



Chapter 1

FIRST STEPS

Writing for Performance; Using the Physical Features of the Playhouses; Sound Effects and Music; Writing with Specific Actors in Mind; “The Purpose of Playing”

I

*Differences between writing for reading and writing for performance. Using the two flanking doors at the back of the stage for entrances and exits. Props and the book-keeper. Wall, Moonshine, and some of the pitfalls of literalism in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.*

Modern editions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* routinely head up act 1, scene 2, with “Enter QUINCE the carpenter and SNUG the joiner and BOTTOM the weaver and FLUTE the bellows-mender and SNOUT the tinker and STARVELING the tailor.” A result of this stage direction—it marks the first entrance of these characters in the play—is that, if you are reading *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, you know before you get to the characters themselves what all their names are and what they do for a living. But Shakespeare did not write his plays to be read, he wrote them to be performed, and writing for performance is very different from writing for reading. If you write for performance, you have to think about what the audience¹ will see even before anyone speaks; what it will hear in addition to the words themselves—for instance, a fan-fare or thunder; and in what styles it will hear the dialogue delivered—for instance, in what accents and tones of voice. You also have to think about the order in which you want information given to the audience and whether



you want that information imparted directly or indirectly. Entrances can be very complex events, and no two are exactly alike.

As far as Shakespeare was concerned, entrances, like exits, would normally be made through one of two flanking doorways in the tiring-house facade at the back of the stage. One was toward the left-hand side and one was toward the right. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the artisans make their first entrance through one door as Helena is exiting through the other, and, virtually without a break, the stage is now their space. Before they start speaking, they are seen. Although nominally Athenian, they will be wearing the coarse clothes of Elizabethan workingmen. That is why Puck later calls them “hempen home-spuns” (3.1). They may be wearing leather aprons and woolen caps as well: when Shakespeare came to write *Coriolanus*, he had Menenius refer to workingmen as “apron-men” (4.6), and Coriolanus tells of their throwing their caps in the air (1.1). In any printed version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Helena's exit and the artisans' entrance seem to take place one after the other, but, in performance, the audience experiences an overlap, and that automatically leads to comparisons being made. Just the way the artisans look and move contrasts them socially with Helena and her class. It is a contrast that Shakespeare could count on his audiences recognizing and registering instinctively. Elizabethan society was stratified socially; so were playhouse audiences; and so is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Since Quince comes on first, he can be assumed to be the leader, and Shakespeare's audiences might actually know some of the actors coming on-stage by sight. Will Kemp(e), for example, played Bottom² and was famous for his comic performances. He would generate expectations of humor just by being seen. Shakespeare liked to remind his audiences that they were watching actors at work as they watched his plays. Far from spoiling illusions, these reminders actually increase the audience's involvement and interest. In act 3, scene 3, of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for example, Falstaff's page is sent off to tell his master that Mistress Ford is alone, while Mistress Page, intending to surprise Falstaff, goes off to her hiding place. As she does so, Mistress Ford calls out, “Mistress Page, remember you your cue,” and Mistress Page replies, “I warrant thee, if I do not act it, hiss me.” In terms of the plot, there is no need for these lines. What they do is remind the audience that it is experiencing an art form that, for good as well as for ill, lives through performance. They also encourage it to think that what is about to happen is well worth waiting for.

Shakespeare routinely employs such “actors at work” reminders so deftly that it seems impossible that they could go wrong. But they can, if the thinking behind them is wrong. During the discussion of how *Pyramus and*



Thisby is to be performed, Bottom proposes two such reminders to avoid frightening the ladies (3.1). To offset Pyramus's suicide, he urges Quince to "tell them that I Pyramus am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear." And to offset the lion, he says, "Nay; you must name his [Snug's] name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck." Like Shakespeare, Bottom understands that drama has power, but Bottom's response to that understanding and Shakespeare's diverge. Shakespeare uses the "actors at work" factor to augment drama's power, since he knows that he can control it. But Bottom, hesitant about drama's power, wants to misuse the "actors at work" factor in order to reduce it. This is rather like removing some of the spark plugs of a Ferrari to make it easier to handle.

When the artisans speak, they use prose, whereas their social superiors speak verse. Quince speaks first, and Shakespeare wants the others to cluster round him so that Bottom can tell them, "Masters, spread yourselves" (1.2). By this means, Shakespeare ensures that the audience will get a good view of them all. Appropriately, Quince is named first as well, and his name, when it is heard, is close enough to "quoins" or "quines" ("wooden wedges") to suggest a carpenter.³ He might even be carrying a wooden rule: in *Julius Caesar*, Murellus identifies the rule and leather apron as signs of a carpenter's trade (1.1). Just as appropriately, the self-important Bottom is named second, but it is not until line 64 that the audience hears the last name and occupation—Snug the joiner—and, by then, a lot of exposition has been accomplished, including the title of the artisans' play, who its leading characters are, and why it is to be put on.

What Quince says when he first speaks is "Is all our company here?" so it is reasonable to ask where "here" actually is. One editor writes, "This scene is to be imagined as taking place somewhere in the 'town' . . . of Athens, though no scenery or properties need have been used to indicate this in Shakespeare's theatre." Another locates the scene as "Athens. Quince's house."⁴ In fact, "here" is not a geographical location but a dramatic concept, and it is intended to contrast with other "here"s—the ducal palace, various places in the wood—as the play unfolds. Place as a dramatic concept and stages without scenery, like Shakespeare's, obviously go together.

All props would be movable—chairs or benches, for example, that could be brought on and taken off either by the actors or by stagehands. The bookkeeper of Shakespeare's company would have a fair copy of the complete play (hence his title), and, just as in any modern production, props would be noted in it to ensure their readiness to hand. The bookkeeper (always male) would also remind actors of their next entrance.⁵ Quince identifies himself to the audience as the bookkeeper as well as the play maker of



Pyramus and Thisby by saying, “In the mean time I will draw a bill of properties, such as our play wants” (1.2). In rehearsal, it also falls to Quince to help out with the cues (3.1; see also 4.1, when Bottom awakes).

As it happens, although it dwells on some of the practicalities of putting on a play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is technically less demanding than plays Shakespeare had already written or plays he was to write later (it is in the region of his twelfth). It requires neither balcony nor trapdoor nor (as is explained shortly) a discovery space. In fact, it needs little more by way of physical facilities than does *Pyramus and Thisby* itself, and what they are is made clear when Quince says to his troupe, “[A]nd here’s a marvail’s convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring-house” (3.1). In other words, an open playing area with changing and storage space behind it (the tiring-house) is enough. A rehearsal isn’t a performance, of course, but Quince adds, as if it were self-evident, “[A]nd we will do it in action as we will do it before the Duke,” implying that what is rehearsed on the “green plot” will transfer directly to a private indoor location for the real thing. And, of course, what will work in private will also work in a playhouse. It is true that there is a wall in *Pyramus and Thisby*, but a prop made by Quince or Snug would do. (There are walls in *Henry VI, Part Two* [4.10], and in *Romeo and Juliet* [2.1], and, in those cases, dialogue alone is enough.) But the wall in *Pyramus and Thisby* is a prime example of how Shakespeare can turn even the most mundane detail into high-quality play making. Because the hempen home-spuns are too literal in their thinking, Snug has to act the part of Wall. This causes a clash between the wall understood literally and the wall understood as part of theater with an actor in the role. Unintended humor is the result. Thisby says that her “cherry lips” have often kissed Wall’s “stones” (one meaning of which is “testicles”). She then kisses his/its “hole” (5.1).

Lighting gives rise to a comparable point. For Shakespeare, dialogue alone is enough, for example, “Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania” (2.1). But the hempen home-spuns feel that they need an actor, a bush of thorns, and a lantern. To show that here, too, their thinking is too literal, Shakespeare once more lands them in a muddle of their own making. The dying Pyramus mistakenly says, “Moon, take thy flight” (5.1) instead of “Tongue, take thy flight” (that is, “Tongue, fall silent”), and Starveling, who is playing Moonshine, thinks he is being cued off the stage; so he exits, taking his moonlight with him. This would not plunge the play into darkness, since, whether in a private venue or a playhouse, performance and audience always shared the same light, that is, either candlelight or daylight. However, as Hippolyta realizes, moonlight is still technically needed within *Pyramus*



and *Thisby* if *Thisby* is to find *Pyramus's* corpse for the play's big finish. "How chance *Moonshine* is gone before *Thisby* comes back and finds her lover?" she asks (5.1). Had words been used for moonlight instead of *Starveling*, the problem would not have arisen.

II

The arras and the discovery space. The advantage of not using the discovery space in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Green rushes on stage. The balcony.

While Shakespeare's minimum requirement might be a playing area accessed from a changing area behind it, his plays, taken together, show that he could make creative use of all the features the various venues of his day offered him. In the public playhouses, these features included a platform stage about five feet off the ground, covered around the sides and surrounded by a standing space or yard; three tiers of seated accommodation forming an enclosure; a fixed screen (the tiring-house facade) across the back of the stage with the tiring-house behind it; a trapdoor in the stage, the trap being accessible from underneath as well; the two flanking doorways (already mentioned) for entrances and exits; possibly a central opening between the two flanking doorways, covered with an arras or a painted curtain; a balcony ("gallery" is the better word) above the tiring-house facade containing "lords' rooms" for the wealthy and providing additional acting space if required; two pillars, or stage posts, supporting a decorated canopy over the stage called the "heavens"; and a hut above the "heavens" from which deities could be lowered and raised by unseen stagehands using winding gear. Right at the top, a flag displayed the insignia of the theater. A trumpet was sounded when a play was about to start. And Shakespeare could count on lively acoustics to ensure the audibility of soliloquies and asides.⁶

However, listing the characteristics of Shakespeare's venues is like listing the instruments in an orchestra: it is not that they are there but how they are employed that matters. So, starting with the arras, here are some of the ways Shakespeare transformed what he had to work with.

An arras (originally a cloth woven in Arras, France) is a tapestry suspended by its upper edge and probably divided. An arras (or a painted curtain) placed over the central opening created a concealed recess that could be used in a number of different ways. First, large props could be kept in it and slid out from it as needed. These might include a couch, as in *Pericles*, or a four-poster bed, as in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Othello* (stage beds were narrower than their real-life counterparts, which were normally the size of a double bed). Large props might also include a throne, or even two: if there



are a king and queen in the play, as in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, then each has a “chair of state.”⁷ Second, because the space behind the arras is relatively wide and is connected to the tiring-house, it can be used, in conjunction with the arras, for grand entrances and exits. Third, a closed arras provides an ad hoc place of concealment. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Borachio, telling how he was surprised by Don Pedro and Claudio while he was perfuming a musty room, says, “I whipt me behind the arras” (1.3). In *Henry IV, Part One*, Falstaff, hunted by the Sheriff, is ordered by Prince Hal, “Go hide thee behind the arras” (2.4). And in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, when the Falstaff of that play wants to hide from Mistress Page, he declares, “She shall not see me, I will ensconce me behind the arras” (3.3). When used like this, the arras changes from being a neutral stage feature to being a constituent of the plays concerned and a moral indicator, too, since the characters just mentioned have distinct question marks over them. That the arras can have very high dramatic potential is shown in *Hamlet*. Polonius, in Gertrude’s closet, “*hides behind the arras*” (3.4). When he makes a noise, Hamlet “[*k*]ills Polonius through the arras,” and only when Hamlet “[*p*]arts the arras and discovers Polonius” does he learn that he has not killed Claudius. “Discovers,” by the way, means “reveals” or “uncovers,” not “finds,” when the arras is involved—hence “discovery space,” the root meaning of which becomes obvious if a dash is added (“dis-covery space”).

In the past, the discovery space has sometimes been called an “inner stage,” but while Shakespeare uses it to extend main-stage action, it is far too cramped and out of sight for full-scale acting to take place inside it; so characters either step into it or step out of it. Stepping out, if properly prepared, can be a major dramatic moment and one that is also open to considerable variation, as a comparison between *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest* reveals. In *The Winter’s Tale*, an act of stepping out marks the climax of the play. Paulina says, “[P]repare / To see the life as lively mock’d as ever / Still sleep mock’d death” (5.3; “mock’d” means “imitated”). She then “*draws a curtain, and discovers Hermione standing like a statue.*” Leontes, captivated, half orders and half pleads, “Do not draw the curtain” (“draw” now meaning “close,” not “open”), and, shortly after, Hermione comes down from her pedestal and comes forward onto the main stage through the parted arras, symbolically reintegrated into life. Thanks to what are called embedded stage directions—that is, stage directions that are contained in the dialogue—there can be no doubt that Hermione comes down from where she is standing and then comes forward. Before Hermione moves, Paulina says, “If you can behold it, / I’ll make the statue move indeed, *descend,* / And take you by the hand” (5.3; italics added). Then, when the moment comes for



Hermione to do that, Paulina commands, "'Tis time; *descend*; be stone no more; *approach*" (5.3; italics added).

Embedded stage directions in fact occur throughout Shakespeare's plays, and they shed invaluable light on his own thoughts about the performance of his plays. If, for example, we want to know how Olivia reacts to "Cesario" as act 1, scene 5, of *Twelfth Night* becomes increasingly intimate, there is no need to speculate, since, in act 2, scene 2, Viola recalls, "She made good view of me; indeed so much / That methought her eyes had lost her tongue, / For she did speak in starts distractedly." Or if we want an idea of the behavior of the hempen home-spuns in act 3, scene 1, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* after Bottom returns transformed into an ass, we can consult Puck's self-serving account in the next scene. It begins:

When they him spy,
As wild geese that the creeping fowler eye,
Or russet-pated choughs, many in sort
(Rising and cawing at the gun's report),
Sever themselves and madly sweep the sky,
So, at his sight, away his fellows fly[.]

These reported gestures may seem larger than life but, unlike television or film, the stage generally requires calculated exaggeration if it is to communicate precisely and clearly with its audiences.

With their reunification, Hermione and Leontes reach their dramatic terminus. Although they live on after *The Winter's Tale* is completed, the play itself has nothing more to say about them. But when, in act 5, scene 1, of *The Tempest*, Prospero "*discovers FERDINAND and MIRANDA playing at chess,*" he ushers in a situation that, consistent with the youth and evolving circumstances of the chess players, is inherently open-ended. Prospero has promised to show Alonso "a wonder," but the lines that follow his action are not quite that ("wrangle" means "quarrel" or "argue"):

MIRANDA: Sweet lord, you play me false.
FERDINAND: No, my dearest love,
I would not for the world.
MIRANDA: Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle,
And I would call it fair play.

Is Ferdinand really cheating? If so, what does that say about the honor he affirms to Prospero in act 4, scene 1? And is Miranda really prepared to endorse



his cheating for “a score of kingdoms”? Their lines provoke questions more readily than answers precisely because Miranda and Ferdinand are still characters in the making. When they step out onto the main stage, Alonso greets them with love and looks forward to their marriage. But *The Tempest* is set after the fall of man, not before it, so when Miranda naively exclaims, “How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world / That has such people in’t!” Prospero feels compelled to add, “’Tis new to thee” as a worldly-wise corrective.

The discovery space’s capacity for holding large items can likewise be turned to dramatic advantage—for example, if Juliet’s four-poster bed in *Romeo and Juliet* is not manhandled onto the stage for act 4, scene 3, but retained in the discovery space.⁸ On this assumption, the arras would be parted as Juliet and the Nurse enter, and, when Juliet “falls upon her bed, within the curtains,” she would close the bed curtains around herself, the bed itself remaining visible at the back of the stage. This simultaneous use of closed bed curtains and main stage would express scenically the play’s major divisions at this point. Behind the bed curtains is Juliet, isolated from her family and committed to her concealed intentions, while, on the main stage, preparations for her imposed wedding to Paris gather pace. When the Nurse “[d]raws back the curtains” in act 4, scene 5, she would reopen the bed curtains and discover what she believes to be Juliet’s corpse. This would reconnect Juliet with the main stage, providing a focal point for the highly ironic interaction of subterfuge on the one hand and parental grief on the other that takes place in front of her before the arras is finally closed. Even if the arras is not left open but closed at the end of act 4, scene 3, and then reopened for the beginning of act 4, scene 5, its prominence in the center of the tiring-house facade would make possible the same message from the stage during act 4, scene 4, with little, if any, loss of force.

It is possible, though not certain, that the discovery space also housed the Capulets’ tomb in act 5 of *Romeo and Juliet*,⁹ thereby connecting it symbolically with Juliet’s bed, which would have been moved out of sight in the meantime. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, the discovery space might likewise have housed a tomb, namely, the one Hero is supposed to be buried in (5.3). If it did, there would be two immediate gains. First, a substantial piece of stage furniture could be kept ready but out of sight until the play required it. Second, *Much Ado about Nothing* is a comedy; that is, it moves toward a happy ending. A tomb that was uncovered for the act of penance, then covered up again as the characters leave the stage to wedding talk, would signal in clear terms that the play’s worst moments were over, especially as word of Hero’s innocence is already spreading.



Can it happen that the discovery space is not the ideal option it appears to be? In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Titania requires a place to sleep from act 2, scene 2, to act 3, scene 1, when she is awakened by Bottom's singing; and her occupying, then stepping out from, a curtained discovery space seems the obvious solution. But Oberon identifies her actual sleeping place as "a *bank* where the wild thyme blows" (2.1; italics added); so Titania can just as easily sleep to one side of the playing area on a decorated bench. Such an arrangement would be advantageous in private performance. It would also keep the audience mindful of Titania during the involved chain of events that results in Bottom eventually waking her (that chain of events is discussed in chapter 7, section I). And it would allow the audience to witness the full process of Titania waking up and falling in love with Bottom as he sings.

Or she can sleep not on a bench but on a heap of the green rushes routinely used for covering the stage. (Peter Quince's "green plot" [3.1] can refer to the real rushes strewn on the playing area as well as to the notional floor of the wood outside Athens.) Rushes were part of life in Shakespeare's day. They were strewn on domestic floors as well as on playhouse stages, a practice that finds its way into *The Taming of the Shrew* (4.1), *Romeo and Juliet* (1.4), and, more sinisterly, *Cymbeline* (2.2), when Jachimo emerges from the trunk in Imogen's bedchamber with the name of Tarquin on his lips. Rushes were also strewn in the streets if a royal procession were due, as happens in *Henry IV, Part Two*, as act 5, scene 5, opens ("Enter STREWERS OF RUSHES"). Even so, sleeping on rushes might sound farfetched, except that, in *Henry IV, Part One*, Glendower, translating for Lady Mortimer, says to Mortimer,

She bids you on the wanton rushes lay you down,
 And rest your gentle head upon her lap,
 And she will sing the song that pleaseth you,
 And on your eyelids crown the god of sleep.

(3.1)

So Titania's sleeping on rushes, while arguably less practical, is a possibility.

When Shakespeare has Bottom tell his fellow artisans to spread themselves, "spread" doesn't mean in a straight line facing forward, as it would on a proscenium-arch stage. For, with an in-the-round audience, spreading implies depth as well as breadth. The hempen home-spuns would, of course, spread themselves in the horizontal plane. But the vertical plane was at Shakespeare's disposal as well, thanks to the balcony above the stage and the space beneath it through the trapdoor.



In a playhouse, the balcony was reachable through the tiring-house by steps or a ladder out of sight of the audience, and it provided acting space “aloft,” or “above.” Analysis has shown that Shakespeare places only a very few actors aloft at any one time, that they are relatively static, and that their speeches are brief. This suggests limited space, as would be consistent with temporarily taking over one of the lords’ rooms.¹⁰ Even in one of Shakespeare’s most laborious scenes—hauling up the dying Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra* (4.15)—only the boys playing Cleopatra, Charmian, Iras, and one or two maids are actually aloft. Exactly how they managed to heave up an adult male from the stage below is open to conjecture, but the text requires it and concedes simultaneously that it is not easy:

CLEOPATRA: Here’s sport indeed! How heavy weighs my lord!
Our strength is all gone into heaviness,
That makes the weight. . . .

Shakespeare knew all about playhouse balconies from personal experience: he looked up at them, stood in them, and, like Prospero in *The Tempest* (3.3), looked down from them. Their potential fired his imagination, and their symbolical integration into his plays is seamless. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet comes onstage “above” in act 2, scene 2, and Romeo says, “But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.” This is hopeful passion speaking, so Romeo is looking up. But by act 3, scene 5, the tragedy is intensifying, so the scene begins with “ROMEO and JULIET aloft,” and, when Romeo leaves Juliet, “*He goeth down*” onto the stage in full view of the audience, using the much-mentioned “cords made like a tackled stair” that, in act 2, scene 4, the Nurse had been told to expect from Romeo’s man and that may well have been the selfsame rope ladder “with a pair of anchoring hooks” featured in act 3, scene 1, of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Juliet goes down as well, but she does so separately and out of sight through the tiring-house, and, when she reenters for her exchange with Lady Capulet, the stage ceases to be the garden Romeo descended into and is instead an interior room.¹¹ (Romeo’s departure is discussed in chapter 3, section II.)

Nothing stands still in *Romeo and Juliet*. Taken together, these scenes show the balcony being used dynamically to communicate emotional and physical movement in two directions: rising to togetherness and descending to separateness. This is a big advance on the early comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in which the balcony is used statically. In that play, Silvia is located “above at her window” (4.2), and Proteus is down on the stage. This vertical arrangement symbolizes Silvia’s moral superiority over Proteus and her emo-



tional remoteness from him, too. Proteus would certainly like to join Silvia, but Silvia will have none of it and is not going to change her mind. The fixed gap between Silvia “above” and Proteus below on the main stage expresses theatrically the fixed moral and relational gap between them.

Since physical elevation and elevated virtue naturally go together, Shakespeare’s putting Silvia higher than Proteus is a straightforward piece of theater. But, in *Richard III*, it is with relish for the not-so-straightforward that Shakespeare puts Richard, Duke of Gloucester, aloft, for virtuous is the one thing Richard is not. In act 3, scene 7, Richard needs the backing of the Lord Mayor and citizens, so he is persuaded by Buckingham to adopt an image of piety and play hard to get. Buckingham remains onstage to contrast, in best public relations fashion, “this virtuous prince” (Richard) with Edward, “lulling on a lewd love-bed.” Then, “*Enter RICHARD of GLOUCESTER aloft, between two BISHOPS.*” To the audience, though not to the mayor, aldermen, and citizens, the hypocrisy of Buckingham and Richard is blatant. But what really gives this scene its impact is its verticality: Richard’s being above the main stage between the bishops implies godliness and the high moral qualities of kingship, which not only Buckingham but every person in the audience knows he lacks.

Richard of Gloucester displays nerve as well as theatricality as he bluffs his way through a high-risk situation in an exposed location. When, with *Richard II*, Shakespeare embarked on his second cycle of history plays—it was eventually to extend through the two *Henry IV* plays to *Henry V*—he again found expressive use for the balcony, but the theatrical figure occupying it this time is so weak that he will shortly lose his crown. Richard II’s appearance with Carlisle, Aumerle, Scroop and Salisbury “*on the walls*” of Flint Castle (3.3)—that is, on the balcony—is the prelude to royal disgrace. Following his exclamation, “Down court! down king!” Richard and his entourage descend to the aptly-named base court. The symbolism of Richard’s moving from high to low is obvious and is meant to be so. An exchange between Bullingbrook and Northumberland gives him a certain amount of time to make his way down, but it is brief enough to suggest that a dramatic pause is intended before Richard comes onto the main stage, to be greeted with mock subservience by Bullingbrook.

It is possible that Richard comes onto the main stage through one of the flanking doors,¹² but the balcony can be used in conjunction with the central opening as well. In *Henry V*, Henry begins act 3, scene 3, by taking up his position “*before the gates*” of Harflew (Harfleur) after “*some CITIZENS on the walls*” have taken up theirs. That is, Henry and his train are onstage looking toward the central opening (the arras would be closed) and the balcony above, where the citizens are.¹³ There is a temporariness and a tension in this



visual arrangement, since, normally, a king should be aloft and the citizens below. However, Henry's threat of force majeure is followed by the governor's capitulation and, when Henry orders, "Open your gates," the arras is drawn apart. The governor and, possibly, the citizens having already left the balcony, the victorious Henry enters the gates of Harfleur with Exeter, exiting the stage through the central opening while a flourish rings out. In this scene, the balcony and the central opening are combined to provide an impressive visual and aural demonstration of power politics. (The Chorus's introduction to this scene is discussed in chapter 10, section III.)

III

The trapdoor. The stage posts as places of concealment. The painted "heavens" and the descents of deities. Contemporary allusions. The Globe's flag.

As mentioned in section II of this chapter, the vertical plane of the Shakespearean stage extends downward as well as upward if the space beneath the stage is used; and the total playing area can be construed theologically if the trapdoor is understood to represent the mouth of hell, for then human affairs can be situated onstage between the "heavens" above and hell below. For example, there is a spirit-raising scene in *Henry VI, Part Two* (1.4), in which a circle is formed and "the Spirit riseth" through the trapdoor; and when the command is given, "Descend to darkness and the burning lake!" the Spirit exits the way it entered ("Exit Spirit sinking down again"). In a note to "the Spirit riseth," Michael Hattaway writes, "The circle may very well have been marked out by a circle of lighted candles" and adds, "Spirits customarily entered through the stage trap."¹⁴

The *Henry VI* plays were written very early in Shakespeare's career and did much to establish him as a rising star. *Macbeth*, on the other hand, was written when his career was some three-quarters over and he was a made man. Yet when Macbeth seeks out the Weird Sisters (4.1), Shakespeare happily returns to connecting evil entities with the trapdoor. After the Third Apparition leaves the stage through the trapdoor, the Witches' cauldron is evidently removed the same way, since Macbeth asks, "Why sinks that cauldron?" The theatrical effectiveness of the trap's use here is well calculated. It is the forces of evil that make the cauldron sink and Macbeth who has to ask why. This shows where the balance of control lies. A balance of control is not, of course, the same thing as a balance of power. The forces of evil do not make Macbeth do anything, but their weasel words nudge him toward conclusions that will be his downfall. One is that he should kill Macduff in order to "make assurance double sure" (leading on, when he learns that



Macduff has fled to England, to the resolve to murder his family); the other is that he will die a natural death.

The most famous uses of the trap, however, probably occur in *Hamlet*. First, the ghost of Hamlet's father must exit through the trapdoor as "[t]he glow-worm shows the matin to be near," since it (the Ghost) calls out "Swear" from various places under the stage (1.5). The Ghost seems to think that it is in purgatory. Nevertheless, as it exits, Hamlet exclaims, "And shall I couple hell?" Very probably, Hamlet's mind has moved on to the punishment that he would incur himself, were he to avenge his father's murder. (The point is returned to toward the end of the next paragraph.)

Second, the open trap serves as Ophelia's grave (5.1) and, as such, it accumulates a multiplicity of meanings as the scene progresses. Initially, it is associated with Ophelia's suspect death by drowning. Then, after Hamlet and Horatio enter, the first skull thrown up reminds Hamlet of Cain, "that did the first murder!"—a condemnatory link with Claudius, who has murdered his brother. The most famous skull in English literature—that of Yorick, the king's jester—is subsequently handed up, and it evokes the gruesomeness and mystery of death as well as Hamlet's anger with Gertrude. Love, bereavement, anger, and revenge come together as Hamlet and Laertes fight in the trap. Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa write of this development, "To the symbol-conscious Elizabethan audience . . . jumping into the trap . . . confirmed Hamlet's readiness to enter hell like Laertes in pursuit of his revenge. Revengers paid the price of damnation for the blood they drew."¹⁵ Eventually, the trapdoor is closed over Ophelia, the stage is cleared for the next scene, and Claudius's dissembling "This grave shall have a living monument" remains with the audience as an earnest of death and evil deeds to come.

To either side of the trapdoor and toward the front corners of the stage were the stage posts, the two heavy timbers that supported the stage's roof or canopy. They were painted to look like marble in the *Swan*, and probably in other theaters, too, and they added to the arras or to specially constructed mobile props as alternative hiding places for characters. Characters "concealing" themselves behind stage posts remain in full view of the audience, and that has two consequences. The first is that the audience has to be told what they are supposed to be up to. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon declares, "I am invisible, / And I will overhear their conference" as Demetrius enters, followed by Helena (2.1); and *Much Ado about Nothing* has Benedick exclaim, "Hah! the Prince and Monsieur Love. I will hide me in the arbor," as he retreats behind a stage post (2.3). When, in the same play, Beatrice's turn to hide comes, Ursula states that she is "couched in the woodbine



coverture” (3.1; to “couch” means to “hide,” usually with a stooping action); and in *Hamlet*, Hamlet and Horatio conceal themselves behind a stage post with the words “Couch we a while and mark” as Ophelia’s funeral procession approaches (5.1; to “mark” is to “observe”). The second consequence is that the reactions of the eavesdroppers can be fully incorporated into the main onstage situation. Beatrice is unlikely to remain impassive as Hero says of her, “Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes”; Benedick delivers asides to the audience from his hiding place; and Hamlet’s behavior will prepare the audience for his leap into Ophelia’s grave to fight with Laertes.

As for the canopy the stage posts support, its first function was to protect the actors and their valuable costumes from rain.¹⁶ Shakespeare may have been inspired by this mundane function when writing act 3, scene 3, of *Much Ado about Nothing*. Just before Dogberry and Verges exit, the Second Watchman says, “Let us go sit here upon the church-bench.” The line implies moving to a new position. The Second Watchman is given asides to speak, so that new position must be to one side of the stage, and it could well be between the stage post on that side of the stage and the tiring-house facade, so that, when Borachio and Conrade are ordered to stand where they are, they can be cut off from the flanking doors. Since the Watch’s initial position is on a bench and therefore fixed, Borachio and Conrade need to be maneuvered near them to be overheard, *Much Ado about Nothing* being a play in which stage space is fully exploited—a little earlier, Beatrice has entered act 3, scene 1, “like a lapwing,” and Hero and Ursula are intended to “trace this alley up and down” after her entrance. Borachio and Conrade enter with enough energy to carry them to the stage’s perimeter, either to the front or to the side opposite the Watch, and Borachio is given the line “Stand thee close then under this penthouse, for it drizzles rain” (he may even hold his hand out over the edge of the stage as he says it). This is enough to get them to move near the Watch, which is on its feet by the time it senses that treason is likely, if not before, but which is kept where it is by the Second Watchman’s “yet stand close” (the phrase means here “keep absolutely still” or “don’t move yet”). When the play is read, Shakespeare’s contrivance is obvious, since weather is not an issue anywhere else in the play. But, as Shakespeare knew, such artifice goes unnoticed during performance.

The underside of the canopy was painted with celestial designs, creating the opportunity for easily understood symbolism. In *Hamlet*, the canopy suggests the heaven the sinful Claudius prevents himself from reaching. Setting up the sword fight that will end the play, Claudius exclaims:

Give me the cups,
And let the kettle to the trumpet speak,
The trumpet to the cannoneer without,



The cannons to the heavens, the heaven to earth,
 “Now the King drinks to Hamlet.” . . .

(5.2)

As he utters these lines, Claudius may well be meant to raise his hand to the painted “heavens,” then lower it, so that it points to the trapdoor. Such a gesture would be a fitting one for him to make. The audience knows of his wicked intent, and the sense of a character firmly on the road to perdition has already been instilled by Claudius himself in act 3, scene 3, after he has tried in vain to pray: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: / Words without thoughts never to heaven go.”

Outside the Christian frame of reference, winding gear above the “heavens” permitted antique deities to descend and rise again. This form of vertical symbolism can be spectacular. In *Cymbeline*, Jupiter “*descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle: he throws a thunderbolt*” (5.4). His assurance that “[y]our low-laid son our godhead will uplift” gains instant credibility from this display; and his parting words, “Mount, eagle, to my palace crystalline,” are the sound cue for him to be cranked up again by a stagehand or stagehands overhead. Not all so-called theophanies—that is, divine appearances—need be so rambunctious, however. If, as is frequently assumed, Diana (*Pericles*, 5.1) and Juno (*The Tempest*, 4.1) descend from above, they do so with music and decorum. Alternatively, they may appear on the balcony first, then enter through a flanking door or the central opening. Expressing divine superiority would then be a further use of the balcony. Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa are confident that Juno was lowered and raised again but that, in *As You Like It*, Hymen enters through the Globe’s central opening (5.4).¹⁷

The Tempest supplies one of the better-known examples of an external event finding its way into a Shakespeare play, namely, the running aground in 1609 of the *Sea Adventure* (more usually called the *Sea Venture*) on the island of Bermuda (known as the Isle of Devils), together with the unexpected reappearance of its complement in 1610. For, far from being diverted from the outside world by attending a play, Shakespeare’s audiences are repeatedly reminded of it. They might be reminded of something big, like the Gunpowder Plot (*Macbeth*), or of something more everyday, like bowls in *Cymbeline*, brothels in *Measure for Measure*, or “westward-ho!”—the Thames watermen’s cry—in *Twelfth Night*. Near the Globe, there were four flour mills. In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare uses them to unite contemporary London and the classical world (the play opens with the price of grain an issue):¹⁸

AUFIDIUS: I am attended at the cypress grove. I pray you
 (’Tis south the city mills) bring me word thither



How the world goes, that to the pace of it
I may spur on my journey.

(1.10)

In 1599, the newly opened Globe was itself an object of attention and prompted a number of allusions. *As You Like It*, possibly the Globe's inaugural play, appears to make direct reference to the new playhouse's motto. It was *totus mundus agit histrionem* (roughly, "everyone is a player"), and it is paraphrased in Jaques's "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players" (2.7). And *Hamlet*, in addition to having Claudius point to the "heavens," has the Prince stand beneath the freshly painted canopy and speak of "this majestic roof fretted with golden fire" (2.2).¹⁹

Above the Globe, in the fresh air above the smell of garlicky breath, there flew a flag depicting Hercules (Heracles) carrying the globe of the world on his shoulders, and not even this escapes Shakespeare's ingenuity, as *Hamlet* and, possibly, *Much Ado about Nothing* show. Hamlet declares that Claudius no more resembles his late father than he (Hamlet) does Hercules (1.2), and he also resolves to remember his father for as long as "memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe" (1.5). Rosencrantz states that the "little eyases" carry away "Hercules and his load too" (2.2), meaning that child actors are proving more successful than adult ones; and Hamlet leaves act 5, scene 1, with the words "Let Hercules himself do what he may." These allusions to the flag compare Hercules, the achiever, and Hamlet, the nonachiever. *Much Ado about Nothing* is thought to have been written late in 1598, and Shakespeare may well have had the Globe in mind, since the play contains four references to Hercules. The Globe's flag would have lent special emphasis to two of these. First, Benedick excoriates Beatrice as someone who "would have made Hercules have turn'd spit" (2.1). "Spit," here, is the rotating kitchen implement used for roasting meat. When Hercules was enslaved to Omphale, Queen of Lydia, he was required to dress as a woman and do women's work. Benedick reveals his awe of Beatrice's shrewishness by suggesting that Beatrice would have gone even further and made Hercules a kitchen hand.²⁰ Second, Don Pedro boastfully proposes to undertake "one of Hercules' labors" (2.1). However, Hercules' capacity for getting things right highlights Don Pedro's capacity for getting things wrong.

IV

Sound effects, songs, and instrumental music.

Shakespeare enriched his plays by adding a whole range of sounds to the spoken word, including cannon. Claudius's "the cannoneer without" (5.2)



suggests a gunner behind the theater needing a sound cue from the stage via kettle drum and trumpet, and comparable cuing appears to occur in *Henry VI, Part One*, where a stage direction for Talbot reads “*Winds his horn. Drums strike up; a peal of ordinance*” (2.3). “Winds” means “blows,” and the ordinance, again, could well be behind the theater and out of sight. That, at any rate, is where the distinguished illustrator C. Walter Hodges locates Shakespeare’s cannon, though, more recently, in *Rebuilding Shakespeare’s Globe*, Paul Cox (the book’s artist) depicts a gallery jutting out from the “heavens” above the stage with a cannon in place there.²¹ Wherever cannon were situated, however, Shakespeare was aware that they and other acoustic supplements can extend the physical limits of the stage significantly. For example, *Antony and Cleopatra* requires “*the noise of a sea-fight*” (3.10), that is, a sound scene to round out the words of the actors. Sounds can also trigger the disclosure of important emotions. Near the opening of *Hamlet*, Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus are waiting for the Ghost to appear. Since they are up on the guard platform, they are well away from Claudius. Then “[*a flourish of trumpets, and two pieces goes off within*” (1.4)—and immediately, Hamlet is reconnected with his stepfather. His explanation to Horatio of what is happening reveals his burning resentment of Claudius:

The King doth wake to-night and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the swagg’ring up-spring reels;
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge.

(1.4)

The finesse with which Shakespeare employed cannon should not be obscured by their most sensational intervention, namely, the burning down of the Globe on June 29, 1613, during a performance, possibly the premiere, of *Henry VIII*. (The precise moment is usually identified with the stage direction “*Drum and trumpet; chambers discharg’d*” in act 1, scene 4.) This is how Sir Henry Wotton (who had not been there) described the event in a letter to his nephew, Sir Edmund Bacon, three days later:

Now, King *Henry* making a Masque at the Cardinal *Wolsey’s* house, and certain Chambers being shot off at his entry, some of the paper, or other stuff wherewith one of them was stopped, did light on the thatch, where being thought at first but an idle smoak, and their eyes more attentive to the show, it kindled inwardly, and ran round like a train, consuming within less than an hour the whole house to the



very grounds. . . . [O]nly one man had his breeches set on fire, that would perhaps have broyled him, if he had not by the benefit of a provident wit put it out with bottle Ale.²²

“Chambers” are small cannon—Falstaff speaks of venturing “upon the charg’d chambers” in *Henry IV, Part Two* (2.4)—and multiple firing shows Shakespeare’s alertness to what was due to stage royalty. The thatch was a cost-cutting substitute for tiles. In retrospect, the fire looks like the end of an era. As Andrew Gurr puts it, “[Shakespeare’s] will seems to indicate that some time before he died he had given up his shares in the Globe and the Blackfriars theaters, and also his rooms in the Blackfriars gatehouse. If so, the burning of the Globe may have marked his final withdrawal from the city which had seen his greatest triumphs.”²³

It is easy to overlook, even when reading Shakespeare aloud, the extent to which he exploits what might be called the rhetoric of sound; yet his plays routinely require firecrackers, trumpets, drums, and clashing swords as well as cannon, and they must have provided a highly diversified experience. Repeatedly, he also uses music in an integrated way, both with and without words. Three songs, standing for many more, show this well. First, one of the themes of *As You Like It* is man’s inhumanity to man. The song “Blow, blow, thou winter wind, / Thou art not so unkind / As man’s ingratitude” (2.7) gives that theme expression at the moment when, with contrasting generosity, Duke Senior welcomes Orlando and the exhausted Adam. Second, the *carpe diem* strand of *Twelfth Night* is well communicated by Feste’s song “O mistress mine,” since it is sung at a late hour for the death-marked Sir Toby (2.3). Third, in act 2, scene 3, of *Cymbeline*, all Imogen wants, having been separated from her husband, is to be left alone. Instead, she is subjected to a serenade that, in itself, is a delightful aubade—“Hark, hark, the lark at heaven’s gate sings.” But Imogen is being harassed, as is brought out by what Cloten says to the musicians before they play and sing: “If you can penetrate her with your fingering, so; we’ll try with tongue too.” These three examples alone show Shakespeare using songs to emphasize a line of thought (*Twelfth Night*) and to generate dramatic contrast (*As You Like It* and *Cymbeline*).

Shakespeare also makes full use of music without words, and, again, a handful of examples must stand for many more. As *Twelfth Night* opens, music famously accompanies the lovesick Orsino, but it is quickly disturbed by him, communicating his own disturbed state from the outset of the play. In *Pericles* and in *The Winter’s Tale*, music is used for atmospheric effect. In *Pericles*, as Cerimon sets about reviving the apparently dead Thaisa, he calls for



“rough and woeful music” (3.2; “rough” means “harsh” or “discordant,” that is, of the sort to revivify Thaisa. Some editions associate this music with a viol); and in *The Winter’s Tale*, when Hermione is revived from suspended animation, Paulina commands, “Music! awake her! strike!” (5.3). Less solemnly, *Much Ado about Nothing*, which has already deployed a masked ball in act 2, scene 1, to emphasize deception, brings the play’s double love theme to a successful conclusion with a harmonious dance onstage. Benedick calls out, “Strike up, pipers,” and the dance takes place before the characters exit.²⁴

V

Players’ names and appearances. Boys as women. “The purpose of playing.”

Given today’s globalized theater industry, a modern playwright’s relationship with the performers of his or her plays can be remote to nonexistent. Shakespeare, on the other hand, was used to working as part of a team, and it is still possible to link certain parts to certain names. In addition to Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Will Kemp, who was also renowned for his jigs, played Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, probably Costard in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the original Dogberry in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Robert Armin took this last role over following Kemp’s departure in 1599 and also played Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night* (Armin could sing as well as act), and the Fool in *King Lear*. Richard Burbage, Shakespeare’s star, played Richard III, Romeo (in 1596, when he was about twenty-eight, opposite Master Robert Goffe’s Juliet), Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and “all the other leading roles in Shakespeare’s plays.” Thomas Pope may have played Falstaff, and Shakespeare himself is traditionally associated with playing older parts, notably Adam in *As You Like It*. As to working in combination, Will Kemp as Bottom was paired with Richard Cowley as Quince in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the double act was repeated in *Much Ado about Nothing*, with Cowley playing Verges to Kemp’s Dogberry.²⁵

Listing names from the past generates more the illusion of closeness to bygone days than the real thing, though that is perhaps less the case when a part is linked to physical appearance. The relative heights of Kemp and Cowley probably explain Leonato’s remark to Dogberry about Verges: “Indeed, neighbor, he comes too short of you” (*Much Ado about Nothing*, 3.5), and this discrepancy feeds neatly into characterization, since both Bottom and Dogberry are overbearing, while Quince and Verges have to assert themselves. As to whether, in absolute terms, Kemp was tall or Cowley short, an answer, albeit not a conclusive one, seems to lurk in Quince’s prologue to



Pyramus and Thisby, in which Pyramus (Bottom) is referred to as “sweet youth and tall” (5.1).

Shakespeare also wrote for an outstandingly thin actor, John Sincler (or Sincklo). In *The Comedy of Errors*, Sincler is Dr Pinch:

a hungry lean-fac'd villain,
A mere anatomy, . . .
.....
A needy, hollow-ey'd, sharp-looking wretch,
A living dead man. . . .

(5.1)

With accompanying gestures and emphases on key words, such to-the-life description must have been a rich source of laughter. Sincler is also associated with the First Keeper in *Henry VI, Part Three* (3.1; a “keeper” is a game-keeper); the Tailor in act 4, scene 3, of *The Taming of the Shrew* (tailors were proverbially thin); Robert Faulconbridge in *King John*; Starveling (another tailor) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and the Apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet*, of whom Romeo says, “Famine is in thy cheeks, / Need and oppression starveth in thy eyes” (5.1). In *Henry IV, Part Two*, Sincler probably played Simon Shadow, whom Falstaff describes as a “half-fac'd fellow. . . . He presents no mark to the enemy” (3.2); and, toward the end of the same play, Doll Tearsheet calls the skinny Beadle (Sincler again) a “thin man in a censer” and a “filthy famish'd correctioner” (5.4; a “censer” was a pan for burning perfumes, often ornamented with figures in low relief). Whether Shakespeare was writing a comedy, a tragedy, or a history play, Sincler's emaciated appearance repeatedly drew vivid, crowd-pleasing lines from him.²⁶

That boys played female parts in Shakespeare's day is common knowledge. They were taken on as apprentices and treated as protégés of the company. It may be said in passing that the post-Shakespearean practice of using female actresses in their twenties and beyond can put quite a few years on his Juliets, Hermias, Helenas, and Heros as originally conceived. When, in *Cymbeline*, Belarius finds the disguised Imogen, he puts down a marker for modern casting directors by exclaiming, “Behold divineness / No elder than a boy!” (3.6).

Boy actors were bewigged, costumed, and coached in the movements of women to make them look like the real thing. In the induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Lord gives the order, “Sirrah, go you to Barthol'mew my page, / And see him dress'd in all suits like a lady,” concluding: “I know the boy will well usurp the grace, / Voice, gait, and action of a gentlewoman.”



“Usurp” means to appropriate what does not belong to you by right—here, by right of nature. And “gentlewoman” means very precisely, in the social understanding of Shakespeare’s day, a lady of rank and breeding, to be differentiated in accent and deportment from, say, the Hostess in the second *Henriad*. With Bartholomew’s gift for mimicry, only tears might have to be forced—according to the induction, with an onion held in a napkin.

Amazing as it may seem nowadays, boy actors could carry off all of Shakespeare’s female parts with complete conviction. For example, in a 1610 Oxford performance of *Othello*, Desdemona was said to plead her case effectively and, once dead, to “[entreat] the pity of the spectators by her very countenance.”²⁷ But, of course, everybody knew that his female figures were boys dressed up, and Shakespeare repeatedly exploits the fact. For example, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, when Cleopatra foresees herself being travestied in Rome, she naturally imagines that a boy will play her: “[A]nd I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I’ th’ posture of a whore” (5.2). If an actress speaks these lines, they don’t make much sense. Only a boy actor known to be such can really make their combination of wit, pride, and pathos work onstage.

However well they are feminized, however, boy actors cannot hide their individual build and appearance, and Shakespeare has uses for these, too. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Slender’s ridiculousness is enhanced by his almost marrying not just any boy dressed up but “a great lubberly boy” (5.5). Conversely, the original Maria in *Twelfth Night* was obviously small enough to provoke a laugh when Viola says, “Some mollification for your giant, sweet lady” (1.5) and another when Sir Toby says, “Good night, Penthesilea” (2.3; Penthesilea was the warrior queen of the Amazons). And Shakespeare’s first Viola must have looked just as Malvolio describes him/her: “Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy. . . . ’Tis with him in standing water, between boy and man” (1.5). Essential to the joke is that Malvolio is describing a boy playing a young woman disguised as a young man.

Like adults, boys can be paired, and Shakespeare apparently had for a time two talented youngsters, one tall, one small, to write parts for. They played Helena and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in which Helena calls Hermia a “puppet” and Hermia calls Helena a “painted maypole” (3.2). The short boy must have been dark as well, since Lysander speaks of “Ethiopian” and “tawny Tartar” (3.2). The same pair is assumed to have played Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It*, and Beatrice and Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing*.²⁸ In *As You Like It*, Rosalind describes herself as “more than common tall” (1.3), and, in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Hero is described by Benedick first as “too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little



for a great praise” (1.1), then as “Leonato’s short daughter” (1.1). In context, Benedick’s words are amusing anyway, but Shakespeare doesn’t stop there. He has Benedick speak of Beatrice much more equivocally than he does of Hero and so uses one boy actor’s personal appearance—the short, dark one’s—to allow Benedick to hint at his real feelings about the character played by the other boy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was rumored during Shakespeare’s day that boy actors were adult actors’ catamites.²⁹ So is there a homoerotic element to Shakespeare’s plays? Anyone who has seen boys acting female roles will know that some can wear what women’s clothes they like and still look like boys, while others become more ambivalent in their wigs and dresses. Some of that ambivalence is arguably present in *Twelfth Night*. For example, Orsino says to Cesario/Viola,

Diana’s lip

Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe
Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman’s part.

(1.4)

The surface point is that Orsino is so infatuated with Olivia that he cannot, despite some very obvious clues, detect that there is a woman right in front of him who is as lovesick as he is. But an undertone of affection on Orsino’s part for Cesario, as distinct from Viola, can be contended as well—or conceivably for the boy actor—as if Shakespeare wanted to acknowledge proscribed passions, too. One way or another, the boy-girl-boy complex (which is added to by Malvolio’s description of Viola/Cesario in the following scene) must surely have cut across conventional gender boundaries.

In the last analysis, however, that remains speculative. What is not speculative is that, in the course of time, boys grow up and their voices break. For an acting company, breaking or broken voices can create difficulties—hence Orsino’s compliment to the boy actor playing Viola/Cesario that his voice is still “sound.” Small wonder, then, that, when Hamlet greets the newly arrived players in Elsinore and notices that the boy actor has grown, he expresses apprehension: “Pray God your voice, like a piece of uncurrent gold, be not crack’d within the ring” (2.2), that is, is not becoming unsuitable for women’s parts. But even such a difficulty can be turned into successful theater. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Peter Quince wants Flute to play Thisby, but Flute replies, perhaps with resentment, perhaps with a touch of pride, “Nay, faith; let not me play a woman; I have a beard coming” (1.2). A beard coming implies that the actor’s voice is breaking or broken. And in



Cymbeline, when Arviragus (Cadwal) and Guiderius (Polydore) are preparing to honor what they think is the body of Fidele, the original Arviragus was obviously in dire straits, since he is given the line, “And let us, Polydore, though now our voices / Have got the mannish crack, sing him to th’ ground.” But, evidently, his fellow actor was even worse off, since he replies:

Cadwal,
 I cannot sing. I’ll weep, and word it with thee;
 For notes of sorrow out of tune are worse
 Than priests and fanes that lie.

(4.2)

Indeed they are, so in the end both agree to speak the dirge, even though it was obviously intended to be sung.³⁰ In the case of Arviragus and Guiderius, Shakespeare was writing for two male adolescents playing their own sex, not the opposite one. For all that, their lines evidence once more his resourcefulness in integrating the features of real actors as well as of real venues in the construction of his plays.

Finally, since a play’s performance is the *raison d’être* of everything else about it, it remains to be asked how Shakespeare understood, in Hamlet’s phrase, “the purpose of playing.” Hamlet, as a character in a play, is not necessarily Shakespeare’s spokesman, but what he says about acting is crucial:

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 any thing so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end . . . was and is, to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (3.2)

At the heart of these lines are axiomatic interests in human nature and human affairs, and in ways of speaking and acting appropriate to their representation. It is often said that the lines are a criticism of Will Kemp’s ad-libbing and playing for laughs, but that restricts them unnecessarily, since they can be applied to Shakespeare’s plays in general. And, in part, they have a precedent, too. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, which was written at some time between 1590 and 1594, the Lord congratulates the First Player on having played a part “aptly fitted and naturally perform’d” (induction). In performance, the line is soon left behind. But it is there in the script, and it indicates that, very early in his career, Shakespeare was already drawn to the idea of putting human nature onstage in precise and truthful ways.