeare was that the actor's embodied voice is the true creative agent, like Orpheus with his lute, raising cities in the mind's eye rather than on the flat boards of The Wooden O. The original lecture/recital has been revised to elaborate the accompanying commentary.

\*The chiasmatic and circular nature of that phrasing is deliberate.

Keywords: *voice, words, tongue*

## Introduction

In 1997, CUP published a book by Pauline Kiernan, entitled *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama*, in which she argues that Shakespeare must indeed have had a theory of drama and that it was not, as people have supposed (thanks maybe to an over-hasty reading of Hamlet's advice to the Player), the traditional theory of mimetic realism: it was, rather, a theory of Orphic creativity: the hypothesis that the artist is a maker rather than an imitator.

Dr Kiernan argues that Shakespeare was not holding a mirror up to nature, if by "nature" we mean historical, physical or photographic truth (should there be any such thing). If a Shakespearean play is a mirror, as Hamlet claimed a play should be, it is a mirror in which the audience sees itself—which is actually what Hamlet is saying—and that what the audience sees in the mirror are people they recognise in actions which are psychologically believable, presented in ways which mirror the audience's own actions, reactions and emotions.

And though there must be some similarity between the recorded words and behaviour of the historical Henry the Fourth and the words given to the actor who plays that part, historical verisimilitude is not what Shakespeare is after: his art draws attention—through its words as meditated by the actor's body and voice—to the universal in the particular, something which Samuel Johnson said more than two hundred years ago. (Dr Kiernan's thesis may not therefore be quite as revolutionary as she and her publishers claim.)

What is important here, and what I take from Dr Kiernan (though I learned it from Johnson first), is that Shakespeare did not attempt to

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portray nature with strict fidelity to the historical record or to the streaks on the tulip as in a Dutch still-life painting (Johnson), since he knew that this was “a sterile and deadening thing to do” (Kiernan): he was creating characters (even if they were called Henry the Fourth or Macbeth), to be portrayed by living actors, with living bodies and speaking voices in the “here and now”.

Each actor will bring his own body and his own voice (his own physical presence) into the physical presence of the audience; and every time that this happens it will be a re-creation, a re-enactment, not of a historical past, presented mimetically, but of a fictive theatrical present. And it is the voice which acts: the words are the actions.

In *Art and Illusion* (Phaidon, 1962), Sir Ernst Gombrich suggested as a norm of artistic procedure that “making comes before matching”<sup>2</sup>. Gombrich reported that Leonardo da Vinci had said something similar: that an artist is a creator, not an imitator. An artist makes an artefact; others (readers, observers, congregations) may then match it (if they wish to) with whatever they suppose reality—or the world of their own experience—to be. These others, in the theatre (Shakespeare’s *Globe* or Olivier’s *National*), would be the watchful listeners, if that is what they go to the theatre for, rather than simply to be entertained, to be amused, to be taken out of themselves.

Yet, since every living creature is unique, it is to the artist’s uniqueness that we often respond, and the unique angle of an individual artist’s vision may help us to see the world around us with new (or awakened) eyes. No one before Leonardo seems to have had quite the visions which he realised with his pencil, but that does not make them invalid as creations of the human imagination, to which others can respond. No one has had the least trouble in interpreting the surreal visions of Hieronymus Bosch or Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Thomas Kuhn, the historian of science, said something similar in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962): new scientific models (or paradigms, as Kuhn called them) offer us new ways of looking at what we thought we already knew and understood when we were using the old paradigms: just as Copernicus changed the way in which we looked at the world and understood its place in the universe<sup>3</sup>.

Ever since I came across these books more than thirty years ago, the views of Gombrich (especially Gombrich) and Kuhn have influenced my own thinking about the arts, so that the contention that Shakespeare did not set out to be an imitator—in the sense that he wished to offer a carbon copy or transparent representation of whatever historical event he was describing—is one to which I can happily subscribe. He was, by contrast, quite self-consciously a maker, a creator (or re-creator) whose (proto)type, as Dr Kiernan tells us, is Orpheus, the Thracian musician, the player who—with his lyre (or harp)—could cause the leaves to appear on the trees, who could make birds sing and beasts dance, and who—out of stuff that was inanimate and cold—could charm the breath of life. The Elizabethans sang songs about him while for many years he has figured in my own pantheon (and, indeed, if I may presume to say so, has been the inspirer of verses of my own).

To assume such power will seem—if you believe that a monotheistic God alone has the ability to create life—a blasphemous thing to do. But it is a power upon which the theatre depends and without which it cannot exist<sup>4</sup>.

## 1 The Actor as Demiurge

I read *Art and Illusion* (and thus of Leonardo's opinion) while studying *The Tempest* with A level students at Shrewsbury School, and

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the two experiences gelled, fused in my mind, gave birth to a new conception: that Shakespeare was conscious of himself as a demiurge as well as a dramaturge<sup>5</sup>. And I am surprised that Dr Kiernan did not cite the first text that I shall look at: it would, I believe, have supported her case powerfully.

I wish, then, as my starting point, to draw particular attention to a singular exchange between the potential regicides Antonio and Sebastian after Alonso, King of Naples, has come to grief on Prospero's Island, and wanders about helplessly, disconsolate with grief for the son whom he thinks that he has lost. Gonzalo and Adrian attempt to cheer him up; in asides [...], Sebastian and Antonio mock their efforts.

Text 1

Gonzalo: *Methinks our garments are now as fresh as when we put them on first in Afric, at the marriage of the king's fair daughter Claribel to the King of Tunis.*

[Sebastian: *Twas a sweet marriage and we prosper well in our return.*]

Adrian: *Tunis was never graced before with such a paragon to their queen.*

Gonzalo: *Not since widow Dido's time.*

[Antonio: *Widow? A pox o' that! How came that widow in? Widow Dido?*

Sebastian: *What if he had said widower Aeneas, too? Good Lord, how you take it!*]

Adrian: *Widow Dido, said you? You make me study of that. She was of Carthage, not of Tunis.*

Gonzalo; *This Tunis, sir, was Carthage.*

Adrian: *Carthage?*

Gonzalo: *I assure you, Carthage.*

[Antonio: *His word is more than the miraculous harp.*

Sebastian: *He hath raised the wall, and houses too.*

Antonio: *What impossible matter will he make easy next?*

Sebastian: *I think he will carry this island home in his pocket, and give*

*it his son for an apple.*

Antonio: *And, sowing the kernels of it in the sea, bring forth more islands.]*

The Tempest, Act 2, Scene 1

A critic (I have forgotten who) once wrote that if we could understand this exchange we might, with its key, unlock the secrets of Shakespeare's dramaturgy, his theory of drama. I believe that renaissance neo-platonism (of which Leonardo's opinion is an echo) offers us that key. Amphion, the son of Zeus and Antiope, was, like Orpheus, the bearer of a miraculous harp (or lyre), and with its aid he raised the walls of Thebes. This is what the actor does, too: with his embodied voice, he raises the walls and the houses in which he and his fellows act out the play. At the same time, the Shakespearean actor carries the island in his pocket wherever he goes, and each time *The Tempest* is performed, he presents it afresh to his audience so that the audience may savour — as if for the first time — the living taste of the text's eternal fruitfulness, while out of the multitudinous seas — a renaissance commonplace for great creating nature — the player poet will bring forth (or spawn) other works of the creative imagination. For although Shakespeare regularly used stories and histories written by others — the great oceanic treasure house of western literature — he fashions from the old stories new islands and new imaginative worlds<sup>6</sup>.

Whether all this is or is not the case (or whether you think it, as some of my friends may, a load of old pseudery), there can be no doubt that Shakespeare was always, and self-consciously, aware that he was a player, that his stage was a playhouse (which he was already calling a theatre) and that the actor's voice — supported by, and inseparable from, the actor's body — was his instrument: the instrument which had, through evocative words, to create the context in which the actor

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moved and had his being. At the same time, Shakespeare's characters never forget that they are speaking to each other, to the audience, and that others will hear — or may overhear — their words: we, too, will be audiences to the accompt. Shakespeare's actors are forever telling tales to each other, and to us, and they expect to be listened to as well as watched: indeed, listening comes before watching. (It was very easy during Kenneth Brannagh's *Hamlet* to close one's eyes and concentrate on the words rather than allow oneself to be distracted by screen pictures which seemed to contradict, and take your attention away from, the words.)

My second example of demiurgy is more familiar, and in it Shakespeare openly admits — indeed, seems to revel in — the impossibility of achieving any kind of historical authenticity: it challenges his creative powers (and those of the audience, too). If Dr Kiernan is right, he will also have thought it undesirable to try for such authenticity: this is not what his plays are about. Nor are we to suppose, as Samuel Johnson pointed out, that at one moment Shakespeare expects us to believe ourselves in Rome and the next in Alexandria, while, even if, along with Coleridge, we willingly suspend our disbelief, we rarely think that Othello is simply Othello: part of us is always aware that he is really Paul Robeson or Laurence Olivier; and one reason for that — if you are a theatre-goer — is that their voices are unmistakeable.

Naive spectators may, of course, be taken in, like the woman who is supposed to have cried out “You great black fool, can't you see she's innocent?” But she was naive, like many of those who are addicted to soap operas on radio or television: the ignorant spectator who thinks that what she is watching is indeed “real life” (and sends wreaths to the BBC when a fictional character is killed off).

Shakespeare constantly reminds us that what we are watching is a



fiction. And he would obviously much rather use the actor's voice to create the scene than attempt, like a sixteenth century Richard Wagner, to bring on to the stage Cleopatra's barge and the River Nile (Dr Kiernan's example). This is why so few Shakespearean films are successful: attempts to create realistic sets distract from the pre-eminent role of the voice to do the job, and they show a sad lack of trust in Shakespeare's ability to do it. Shakespeare did not write *screen-*plays, and the only verisimilitude he really cared about was psychological.

Above all, it is obvious that as well as being "in the highest degree curious and attentive" (Johnson), Shakespeare cared passionately about words, the symbolic building bricks of language, and in the theatre, whatever the setting, it will be the poet's words and the actor's voice which must create for us the only reality we can ever know. It is the word which gives us our humanity and through whose gifts (if that is how we think of them) we are enabled to act: in the beginning *was* the word.

Although the words of the Chorus in *Henry the Fifth* are a mischievously self-mocking acknowledgement of his inability to show, in any remotely realistic way, events that are past and done with in places here and there, he does reveal, nonetheless, absolute confidence in his own power to fire the forges of the human imagination, his ability to work on the imaginary forces of those who choose to pay attention to his words. The physical limitations of *The Wooden O* and the limited manpower of a theatrical company restrict the players to all but the barest, most lamentable re-enactment of the events they propose to stage, but the capacity of the playwright's words to stoke the creative fire of the auditor's imagination is absolutely unlimited.

I have just learned from Bruce R. Smith that the O with which the

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speech opens is the phoneme with the greatest range of decibels, and that The Wooden O was actually modeled to reproduce the characteristics of the human voice box and was designed to set it off to the greatest effect<sup>7</sup>.

Text 2

Chorus: *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.*

*Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,*

*Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels*

*Leashed in like hounds, should Famine, Sword, and Fire*

*Crouch for employment. But, pardon, gentles all,*

*The flat unraised spirits that hath dared*

*On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth*

*So great an object. Can this cockpit hold*

*The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram*

*Within this wooden O the very casques*

*That did affright the air at Agincourt?*

*O, pardon, since a crooked figure may*

*Attest in little place a million;*

*And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,*

*On your imaginary forces work...*

*Suppose within the girdle of these walls*

*Are now confined two mighty monarchies,*

*Whose high uprearéd and abutting fronts*

*The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder.*

*Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;*

*Into a thousand parts divide one man,*

*And make imaginary pouissance.*

*Think when we talk of horses that you see them*

*Printing their proud hoofs in the receiving earth:*

*For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,*

*Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,  
Turning the accomplishment of many years  
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,  
Admit me Chorus to this history,  
Who, prologue-like, your humble patience pray,  
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.*

*Henry the Fifth: The Prologue to Act One*

The lines here which reflect both the playwright's modesty and his presumption are familiar to everyone: "Think when we talk of horses that you see them/Printing their proud hoofs in the receiving earth". The word creates the image. We are teased at the end of the Prologue to Act IV, though, when the Chorus asks us to mind "true things by what their mockeries be", since this raises fundamental issues of truth and fiction that I am only touching on tangentially here. (Though we might recall Frederic Raphael's remark: "Truth is stranger than fiction, but fiction is truer".) Dr Kiernan says that Shakespeare always uses the word "mockeries" pejoratively: to underline the falsity and immodesty, even perhaps the immorality, of efforts to be mimetically realistic.

We may be reassured, however, when, in the Prologue to the fifth act, the Chorus encourages us to "behold/In the quick forge and working house of thought" the actions and movements which the words describe, since Shakespeare himself is reminding us, as he does many times, of the power of words to inspire and to fire the forge, where, on his anvil, the blacksmith hammers into shape the molten metal of previously innate or inert ideas—and this being so, we are left in the end to decide for ourselves which are the true things and which the mockeries.

## 2 The Actor as Player King

Richard the Second's meditations before his death (*Richard the Second*, Act 5, Scene 5) show a man *in extremis*, at the point when his life is more or less over, yet still battling to give voice to his thoughts, which he hammers out with the help of words (and without words he could not do so) in the forge of his still living, word-spinning brain. Richard the Second is always taken to be the most actorly of Shakespeare's characters, like Shakespeare himself, the chameleon artist as John Keats believed, one man in his time playing many parts.

### Text 3

Richard II: *I have been studying how I may compare*

*This prison where I live unto the world,*

*And for because the world is populous*

*And here is not a creature but myself,*

*I cannot do it: yet I'll hammer it out.*

*My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,*

*My soul the father, and these two beget*

*A generation of still breeding thoughts,*

*And these same thoughts people this little world*

*In humours like the people of this world:*

*For no thought is contented: the better sort,*

*As thoughts of things divine, are intermixed*

*With scruples, and so set the word itself*

*Against the word,*

*As thus, "Come little ones", and then again,*

*"It is as hard to come as for a camel*

*To thread the postern of a small needle's eye".*

*Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot*

*Unlikely wonders, how these vain weak nails*

*May tear a passage through the flinty ribs*

*Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls,*

*And, for they cannot, die in their own pride.  
Thoughts tending to content flatter themselves  
That they are not the first of fortune's slaves  
Nor shall not be the last—like silly beggars  
Who sitting in the stocks refuge their shame  
That many have and others must sit there,  
And in this thought they find a kind of ease,  
Bearing their own misfortunes on the back  
Of such as have before endured the like...  
Thus play I in one person many people,  
And none contented. Sometimes am I king,  
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,  
And so I am: then crushing penury  
Persuades me I was better when a king,  
Then am I kinged again and by and by  
Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,  
And straight am nothing....But whate'er I be  
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased  
With being nothing.....Music do I hear?  
Ha, ha! Keep time. How sour sweet music is  
When time is broke and no proportion kept!  
So is it in the music of men's lives,  
And here have I the daintiness of ear  
To check time broke in a disordered string  
But for the concord of my state and time  
Had not an ear to hear time broke.  
I wasted time and now doth time waste me,  
For now hath time made me his num'bring clock,  
My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar  
Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,  
Whereto my finger, like a dial's point,  
Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears.  
Now, sir, the sound that tells what hour it is*

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*Are clamourous groans that strike upon my heart,  
Which is the bell—so sighs, and tears, and groans  
Show minutes times and hoürs—but my time  
Runs posting on in Bolingbroke's proud joy,  
While I stand fooling here, his Jack o'the clock...  
This music mads me, let it sound no more,  
For though it hath holp madmen to their wits  
In me it seems it will make wise men mad.  
Yet blessing on his heart that gives it me,  
For 'tis a sign of love, and love to Richard  
Is a strange brooch in this all-hating world.*

*Richard II, Act 5, Scene 5*

### **3 The Actor as Word-Shuffler**

One could, of course, write a book about this speech, which, while it tries out a number of roles that the actor might play, is also the performance of a man talking to himself, since it is only through our ability to handle words, symbolic playing cards (as well as building bricks) that we have become self-conscious creatures: words enable us to be analysts and prophets and thus human beings. Thanks to the power of the word, the human race has come to suppose that the word is a special gift to the human race, and that would pre-suppose a giver, who for many has been and is God. A tricky supposition, these days.

When a man seeks to communicate with God, which he has done with daily regularity for millenia, he does so through prayer, the words we use when talking to God: it is with voiced words (even if we pray silently) that we attempt to reach God, to seek out God's disembodied, other-wordly ear, as Claudius does in the prayer scene in *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 3), but words unsupported by thoughts are worthless: "My

words fly up, my thoughts remain below;/Words without thoughts never to heaven go”.

What Claudius means is that since his thoughts remain on earth with his queen and his crown, his words of repentance are not true to his thoughts (which can only be expressed in words whatever his mental image of them may be), and that since there is a division between thoughts and words, a lack of concord, a fatal separation, his spoken words are merely words. Which Richard perhaps thinks his are, too: no more, if one is a religious sceptic, than a means of passing the time.

Today, with all our electronic means of recording and communication and our increased ability to send messages to each other by ways other than the direct presence of the speaking voice, the embodied voice may be losing some of its traditional unique authority. Jacques Derrida claims that writing precedes speech, and Shakespeare (like Hamlet) wrote down his words before he gave them to the actor to speak; but Shakespeare seems to have made no personal effort to preserve his dramatic *écriture*. In the Shakespearean theatre it is always the player’s voice that counts. It is the actor’s voice which creates.

#### 4 The Actor as Prototype

Of course, Shakespeare did not, as God was believed to have done, create *ex nihilo*, and it is indeed possible to find a source for almost everything that he did write, while his thoughts do seem to arise out of well-known commonplaces—the *topoi*, or topics—the places where you went to look for ideas to spur your powers of invention. Yet Shakespeare had, on top of his other gifts, the ability to re-invent, to re-vivify the old and the familiar—and so it must have seemed to his original audience.

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One *topos* with which Shakespeare's audience will have been perfectly familiar, and which is now familiar to us as well, thanks to Shakespeare's power to give to the ideas he found around him "a local habitation and a name" (as Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* defines the poet's skill): what TSEliot was later to call "the objective correlative". This is the notion that life itself is "a play", that a man's life is acted out on the stage of this sublunary world, as Richard the Second, in his dying moments, played many parts, and none contented.

Shakespeare's treatment of this topical commonplace hardly needs a gloss—but it is worth noting that each of the seven ages of man is characterised by the accoutrements which deck the body and by the characteristic tones of the individual voice<sup>8</sup>.

Text 4

Duke Senior: *Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy:*

*This wide and universal theatre*

*Presents more woeful pageants than the scene*

*Wherein we play in.*

Jaques: *All the world's a stage*

*And all the men and women merely players;*

*They have their exits and their entrances,*

*And one man in his time plays many parts,*

*His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,*

*Mewling and pucking in the nurse's arms;*

*Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel*

*And shining morning face, creeping like snail*

*Unwillingly to school; and then the lover,*

*Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad*

*Made to his mistress' eyebrow; then a soldier,*

*Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,*

*Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,*

*Seeking the bubble reputation*



*Even in the cannon's mouth; and then the justice,  
In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances,  
And so he plays his part...The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound...Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

*As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 7*

## 5 The Actor as Stage Director

Many critics have regarded Hamlet's advice to the Player as representing Shakespeare's own view of his dramatic craft, which it well may, but they have taken the phrase "to hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature" as indicating that Shakespeare's aim, like that of so much Renaissance theory if not always of practice, was simply mimetic; and that he had taken over this view without thinking too much about it. Dr Kiernan believes that Shakespeare is bound to have thought deeply about what he was doing, and she offers evidence to show that Shakespeare firmly and consciously believed that slavish 'imitation' is in fact beastly, merely apish — if, that is, the purpose of such imitation is to portray 'real life', the thing itself — real horses for make-believe ones. The mirror Shakespeare seems to be talking about is the one in which we see our own faces reflected, and his art is a fiction.

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The actor who holds a mirror up to nature and the dramas in which he appears is himself the mirror: we, the audience, see ourselves reflected in what the player says, and, through his words, what he does (or acts). All that the players need to be is life-like, in their gestures and speech no less than in their behaviour; to be technically accomplished professionals and recognisable human beings. Here, at any rate, is what Hamlet — if not Shakespeare — had, famously, to say on the topic. Hamlet's advice to the players is as well-known as Jaques' observations on man's seven ages, but it also serves my purpose.

Text 5

Hamlet: *Speak the speech I pray you as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-cryer spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and I may say whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that will give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul, to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise: I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant: it out-Herods Herod, pray you avoid it.*

Player: *I warrant your honour*

Hamlet: *Be not too tame neither, but let your discretion be your tutor, suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure...Now, this overdone or come tardy off, though it make the unskillful laugh cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have*

*seen play — and heard others praise and that highly — not to speak it profanely, that neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan or man, have so strutted and bellowed, that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made them, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.*

Player: *I hope we have reformed that indifferently with us.*

Hamlet: *O reform it altogether, and let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh, too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villanous and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it...Go, make you ready.*

*Hamlet Act 3, Scene 2*

What Hamlet is talking about here is, it seems, the “imitation of humanity” — humanity in its generality, as Samuel Johnson argued later — and if we, the audience, did not recognise the lineaments of general humanity in his characters, none of us would ever have heard of him. What he never attempted to do, however, was to pretend that his historical characters are virtual portrayals of whatever personages they recreate—as if any of this was laid down as given and unchangeable. Indeed, he played fast and loose with such facts when it suited his dramatic purposes to do so. He is impersonating human beings in their common humanity (even when historically particular), and he uses their voices and their gestures to embody what we see and hear upon the stage. In Hamlet’s soliloquy “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I”, Shakespeare is having it both ways.

Many critics have suggested that Hamlet’s comments on the play within the play are meant to persuade us to think of him as not within a play of his own, and as therefore somehow more “real”, as Hamlet himself, appearing to neglect his own advice, “tears a passion to tatters” (Shakespeare, one feels, must have intended an irony here). I

agree, rather, with Dr Kiernan that we are actually more likely to be reminded that the actor playing Hamlet is an actor, too, and that it is the actor's virtuosity to which we respond as well as to whatever truth to human nature the character may offer for our discernment.

## 6 The Actor as Tear-Jerker

We go to the theatre to enjoy good acting, which “both at first and now” has meant good speaking, just as we go to the opera to listen to great singing: and it will be the quality of the performance that we applaud. Nonetheless, we may be so moved by what is happening on the stage that we are changed by it, transformed or reformed by it, or provoked into taking some action on our own account (as Hamlet hopes that Claudius will be provoked when watching *The Mousetrap*).

### Text 6

Hamlet....*Ay, so, God bye to you! Now I am alone.  
O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
That from her working all his visage wanned,  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit: and all for nothing?  
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her? What would he do  
Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears  
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,  
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed*

*The very faculties of eyes and ears, yet I,  
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak  
Like John-a-Dreams, unpregnant of my cause,  
And can say nothing: no, not for a king,  
Upon whose property and most dear life  
A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?  
Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,  
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,  
Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i'th' throat  
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me thus?  
Ha! Swounds! I should take it, for it cannot be  
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall  
To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
I should ha' fatted all the region kites  
With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!  
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!  
O, Vengeance!  
Why what an ass am I? This is most brave,  
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,  
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,  
A scullion! Fie upon it! Foh!  
About my brains! Hummm! I have heard  
That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
Have by the very cunning of the scene  
Been struck so to the soul that presently  
They have proclaimed their malefactions:  
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players  
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before my uncle, I'll observe his looks,  
I'll tent him to the quick. If a' do blench  
I know my course.....The spirit that I have seen*

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*May be the devil, and the devil hath power  
T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds  
More relative than this: the play's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king!*

*Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2*

Although actors may weep on stage, they are not supposed to allow themselves to be emotionally affected since this is likely to disturb their control of their performance. But whether their tears are genuine or simulated, they are nonetheless real. And for all the cool detachment of his advice to the players, Hamlet is not indifferent to the power of words, and an actor's tears, to move him, and be himself provoked into action<sup>9</sup>.

## **7 The Actor as Myth Maker (or Word Spinner)**

Shakespeare's characters are as aware as Shakespeare himself is of the semi-magical power of their own words, not only to persuade but also to create, and Othello's explanation to the Senate — the Venetian Council — of how Desdemona came to love him is another famous instance of this. Desdemona's father accuses Othello of witchcraft, which Othello denies — but of course there is witchcraft in his words, for words can bewitch, as speakers in other plays are also all too well aware.

Text 7

*Othello: Ancient, conduct them, you best know the place, And till she  
come, as truly as to heaven*

*I do confess the vices of my blood,  
So justly to your grave ears I'll present  
How I did thrive in this fair lady's love  
And she in mine.*

Duke: *Say it, Othello!*

Othello: *Her father loved me, oft invited me,  
Still questioned me the story of my life  
From year to year—the battles, sieges, fortunes  
That I have passed.*

*I ran it through, even from my boyish days  
To the very moment that he bade me tell it,  
Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,  
Of moving accidents by flood and field,  
Of hair-breath scapes in the imminent deadly breach,  
Of being taken by the insolent foe  
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence,  
And portance of my travails' history,  
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,  
Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven  
It was my hint to speak — Such was the process —  
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,  
The Anthropopagi, and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear  
Would Desdemona seriously incline,  
But still the house affairs would draw her thence,  
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch  
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear  
Devour up my discourse, which I observing  
Took once a pliant hour, and found good means  
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart  
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,  
Wherof by parcels she had something heard,  
But not intentively. I did consent,  
And often did beguile her of her tears*

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*When I did speak of some distressful stroke  
That my youth suffered. My story being done,  
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs,  
She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,  
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful,  
She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished  
That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me  
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,  
I should but teach him how to tell my story  
And that would woo her. Upon that hint I spake:  
She loved me for the dangers I had passed  
And I loved her that she did pity them.  
That only is the witchcraft I have used.  
Here comes the lady: let her witness it.*

*Othello, Act 1, Scene 3*

## **8 The Actor as Reporter, and as (de-) Mythologizer**

Many Shakespearean speeches are reports—reports of what others have done and what others have said. The speakers wonder, like the Chorus in *Henry the Fifth*, if their voices will be an adequate means to convey what they would report, especially when the subject of their report is speechless. When, today, we listen to Cominius's report of Coriolanus's martial prowess, we may find it decidedly unappealing, indeed appalling—for it shows Coriolanus to be a psychopath, a man with a golden sword—and Menenius's "Worthy man" must even in an age which valued such obscenities have been potentially ironic, although presumably not meant so by Menenius.

Yet what we notice is that images of the theatre come perfectly naturally to Cominius—the battle field is the stage on which Coriolanus acts—and that Cominius knows that he is a reporter whose



voice has to convince the crowd which hears it: that it has to persuade those whom Menenius in contempt calls “spawn”<sup>10</sup>.

Text 8

Coriolanus: *I had rather have one scratch my head i' the sun  
When the alarum were struck than idly sit  
To hear my nothings monstered.*

Menenius: *Masters of the people,  
Your multiplying spawn how can he flatter —  
That's thousands to one good one — when you now see  
He had rather venture all his limbs for honour  
Than one on's ears to hear it? Proceed, Cominius.*

Cominius: *I shall lack voice: the deeds of Coriolanus  
Should not be uttered feebly. It is held  
That valour is the chiefest virtue and  
Most dignifies the haver. If it be,  
The man I speak of cannot in the world  
Be singly counterpoised. At sixteen years,  
When Tarquin made a head for Rome, he fought  
Beyond the mark of others. Our then Dictator,  
Whom with all praise I point at, saw him fight  
When with his Amazonian chin he drove  
The bristled lips before him: he bestrid  
An o'erpressed Roman, and i' the Consul's view  
Slew three opposers. Tarquin's self he met  
And struck him on the knee. In that day's feats  
When he might act the woman in the scene,  
He proved best man i' the field, and for his meed  
Was brow-bound with the oak. His pupil age  
Man-entered thus, he waxed like the sea,  
And in the brunt of seventeen battles since  
He lurched all swords of the garland. For this last,  
Before and in Corioli, let me say,  
I cannot speak him home. He stopped the fliers,  
And by his rare example made the coward*



been severed as they were to become severed after Descartes.

Text 9

Brutus: *What is that you would impart to me?*

*If it be aught toward the general good*

*Set honour in one eye and death i'th'other*

*And I will look on both indifferently:*

*For let the gods so speed me as I love*

*The name of honour more than I fear death.*

Cassius: *I know that virtue to be in you, Brutus,*

*As well as I do know your outward favour.*

*Well, honour is the subject of my story...*

*I cannot tell what you and other men*

*Think of this life: but, for my living self,*

*I had as lief not be as live to be*

*In awe of such a thing as I myself.*

*I was born free as Caesar, so were you,*

*We both have fed as well, and we can both*

*Endure the winter's cold as well as he.*

*For once upon a raw and gusty day,*

*The troubled Tiber chafing with her shores,*

*Caesar said to me "Dar'st thou, Cassius, now,*

*Leap in with me into this angry flood*

*And swim to yonder point?" Upon the word,*

*Accoutréed as I was, I plungéd in*

*And bade him follow: so indeed he did.*

*The torrent roared and we did buffet it*

*With lusty sinews, throwing it aside*

*And stemming it with hearts of controversy,*

*But ere we could arrive the point proposed,*

*Caesar cried "Help me, Cassius, or I sink!"*

*I, as Aeneas our great ancestor*

*Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder*

*The old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber*

*Did I the tired Caesar — and this man*



## 9 The Actor as Shape Shifter (or Chameleon)

While the actor's voice must work upon his fellow actors, it must also, as the example from Hamlet makes clear, work upon the audience, either when Hamlet is speaking to us, or is himself the audience, or when the court is the audience of *The Murder of Gonzago*. In *Henry the Sixth, Part Three*, Richard of Gloucester works directly upon the audience in the theatre, you and me, the supposedly objective listeners.

In the great staging of the History Cycle at Stratford in the early sixties, Ian Holm gave an awesome demonstration of the power of the voice to overpower, even when enclosed in an enfeebled body — or, in fact, really, because the body was enfeebled and all he had *was* his voice. Here, Richard of Gloucester tells of his ambition and of his machiavellian determination to achieve it.

Text 10

King Edward: *Widow, go you along. Lords use her honourably.*

Gloucester: *Ay, Edward will use women honourably.*

*Would he were wasted, marrow, bones, and all,  
That from his loins no hopeful branch may spring  
To cross me from the golden time I look for!  
And, yet, between my soul's desire and me —  
The lustful Edward's title buried —  
Is Clarence, Henry, and his son young Edward,  
And all the unlooked-for issue of their bodies,  
To take their rooms ere I can place myself:  
A cold premeditation for my purpose!  
Why, then, I do but dream on sovereignty,  
Like one that stands upon a promontory,  
And spies a far-off shore where he would tread,  
Wishing his feet were equal with his eye,*

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*And chides the sea that sunders him from thence,  
Saying he'll lade it dry to have his way:  
So do I wish the crown, being so far off,  
And so I chide the means that keeps me from it,  
And so I say I'll cut the causes off,  
Flattering me with impossibilities.  
My eye's too quick, my heart o'erweens too much,  
Unless my hand and strength could equal them.  
Well, say there is no kingdom then for Richard.  
What other pleasure can the world afford?  
I'll make my heaven in a lady's lap,  
And deck my body in gay ornaments,  
And witch sweet ladies with my words and looks.  
O miserable thought! And more unlikely  
Than to accomplish twenty golden crowns!  
Why, love forswore me in my mother's womb,  
And for I should not deal in her soft laws  
She did corrupt frail nature with some bribe,  
To shrink my arm up like a withered shrub,  
To make an envious mountain on my back,  
Where sits deformity to mock my body,  
To shape my legs of an unequal size,  
To disproportion me in every part  
Like to a chaos or an unlicked bear-whelp  
That carries no impression like the dam.  
And am I then a man to be beloved?  
O monstrous thought to harbour such a thought!  
Then since this earth affords no joy to me  
But to command, to check, to o'erbear such  
As are of better person than myself  
I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown,  
And whiles I live to account this world but hell  
Until my mis-shaped trunk that bears this head  
Be round-impaléd with a glorious crown.*

*And yet I know not how to get the crown  
For many lives stand between me and home,  
And I, like one lost in a thorny wood  
That rends the thorns and is rent with the thorns,  
Seeking a way and straying from the way,  
Not knowing how to find the open air,  
But toiling desperately to find it out —  
Torment myself to catch the English crown.  
And from that torment I will free myself,  
Or hew my way out with a bloody axe.  
Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile  
And cry Content to that which grieves my heart,  
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,  
And frame my face to all occasions.  
I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall,  
I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk,  
I'll play the orator as well as Nestor,  
Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could,  
And like a Sinon take another Troy.  
I can add colours to the chameleon,  
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,  
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.  
Can I do this and cannot get a crown?  
Tut, were it further off, I'd pluck it down.*

*Henry the Sixth, Part Three, Act 3, Scene 2*

As Holm anatomised the anguish of his bodily as well as emotional frustration, I had a sense of the whole audience being moved to pity for this poor creature, that we were all caught up in a surge of sympathy. (This was not imagination on my part, as you often know in the theatre when the audience as a collective body is sharing a collective experience, and it must be one of the supreme pleasures of an actor's life to feel in control of this response — a dangerous joy, no doubt, if you are Richard in fact, or Adolf Hitler.) As Holm described his sense of being

trapped in a thorny wood, there were tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect; but at the words “Why, I can smile”, he wiped off the suffering expression as if whipping away a mask and laughed in the audience’s face. It was a moment of amazing theatrical audacity, and from then on no one doubted that if he could do that to us, he could do it to everybody else. If he then went on to charm others into accepting the truth of his lies, we believed that he could indeed do so: we had ourselves been taken in.

The speech is itself audacious, for it might be read as Shakespeare’s *curriculum vitae* or *carte-de-visite*: the upstart crow wrapped in a player’s hide is a supremely confident actor. Perhaps Keats had this speech in mind when he praised Shakespeare’s genius (while describing his own) as that of a chameleon poet, which has no self, who “has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen”.

## 10 The Actor as Gossip

I have selected the nurse’s speech from *Romeo and Juliet* to demonstrate a related aspect of the Shakespearean voice: the unique actor’s ability to articulate that voice (and to tell a theatrical tale). It is the actor who gives life and breath, and individual quality, to the voice. Edith Evans first played the part in 1935; she played it again 25 years later. It was a far cry from her Lady Bracknell—and yet not so far since her voice was unmistakable, whatever she played. Some time at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties, while I was attending the annual ten day Shakespeare Summer School at Stratford (something which I used to do in those years), I saw this performance three times, sitting near the front on each occasion; and that year (whenever that year was) Edith Evans took part as a member of the



team in the Panel Discussion with which the Summer School ended. One of the questions put to her was "How do you do it?" "It is very simple," she replied. "I go to the earliest text I can find and follow Shakespeare's punctuation". The earliest available texts in those days were GBHarrison's Penguin Edition, based mostly on the original quartos: they were lovely texts; I once had a set; today, they must be worth a King's Ransom<sup>11</sup>.

A book published only this year has just confirmed the rightness of Edith Evans's judgement, and if I had read it before I wrote the first (or even fifth) draft of this talk, I might have revised its structure, though not its argument. The book, to which I have already referred in passing, is *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*, by Bruce R. Smith, and the book's genesis is a chapter which Smith first wrote several years ago about the acoustic world of an Elizabethan playhouse, about the way the design of a theatre like The Globe, the materials of which it was made, the height of the echoing chamber, were all designed to ensure the maximum effectiveness of the actor's voice. It is rather exciting. Smith analyses how these features would have affected the quantity (or volume) of sound produced and the quality of vocal effects. We can still measure the decibels and the herzes which such theatres accommodate, the quantity of the sound, but the quality of the individual voices is of course lost.

Since actors can be trained in its management, vocal quantity was something that, from the Greek rhetoricians onwards, was of considerable importance. Elocution, one of the five parts of traditional rhetoric, laid down the criteria: control of volume, control of pitch, and control of punctuation. Punctuation marks in sixteenth century dramatic texts indicate lengths of pauses, changes of pitch and segments of speech. These marks were much more sparing than they are in

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modern texts which are tidied up to make the punctuation grammatical: they are not always so much help to the actor. In modern editions, the Nurse's great speech is punctuated grammatically and usually laid out as verse; I have deliberately modified the punctuation, and have realigned the speech as prose, which is how it appeared in Harrison's edition, lightly punctuated.

Text 12

Lady Capulet: *Nurse, where's my daughter? Call her forth to me.*

Nurse: *Now, by my maidenhead at twelve year old, I bade her come. What, lamb, what, lady-bird, God forbid, where's this girl? What, Juliet!*

Juliet: *How now, who calls?*

Nurse: *Your mother.*

Juliet: *Madam, I am here. What is your will?*

Lady Capulet: *This is the matter. Nurse, give us leave awhile: we must talk in secret. Nurse, come back again. I have remembered me: thou'st hear our counsel. Thou knowest my daughter's of a pretty age.*

Nurse: *Faith, I can tell her age unto an hour.*

Lady Capulet: *She's not fourteen.*

Nurse: *I'll lay fourteen of my teeth — and yet, to my teen be it spoken, I have but four — she's not fourteen. How long is it now to Lammas-tide?*

Lady Capulet: *A fortnight and odd days.*

Nurse: *Even or odd, of all days in the year, come Lammas-Eve at night shall she be fourteen. Susan and she, God rest all Christian souls, were of an age, well, Susan is with God, she was too good for me, but, as I said, on Lammas-Eve at night shall she be fourteen, that shall she marry, I remember it well. 'Tis since the earthquake now eleven years, and she was weaned, I never shall forget it, of all days of the year upon that day, for I had then laid wormwood to my dug, sitting in the sun under the dovehouse wall. My Lord and you were then at Mantua — nay, I do bear a brain — but as I said, when it did taste the wormwood on the nipple of my dug, and felt it bitter, pretty fool, to see*

*it tetchy and fall out with the dug! Shake, quoth the dove-house, 'twas no need, I trow, to bid me trudge. And since that time it is eleven years, for then she could stand high-lone, nay, by the rood, she could have run and waddled all about, for even the day before, she broke her brow, and then my husband — God be with his soul, 'a was a merry man — took up the child: yea, quoth he, dost thou fall upon thy face, thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit, wilt thou not, Jule? And, by my holidame, the pretty wretch left crying and said Ay. To see now how a jest should come about! I warrant, and I should live a thousand years, I never should forget it. Wilt thou not, Jule, and pretty fool, it stinted, and said Ay.*

Plain type: *Enough of this, I pray thee, hold thy peace.*

Nurse: *Yes, madam, yet I cannot choose but laugh, to think it should leave crying and say Ay, and yet I warrant it had upon its brow a bump as big as a young cockerel's stone, a perilous knock, and it cried bitterly. Yea, quoth my husband, fallst upon thy face, thou wilt fall backward when thou comst to age, wilt thou not, Jule? It stinted, and said Ay.*

Juliet: *And stint thou, too, I pray thee, nurse, say I.*

Nurse: *Peace, I have done. God mark thee to his grace.*

*Romeo and Juliet, Act 1, Scene 3*

## 11 The Actor as Conjuror (or Ventriloquist)

Another character who has always been credited — by himself as well as by many critics — as being particularly eloquent is Falstaff. Although he made a strange detour into Gloucestershire on his way to Yorkshire to join the army of the Duke of Lancashire, he arrives in time for the aborted battle of Gaultree Forest, and after the armies have dispersed he praises the virtue of sherris-sack (what we today would call sherry, the wine from Jerez, Spain). One of its virtues is to awaken the mind and fire the imagination, which in turn gives elo-

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quence to the voice, the tongue, which, in Falstaff's opinion, gives birth to — or, in other words, conceives — “excellent wit”. (I am implying that this is an act of ventriloquism in that it inspires the belly to speak: the terms's original meaning.)

Text 13

Falstaff: *My lord, I beseech you, give me leave to go through Gloucestershire: and, when you come to court, stand, my good lord, pray, in your good report.*

Prince John: *Fare you well, Falstaff. I, in my condition, shall speak better of you than you deserve. (Exit)*

Falstaff: *I would you had but the wit, 'twere better than your dukedom. Good faith, this same sober-bloodied boy doth not love me, nor a man cannot make him laugh — but that's no marvel, he drinks no wine. There's never any of these demure boys come to any proof, for thin drink doth so overcool their blood, and making many fish meals, that they fall into a kind of male green sickness, and when they marry they get wenches. They are generally fools and cowards, which some of us would be too, but for inflammation...A good sherris-sack hath a two-fold operation in it. It ascends me into the brain, dries me there all the foolish, dull and crudy vapours that do environ it, makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery and delectable shapes, which delivered o'er to the voice, the tongue, which is the birth, becomes excellent wit. The second property of your excellent sherris is the warming of the blood, which before (cold and settled) left the liver white and pale, which is the badge of pusillanimity and cowardice; but the sherris warms it and makes it course from the inwards to the parts extreme. It illumineth the face, which as a beacon gives warning to all the rest of this little kingdom, man, to arm. And then the vital commoners and inland petty spirits muster me all to their captain the heart, who great and puffed up with this retinue doth any deed of courage, and this valour comes of sherris. So that skill in the weapon is nothing without sack (for that sets it a-work), and learning is a mere*

*hoard of gold kept by the devil, till sack commences it and sets it in act and use....Hereof comes it that Prince Harry is valiant, for the cold blood that he did naturally inherit from his father he hath, like lean, sterile and bare land, manured, husbanded and tilled with excellent endeavour of drinking good and good store of fertile sherris....If I had a thousand sons, the first humane principle I should teach them should be to forswear thin potations and to addict themselves to sack.*

*Henry IV, Part 2. Act 4, Scene 3*

At this point, I should also, had there been time, have read Berowne's speech "Have at you then, affection's men at arms" on the power of female beauty, the "true Promethean fire", to inspire the poet's tongue (*Love's Labour's Lost*, Act 4, Sc 3). In Berowne's account, the tongue is the voice of the romantic poet, Jaques' lover sighing like a furnace, and for Berowne it is specifically the poet's voice which is lit by the promethean fire.

In Othello's case, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul", the life-giving fire illuminates Othello's recognition that once the candle of Desdemona's life is extinguished, he "knows not where is that Promethean heat that can thy light relume".

Falstaff's use of the word "forgetive" also echoes the Chorus in *Henry the Fifth*, and since sherry is like Berowne's "promethean fire", it, too, can add fire to the "forge and working house of thought", and, as a result of its power to hammer out new conceits: it can enliven and enlight.

In *Measure for Measure* (Act 2, Scene 2), Isabella's embodied voice has the power to move even Angelo, whose blood is very snow-broth, and when he makes water it is as congealéd ice. It is Isabella's eloquence, her passionately intelligent way with words, as these are expressed through the unique modulations of her voice, that move Angelo to the recognition that "She speaks, and 'tis such sense/That my

sense breeds with it". Isabella's voice is both Orphic and Promethean.

Like Orpheus's harp, Promethean fire has the power to create life out of what has been lifeless, but Othello knows very well that once Desdemona's flame is extinguished no promethean fire can relight it: and there will be no Orpheus to lead her back from the dead<sup>12</sup>.

## 12 The Actor as Memorialist

During Falstaff's earlier detour into Gloucestershire, but before he arrives on the scene, we meet two of the local dignitaries, Justice Shallow and his cousin Silence (not a man much given to speech, and not of much use therefore in a play, except — like Constable Dull in *Love's Labour's Lost* — as a foil). I have chosen this extract for a very special, and personal, reason — a reason that will clarify the dedication of this piece, which you may wonder why I have not explained before now.

Seventy years ago, in 1929, Virginia Woolf published *A Room of One's Own*, and in it she describes a memorable meal that she had enjoyed as a guest in the rooms of a fellow of a Cambridge College, a meal which began with "soles, sunk in a deep dish, over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream, save that it was branded here and there with brown spots like the spots on the flanks of a doe". In similar hunger-inspiring detail, the meal goes on.

Although she does not say so, Woolf's host that day was George ("Dadie") Rylands, a young fellow of King's College, Cambridge, who, this January, died aged 96, still a fellow of that royal pile. He was a Director of the Cambridge Arts Theatre and coached many leading actors in the arts of declamatory speech, while his influence on the directors John Barton and Peter Hall was partly responsible for the

efflorescence of Shakespearean speaking (and of performing) at Stratford during the sixties and seventies. He also directed the recordings of the Shakespearean corpus for the Marlowe Society and Argo Records (which are much better value than the BBC video productions).

During the early 1950s, I had the privilege, as an undergraduate reading English at Cambridge, of attending his lectures, in which, as I have been attempting to do here, he demonstrated how to bring to life the words that Shakespeare has given his actors to speak: with their individual voices, their unique tongues. One of his most moving examples of Shakespeare's ability to create a life in half a page was this short conversation, in which Shallow, an immortal nobody, does, by embodying it, mirror the human condition, its vanity, its pathos, its awe in the face of the death which will silence all our voices, and lay us lifeless in our graves. Shallow remembers Double, a great archer in his time, who could hit the centre of a target with the strongest bow at twelve score yards.

Text 14

Shallow: *Come on, come on, come on, give me your hand, sir, give me your hand, sir! An early stirrer, by the rood....and how doth my good cousin, Silence?*

Silence: *Good morrow, good cousin Shallow.*

Shallow: *And how doth my cousin, your bedfellow? And your fairest daughter and mine, my god-daughter Ellen.*

Silence: *Alas, a black ousel, cousin Shallow.*

Shallow: *By yea and no, sir. I daresay my cousin William is become a good scholar. He is at Oxford still, is he not?*

Silence: *Indeed, sir, to my cost.*

Shallow: *'A must to the inns o' court shortly. I was once of Clement's Inn, where I think they will talk of mad Shallow yet.*

Silence: *You were called lusty Shallow then, cousin.*

Shallow: *By the mass, I was called anything, and would have done*

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*anything indeed too, and roundly too...There was I, and little John Doit of Staffordshire, and black George Barnes, and Francis Pickbone, and Will Squele, a Cotsole man...you had not four such swinge-bucklers in all the inns 'o court again. And I may say to you that we knew where all the bona-robas were and had the best of them all at commandment....Then was Jack Falstaff (now Sir John) a boy and page to Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk.*

Silence: *This Sir John, cousin, that comes hither anon about soldiers?*

Shallow: *The same Sir John, the very same. I saw him break Scoggin's head at the court-gate, when 'a was a crack, not thus high. And the very same day did I fight with one Sampson Stockfish, a fruiterer, behind Gray's Inn...Jesu, Jesu, the mad days that I have spent! And to see how many of my old acquaintance are dead.*

Silence: *We shall all follow, cousin.*

Shallow: *Certain, 'tis certain, very sure, very sure. Death, as the Psalmist saith, is certain to all, all shall die. How a good yoke of bullocks at Stamford Fair?*

Silence: *By my troth, I was not there.*

Shallow: *Death is certain. Is old Double of your town living yet?*

Silence: *Dead, sir.*

Shallow: *Jesu, Jesu, dead! 'A drew a good bow—and dead! 'A shot a fine shoot. John 'a Gaunt loved him well, and betted much money on his head. Dead! 'A would have clapped i' th' clout at twelve score, and carried you a forehand shaft a fourteen and fourteen and a half that it would have done a man's heart good to see. How a score of ewes now?*

Silence: *Thereafter, as they be. A score of good ewes may be worth ten pounds.*

Shallow: *And is old Double dead?*

*Henry IV, Pt 2 Act 3, Scene 2*

In the midst of life there is death, but also in the midst of death there is life: Double is dead, but the price of bullocks and sheep still matters, and will continue to matter as long as farmers raise bullocks



and sheep. My uncle, a sheep farmer, used to say that a farmer should farm as if he meant to live a thousand years, but live as if he is to die tonight. That has always been the farmer's creed<sup>13</sup>.

Now George Rylands too is dead, but only after what in England we would speak of as a very long innings. And I offer this performance today as a poor memorial to him, the man who by his example showed me and countless others how to speak Shakespearean verse and prose. We may not have lived up to his example, but he taught us what we might be able to achieve (and understand of Shakespeare's genius) if we paid attention to the embodied Shakespearean voice.

### 13 The Actor as Restorer

I should like to have had time to conclude with the final scene of *The Winter's Tale* (Act 5, Scene 3), when Hermione is resurrected, brought back to life, as are so many characters in the last plays, re-affirmations of the unquenchable power of life (and of love?). She is finally recognised as being indeed alive when at last she speaks, and only when she speaks (embodied in flesh that shows the marks of age), for it is uniquely the embodied human voice that marks us as unique living creatures — which enables us to continue, haunted as we are by the knowledge that we, like Double, must die, that death is certain, that all shall die, as the psalmist saith, but that life will continue.

After such a reminder, all that the actor, the player, can do is ask for the indulgence of his audience:

Text 15

*The Epilogue to Henry VI, Part 2*

*First, my fear, then my curtsy, last my speech.*

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*My fear is your displeasure, my curtsy my duty, and my speech to beg your pardons. If you look for a good speech now, you undo me, for what I have to say is of my own making, and what indeed I should say will, I doubt, prove my own marring. But to the purpose, and so to the venture. Be it known to you, as it is very well, I was lately here in the end of a displeasing play, to pray you patience for it and to promise you a better. I meant indeed to pay you with this, which if like an ill venture it come unluckily home, I break, and you, my gentle creditors, lose. Here I promised I would be, and here I commit my body to your mercies. Bate me some, and I will pay you some, and, as most debtors do, promise you infinitely. And so I kneel down before you, but, indeed, to pray for the Queen.*

*If my tongue cannot entreat you to acquit me, will you command me to use my legs? And yet that were but light payment, to dance out of your debt. But a good conscience will make any possible satisfaction, and so would I...All the gentlewomen here have forgiven me. If the gentlemen will not, then the gentlemen do not agree with the gentlewomen, which was never seen before in such an assembly.*

*One word more, I beseech you. If you be not too much cloyed with fat meat, our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it, and make you merry with fair Katherine of France, where (for anything I know) Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already 'a be killed with your hard opinions, for Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man...My tongue is weary. When my legs are too, I will bid you good night.*

### Notes

- 1 This essay is a much-extended version of a lecture /recital delivered to The English Literary Society of Japan (Hokkaido Branch), twice: on the 24th of June, 1999 (Hokkaido University), and on the 3rd of October, 1999 (Sapporo University), and the performance of the speeches was an essential part of the proceedings: performance attempted to prove the proposition.
- 2 The ideas developed in *Art and Illusion* (Phaidon, 1962) are re-

presented in more compact form in the essay “Meditations on a Hobby Horse” in the book with that title (Phaidon, 1963).

3 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (The University of Chicago Press, 1962). When Kuhn died several years ago, his ideas were dismissed rather contemptuously, but at the time of its publication, the book was widely esteemed, its thesis was broadly supported, and it was highly influential.

4 Indeed, some scholars (though not all, by any means) believe that the verb *theasthai*, to behold, derives from the word *theos*, God, and that the theatre was where the signs of God’s handiwork were put on display, where, that is to say, the observants in the religious rituals would witness (in both senses) divine epiphanies.

5 I should perhaps explain how I am using these words. The term *demiurge*, which originally meant craftsman (from *demos* + *ergos*, “public worker”), came to be used metonymically in Platonic philosophy (*The Timaeus*, say) to stand for “the fashioner of the world”, which is how I mean it to be understood here. A *dramaturge* is a dramatist, and *dramaturgy* is the theory and performance of drama.

6 In Andrew Marvell’s ‘The Garden’, the creator poet sits in his orchard while the apples drop about him, and he “annihilates all that’s made/To a green thought in a green shade”. The green thought that is inspired by the green shade may be likened to the Shakespearean kernel out of which all other thoughts (once they have been fertilized by the conceiving power of the human imagination) will grow in green profusion.

7 *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*, Bruce R. Smith (The University of Chicago Press, 1999). Shakespeare’s *Globe* was designed to work like the human apparatus of Lungs, Larynx and Mouth, to act as a perfect sounding board; the new *Globe* is “highly reverberant”.

Quintillian, an influential figure throughout the Middle Ages, described “the physiognomy of voice” as consisting of two features: *quantitas* and *qualitas*. *Quantitas* encompasses volume (magnitude), pitch movement (tone) and rhythm/metre (measure). *Magnitude* measures space (variety within a speech), whereas *tone* measures time (pitch vibrations have different oscillations); *measure* itself is the most basic element since it

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subsumes the other two, since changes in volume and pitch “occur in regular patterns”. This has been the basic theoretical principle of my speaking and listening classes for twenty years (see my ‘A Matter of Prosody’, *Jimbunronshu*, Vol 7, 1996). Everything is based on breath. The *qualitas* of a voice refers to those features which Discourse Analysts like Gillian Brown have discussed in some detail: clear/husky, full/thin, smooth/harsh, narrow/diffuse, rigid/flexible, sharp/blunt.

Smith also discusses the part played by music in creating the aural space experienced by the spectator, in which the physical (frequency, intensity, attack of sound), the perceptual (brightness, pointedness, dryness of individual instruments) and the imaginative (the drumness of drums, the trumpetness of trumpets, and all their extra-theatrical associations) work together to create, by metonymy, the appropriate aura, which is always framed by the words.

The concluding sentence of the chapter runs “The object the audience hears in a human voice is character” (p.245).

(And see Note 11 below, on punctuation.)

8 Sir Walter Raleigh expressed the idea succinctly in his verse *What is this Life?* Since I cannot lay hands on the text, I quote the lines from memory and have to hope that I have remembered them more or less correctly.

What is this Life? A Play of Passion,  
Its Mirth the Music of Division;  
Our Mothers' Wombs the Tying Houses Be  
Where We are Dressed for this Short Comedy;  
Heav'n the Judicious Sharp Spectator Is  
Who still doth Sit and Mark who Acts Amiss.  
Thus March we Playing to our Latest Rest:  
Only we Die in Earnest: that's No Jest.

9 Fifty years ago, I saw John Gielgud and Leon Quartermaine as Lear and Gloucester appear to break down and weep on the Stratford stage, and whether or not it was on their part pretense, on my part the tears were unaffected. Tears sprang to Vanessa Redgrave's eyes, when, as Rosalind, she was banished from her uncle's court: although she told us

that they were not, they seemed entirely spontaneous, and I cannot have been the only person in the audience to have responded with tears of my own.

- 10 After reading Cominius's speech, I should like to have read Burgundy's speech from *Henry the Fifth* (Act 5, sc 2) as a commentary (or peace offering) on what we may hope for Yugoslavia now that the illegitimate bombing of that country has mercifully come to an end; the signs, however, are not encouraging.
- 11 Edith Evans's reply was later echoed (in a way) by Harold Pinter when he was questioned about playing Lenny in a revival of *The Birthday Party*. Pinter was asked if he brought any special interpretation to the part. He has always been irked by the silly questions which interviewers ask, and he replied "I just play the lines, which are damned difficult and very tricky".

I learned from Edith Evans what Bruce Smith confirms: punctuation marks in an Elizabethan dramatic text are directions to the actor about where to breath rather than markers of grammatical relationship; they also signify pitch contours and mark the rhythmic shape as well as the pitch contour of the preceding unit (see 'A Matter of Prosody', op. cit.). They are "encodings for the actor". A *commata* (cutting off) is physiological, a *colon* (member/limb) is rhetorical, a *periodus* (circle) is orthographic.

- 12 As Othello knows what he is doing when he snuffs out the candle of Desdemona's life, so Shakespeare was always conscious of the body's frail hold on life. Juliet knows the horrors she faces in the tomb, and in *Measure for Measure*, Claudio echoes Hamlet, "O, but to die and go we know not where,/To lie in cold obstruction and to rot": life with all its miseries is preferable to the disembodied terrors that we must face after we have died.
- 13 Today, alas, British farmers are having to destroy their sheep because they cannot sell them, and their inability to do so seems, in a way, symbolic of the present British government's apparent desire to obliterate respect for the past, to wipe it out of memory, to deny what has always been one of the abiding pieties that sustains a people's (any people's) sense

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of itself.

Such acts, as Anthony O'Hear has said in another context, "disenfranchise the dead", while, as counterpoise, the essential truth of Shakespeare's fiction allows full play to the existential and everlasting freedom of Hamlet, Richard the Second or Juliet's Nurse, Justice Shallow or Falstaff, Coriolanus or Cleopatra, who in their several ways help to keep green and fresh the memory of the past and its passionate players, and increase our respect for the dead, as they are recreated in the "freshest things now reigning", the bodies and voices of the newest time.