

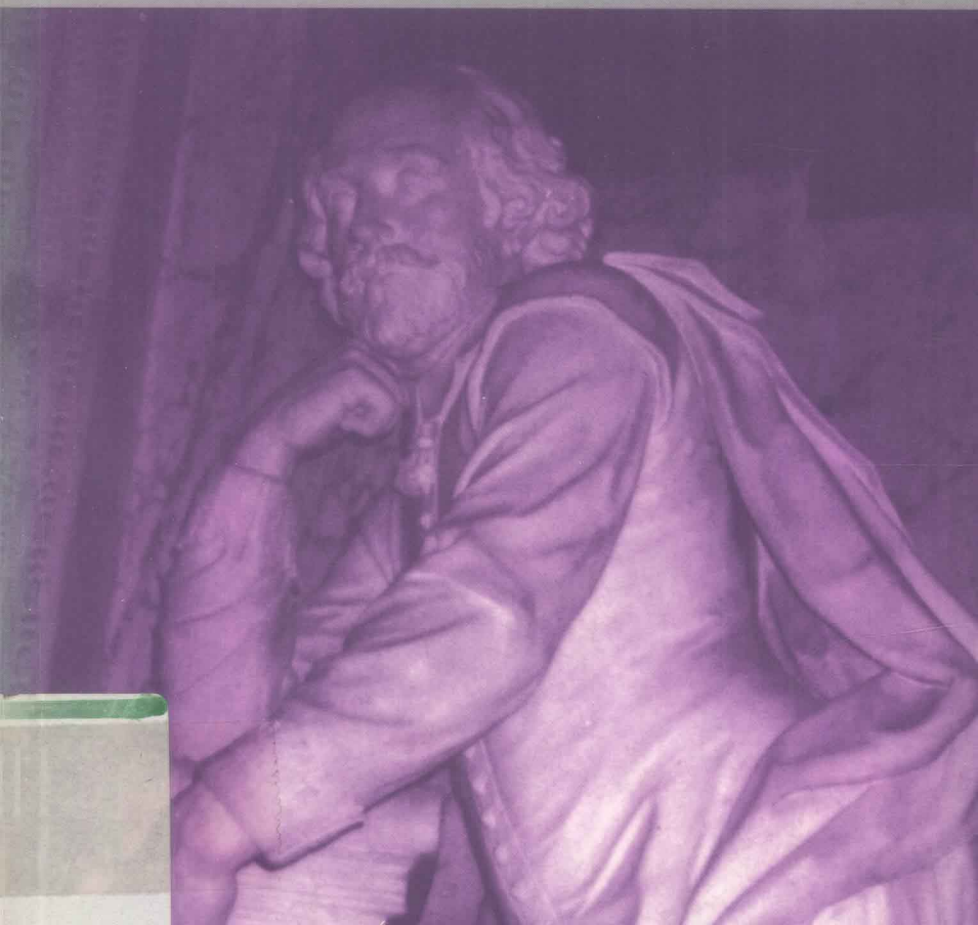
ACCENTS ON SHAKESPEARE

ROUTLEDGE
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Shakespeare Without Women

REPRESENTING GENDER AND RACE ON THE RENAISSANCE STAGE

DYMPNA CALLAGHAN



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Representing gender and race
on the Renaissance stage

DYMPNA CALLAGHAN



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General editor's preface

In our century, the field of literary studies has rarely been a settled, tranquil place. Indeed, for over two decades, the clash of opposed theories, prejudices, and points of view has made it more of a battlefield. Echoing across its most beleaguered terrain, the student's weary complaint "Why can't I just pick up Shakespeare plays and read them?" seems to demand a sympathetic response.

Nevertheless, we know that modern spectacles will always impose their own particular characteristics on the vision of those who unthinkingly don them. This must mean, at the very least, that an apparently simple confrontation with, or pious contemplation of, the text of a 400-year-old play can scarcely supply the grounding for an adequate response to its complex demands. For this reason, a transfer of emphasis from "text" toward "context" has increasingly been the concern of critics and scholars since World War II: a tendency that has perhaps reached its climax in more recent movements such as new historicism or cultural materialism.

A consideration of the conditions, social, political, or economic within which the play came to exist, from which it derives, and to which it speaks will certainly make legitimate demands on the attention of any well-prepared student nowadays. Of course, the serious pursuit of those interests will also inevitably start to undermine ancient and inherited prejudices, such as the supposed distinction between "foreground" and "background" in literary studies. And even the

slightest awareness of the pressures of gender or of race, or the most cursory glance at the role played by that strange creature "Shakespeare" in our cultural politics, will reinforce a similar turn toward questions that sometimes appear scandalously "non-literary." It seems clear that very different and unsettling notions of the ways in which literature might be addressed can hardly be avoided. The worrying truth is that nobody can just pick up Shakespeare's plays and read them. Perhaps – even more worrying – they never could.

The aim of *Accents on Shakespeare* is to encourage students and teachers to explore the implications of this situation by means of an engagement with the major developments in Shakespeare studies of the last ten years. It will offer a continuing and challenging reflection on those ideas through a series of multi- and single-author books which will also supply the basis for adapting or augmenting them in the light of changing concerns.

Accents on Shakespeare also intends to lead as well as follow. In pursuit of this goal, the series will operate on more than one level. In addition to titles aimed at modular undergraduate courses, it will include a number of books embodying polemical, strongly argued cases aimed at expanding the horizons of a specific aspect of the subject and at challenging the preconceptions on which it is based. These volumes will not be learned "monographs" in any traditional sense. They will, it is hoped, offer a platform for the work of the liveliest younger scholars and teachers at their most outspoken and provocative. Committed and contentious, they will be reporting from the forefront of current work and will have something new to say. The fact that each book in the series promises a Shakespeare inflected in terms of a specific urgency should ensure that, in the present as in the recent past, the accent will be on change.

Terence Hawkes

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The book is dedicated to Laurie Maguire, whose friendship I value beyond measure. She has given me unparalleled encouragement throughout and has been a wonder of intellectual inspiration, not only on the beaches of Halki, but also on the perilous voyage out.

In the wake of such blessings, all that remains to say was probably best said in the Renaissance: "I pray thee, Courteous Reader, with patience to amend the faults which may fall out to be more than either we had thought or could by our diligence (which was not wanting) prevent."

Some good body, tell me how I do,
Whose presence absence, absence presence is.
(Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*)

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Introduction

Cleopatra had a way with her

“Enter Blackamoors with music” reads the stage direction in Act V, scene ii, of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. This cue holds forth a prospect that stage directions like “A street in Athens,” “A Tavern in Eastcheap,” etc., cannot, namely that of a perfect coincidence between dramatic representation and reality; the possibility of presence, in this case, exotic and tantalizing. Unlike *“Exit, pursued by a bear”* in *The Winter’s Tale* (III. iii. 58), which may well have involved a real trained bear rather than an actor in a bear-suit¹ (though not, of course, a bear actually in deathly pursuit), *“Enter Blackamoors”* undoubtedly signals the entrance not of actual Africans but of English minstrels in blackface.

Of course, the printed direction *“Enter Blackamoors with music,”* dating from 1597 at the latest, was not available to Shakespeare’s audience any more than the expectation that, even if impersonated *ad vivum* by virtue of mimetic and cosmetic proficiency, these musicians might be real Africans. Although English monarchs employed black musicians from the reign of Henry VIII – Henry had a “blacke trumpet” while Elizabeth I is depicted with a group of black minstrels and dancers in a painting dated c.1577 and attributed to Gheeraerts the Elder, and James I later had a troupe of black minstrels – there is no record of black performers being borrowed from royal or aristocratic households to play roles onstage (Fryer 1984: 4,9; Walvin 1973: 9). There is, however, a wealth of evidence about

how early modern performers achieved racial impersonation by means of theatrical integument. The stage direction, then, signals not that the players borrowed royal musicians but that they are dramatizing the richness and exoticism of court culture (Vaughan and Vaughan 1997).

However problematic or fleeting the possibility of presence it implies, this stage direction shares an epistemological affinity with Stanley Cavell's account of the apocryphal incident of the Southern yokel, "who rushes to the stage to save Desdemona from the black man" (Cavell 1969: 327). The "joke" is not so much that the yokel thinks that Desdemona – a white actress performing in the antebellum South – is really being killed, but rather, that he believes that the white actor playing Othello is really black. Though he nowhere remarks upon it, Cavell's yokel is not simply a naive spectator who contrasts with "the state of mind in which we find the events in a theatre neither credible nor incredible" but a racist spectator whose fear of miscegenation inhibits his capacity to distinguish between dramatic representation and reality. That is, the problem of representation in this incident coincides with specific problems attendant upon the dramatic depiction of gender and race.

What is significant about the blackamoors in the stage direction from *Love's Labour's Lost* and Cavell's yokel is that they bespeak fantasies of presence about people who, for reasons far in excess of problems of geography and practicality, could not possibly have been onstage. *Love's Labour's* blackamoors and Cavell's yokel thereby exemplify the subject of this book, namely the specifically political dimension of the dense philosophical problems posed by dramatic representation. For this book is about what, or rather who, is *not there* on Shakespeare's stage – particularly women (who certainly were not exotic entities on the streets of London), Africans, and the indigenous Irish, a denigrated constituency who, unlike the Anglo-Irish, were probably as scarce and unusual in Shakespeare's London as their exoticized Moorish counterparts. I am especially concerned with whether such absence matters and, further, curious about what complex admixture of elements – including sympathetic representation, misrepresentation, non-representation, and, crucially, the structural effects of mimesis itself – constitutes the absence of these groups.

Despite the absence of women and Africans from early modern public theatre, the only visual record we have of a Shakespearean

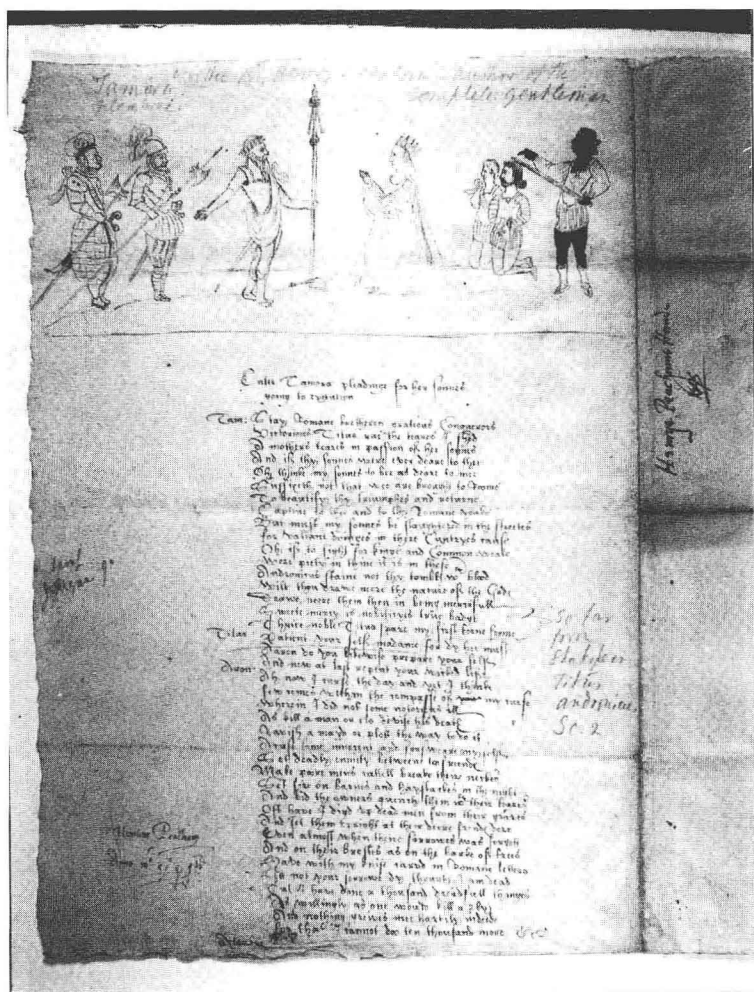


Plate 1 Drawing of *Titus Andronicus* (Henry Peacham). Reproduced by permission of the Marquess of Bath, Longleat House, Warminster, Wiltshire, Great Britain.

performance, Henry Peacham's drawing of *Titus Andronicus* (Plate 1), vividly depicts racial and gendered difference and seems to point to the inclusivity of Shakespeare's stage. A Roman spear marks centerstage, while stage right a kneeling Tamora pleads for her sons'