

# enter the body

WOMEN AND REPRESENTATION ON SHAKESPEARE'S STAGE

CAROL CHILLINGTON RUTTER



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Shakespeare's stage

*Carol Chillington Rutter*

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IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER

Rev. J. H. Chillington

12 December 1906–13 January 2000

who said of dying,  
‘You’re going to find this fascinating. It’s like  
being in a Shakespeare play.’

## PREFACE

When the ghost of Hamlet's father urgently needs to incite his son from paralysed sympathy to sweeping revenge, he remembers his living body and the murder performed upon it. Indeed, he re-performs the ghastly business, transferring it to Hamlet's memory by re-citing the narrative in graphic detail. This 'telling' is not unlike the First Player's 'telling' of another murder of another 'unnerved father', limb-lopped Priam. In that later performance, the Player subjects his actorly body to his narrative, and forces 'his whole function' to 'his own conceit' so entirely that the blood drains from his face while tears spring to his eyes. He remembers the body of Trojan Priam, the 'reverend' king whose age-enfeebled arms can no longer heave a sword, whose 'milky head' incites no pity in killer Pyrrhus. In turn, Grecian Pyrrhus is remembered as another body graphically re-cited and transformed by slaughter, 'total gules', as revenge literally incorporates itself into his deadly physical frame, 'bak'd and impasted' with 'blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons', monstrously 'o'ersized with coagulate gore.' Prompting his son to revenge as ruthless as Pyrrhus's, the Ghost remembers how his own body was monstered, how the effects of the poison corrupted, boiled and burst through his mortal flesh, the 'leprous distilment' coursing like 'quicksilver' through 'the natural gates and alleys of the body' to 'posset' and 'curd' his blood then to erupt in an 'instant tetter', 'most lazar-like'. 'All my smooth body,' cries the Ghost, remembering feelingly the sensuous pleasure of his living flesh, was 'bark'd', scabbed with a 'vile and loathsome crust'. Audience to this appalling re-embodiment, Hamlet reacts by trying to hold off sensation – whose effect is working upon his sensible body already. 'Hold, hold, my heart,' cries the prince, feeling it crack. 'And you my sinews, grow not instant old, / But bear me stiffly up.' Spectator, that is, to the spectre whose re-citation makes his body 'instant old', Hamlet turns into an obscene spectacle – theatrical 'telling' works as violently on his body as his uncle's bizarrely theatrical poison worked on his father's.

Citing *Hamlet* citing bodies that remember in and on the flesh the stories they're compelled to enact, helps me stake out the territory I want to explore in this book. In the theatre, the body bears the brunt of performance; it is the material Shakespeare's text works on, works through. No body in the theatre is exempt – least of all, the spectator's. So how does the body play on Shakespeare's stage? What work does it do, and how can I account for it, bring it on stage within this text? Famously, when Hamlet wants to think about the imperative relationship between remembered action, enactment and acting (both 'playing' and 'doing'), he theorizes the body, framing it abstractly – 'the body of the time' – as he moves from material bodies to the figurative body politic. He lectures the Players (who are, just then, readying themselves to play *The Murder of Gonzago* before the king) on the social work performance does in culture-at-large. 'The purpose of playing,' he tells them, 'was and is' to hold 'the mirror up to nature', to show 'the very age and body of the time his form and pressure'. Thus speaks the academic on study leave from Wittenberg, and his conceit is persuasive enough until Ophelia's entrance some scenes later arrests its intellectual force. Mind-shattered Ophelia devastates theory. She shows instead that 'the purpose of playing' in a theatre of cruelty like the Ghost's or a theatre of bared nerve endings like the Player's is to remember in the body. So, pressing into numbed hands a flower 'that's for remembrance' to urge 'love, remember', mad Ophelia plays out on her wrecked body yet another synoptic reprise of *Hamlet*: *Hamlet* 'with a difference', not a repeat of the prince's political farce, *Gonzago* re-scripted as *The Mousetrap*, but a lunatic improvisation standing surrogate for the wooing play *Hamlet* has kept well offstage. This impromptu wants to end as a comedy – perhaps called *A Lover and His Lass* – but won't. In any case, it requires Ophelia to play all the parts, parts her body re-cites even as she transfers them affectively on to the bodies of her spectators. 'O heat, dry up my brains,' says Laertes, facing a sister 'antick'd' 'in deed' by madness that Hamlet only 'played'.

Ophelia's intensely body-conscious theatre – and the traffic it conducts between memory and re-citation, actor and spectator, telling, re-telling with a difference, and enacting – is the subject of this book. Indeed, this book began its life in the theatre. It began with performances like Ophelia's that interrupted intellect to fix my interest on bodies. They momentarily suspended whatever work Shakespeare's words were doing to gather up meanings that exceeded language, locating expressiveness in the articulate materiality of the actor's body instead. Sometimes what arrested my viewing was fleeting: a casual turn of head or hand, an elbow propped at an angle on a table. Sometimes it was a sight that staggered spectatorship, that left it reeling or raw: a corpse, slumped in the cradle

of her father's arms; a lunatic, matted hair falling over her face, bent to her fixed project of sorting a posy of bones; a fist beating time on a heart, and then later, that same hand clawing the air for life; black shoulders swaying in slow pleasure, recalling a memory bigger than a dream; fingers snapping and pointing; a head, thrown back, opening its mouth in a soundless wail of animal grief. From its beginning in today's theatre, however, this book likewise travels back to Shakespeare's 'original' theatre, to try to recover something of early modern performance practice by calling as witness a variety of contemporary texts that help me understand his culture's body consciousness: documents, letters, playhouse accounts, portraits, tomb effigies, official and unofficial notices. The 'stage' I refer to in my title, then, occupies a site on at least two maps, one of urban London around the turn of the seventeenth century, another of contemporary cultural Britain.

Offering readings of performance, this book gives a series of specific case studies of the work bodies do on Shakespeare's stage, both with and beyond his words. As I argue, the body in play bears continuous meaning onstage, and always exceeds the playtext it inhabits. My business is to pay attention to that 'excessive' performance text, to register and analyse it. My practice is borrowed from Hamlet's Ghost (who, bringing a body into play and on to the stage when people least expect it, coercively reanimates their attention to body work). Like him, I re-perform performance, retelling telling to new listeners and generating what Clifford Geertz calls 'thick descriptions' to produce the kind of archival record of my own viewing that remembers it accurately for subsequent readers – even as I acknowledge its inaccuracy.<sup>1</sup> For like the Ghost, I am partial, selective in remembering. Like him, I have certain axes to grind. First as a reader of performance texts, then a writer of performances remembered, I know that I am engaged in a circular practice or translation exercise that, converting what Barbara Hodgdon calls the 'thisness' of performance into the 'thatness' of analysis, retells 'with a difference'.<sup>2</sup> In its limitations, my writing imitates theatre production: it intends to be rigorous, committed, grounded, but knows it is provisional, contingent, never definitive. In its aspirations, it engages, in Joseph Roach's terms, the two 'necessarily problematic' procedures any reconstruction of performance depends upon – 'spectating and tattling'.<sup>3</sup> These chapters circulate memory as serious gossip.

Some bodies concern me only tangentially in this book; others, not at all. I'm not interested, for instance, in the body that's been so excitingly, if alarmingly, man-handled by certain new historicist and feminist materialist critics over the past decade, prompted, perhaps, by Stephen Orgel's mischievously punning subtitle to *'Nobody's Perfect, Or, Why*

Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?' (1989) – the body, that is, of the cross-dressed professional player on the all-male Elizabethan stage.<sup>4</sup> After Orgel, the practice of theatrical cross-dressing was increasingly politicized, sensationalized (even hystericized) in historicist criticism that figured the London playhouse as a veritable sweat tub of sodomitical desire, a place where men in women's clothes were sexually ambivalent, even androgynous, erotically provocative, certainly seductive, even more certainly threatening to a stable sex-gender system – a place where boys were 'taken' for women and where English culture's 'intense anxieties', fixed on the 'problematics of the flesh', could be staged and their 'transgressive erotic impulses' released.<sup>5</sup> It's certainly a lively place, this eroticized, historicized playhouse, but it's not a place I recognize as a theatre historian and close reader of Elizabethan playhouse documents, no doubt because, as David Cressy mildly observes in surveying this criticism, historicists exploit 'history' very differently than historians do and make very different arguments out of the texts they read as evidence. For him, as for me, this sensationalized theatre turns out to be more a rhetorical than a historical construct, and one that serves post-, not early-modern discursive ends. By contrast, the 'history' I read (including eyewitness accounts) brings me to conclude with Anthony Dawson that cross-dressing was an unremarkable stage convention, no more sensational, anxious or transgressive when practised by the Chamberlain's Men in 1601 than by Cheek by Jowl in 1991 – or indeed, by Shakespeare's 'replica' players playing *Antony and Cleopatra* in his 'replica' Globe theatre in 1999.<sup>6</sup> The English stage didn't 'take' boys for women any more than it 'took' commoners for aristocrats or Richard Burbage for Henry V. It did 'take' players for the parts they played: that is, Elizabethan spectators, understanding actors as professionals whose business was role play, read the role played, not the player beneath the role. When I'm thinking about 'original' performances on Shakespeare's stage, the bodies I focus on belong to the play, not to the players who played them. I read Cordelia as 'she', not 'he'.

I emphasize the point because the bodies in play I observe in this book, the roles and performances I document, are, almost exclusively, women's. This concentration of focus I intend as a corrective to feminist criticism's preoccupation with discursive bodies, and materialist and performance criticism's exaggerated attention on men. The former derives from a fascination with power, the latter, from a logocentric fascination with Shakespeare's words as the bearers of authorial meanings; as everyone knows, men have more to say in Shakespeare than women do. To concentrate criticism on words, on Shakespeare's playtext, then, is to concentrate on men – a habit that doesn't end with academic readings of



these plays but spills over into theatre practice, to affect how plays are cast, rehearsed, directed, designed, publicized, reviewed. To affect, that is, the entire politics of contemporary theatre production. Without diminishing the work Shakespeare's words do in the theatre, I want to argue that his playtext tells only part of the story: that, until the text he didn't write down – the performance text – is recuperated, re-imagined, put back into play and accounted for by spectators, we're reading only half Shakespeare's play. Reading performance texts means reimagining the canon, opening up its supplementary physical, visual, gestural, iconic texts, making more space for the kind of work women do in play (particularly as Shakespeare situates their roles to play off men). It also means writing about it in a body-conscious language attentive to feeling, to the itch and pleasures of desire, and to pain. It means attending to theatre's 'feminine' unruliness and the unpredictable, not to say promiscuous, theory-resisting effects performance generates. And it means registering and fixing scrutiny on the woman's body as bearer of gendered meanings – meanings that do not disappear when words run out or characters fall silent. Discursive criticism finds such textual absence a form of erasure or mysterious opacity: a symptomatic instance of this is Elaine Showalter's interesting failure, in a seminal essay on the 'Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism' some years back, to register Ophelia's appearance in her final scene – where she's a corpse.<sup>7</sup> For Showalter, it seems, the silent body of dead Ophelia simply vanished. More recently, Philippa Berry ends her elegantly word-attentive study of *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings* with 'uncertainty' surrounding the dead body of Cordelia, who remains, says Berry, 'the play's central riddle', 'a mystery even in her death'.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps rhetorically that is true, but as a body in play, Cordelia's corpse is clearly, concretely and extensively legible and generates many more certain, if provisional, readings than Berry allows for. Discursive bodies in criticism may disappear, get erased. Material bodies in the theatre remain in view. Where Berry's work on Cordelia's ending ends, mine on that same ending begins.

In my opening chapter I propose the corpse as a limit case for the work a body in play can perform. Moving between the narrative and performative endings of *King Lear* and seeing the appalling illegibility of his daughters's bodies (which drove Lear's abdication crisis) remembered at the end, I speculate on Cordelia, seeing her dead body as an 'instructive object' and asking 'What does it instruct?'. What do they see when Lear demands of spectators, 'Look on her, look there'? Historicizing those questions, I survey the apparatus Shakespeare's first *King Lear* spectators may have had culturally to hand to make sense – or not – of Cordelia's corpse and the spectacle of theatrical death. Finally, I return to the

present to review three re-presentations of *Lear*'s ending, on film and stage, to see how subsequent performances exploit the 'naught-y' body to frame Lear's death as tragedy.

Chapter 2 takes these ideas further, applying notions of 'vexed looking' and 'unruly bodies' – the actorly corpse who, playing dead, plays up – to a feminist critique of four film *Hamlets* that, I argue, achieve their heroic ending by erasing the body that contests it, the body of Ophelia in the grave. I move between the structuring absence of the Shakespearean playtext (which these films – quite legitimately – mostly cut) and the images film produces in its place to analyse the performance work Ophelia's funeral does in Shakespeare's script. I produce a reading of her funeral that is attentive to the early modern practices Shakespeare is both invoking and inverting, and then I count the cost of what is lost when films commit a body snatch of dead Ophelia.

The politics of performance, representation and celebrity that I see circulating around the hijacked body of Ophelia becomes a central issue in Chapter 3 where the erasure I observe is not of the woman's gendered body but the woman's raced body. Shakespeare's Cleopatra tells us she is black, as his Othello tells us he is black. The Egyptian queen, however, captured early on by white western culture (a capture which, in the play, she commits suicide in order to avoid) and installed as one of its chief feminine icons, is everywhere whited out in her subsequent high-cultural representation. I examine this phenomenon in productions of *Antony and Cleopatra* by the Royal Shakespeare Company since 1953 – coronation year – and I link Egypt's queen 'of infinite variety' both to post-war Britain's young Elizabeth and to England's first Elizabeth. But I also read the black narrative that hovers around the margin of the dominant white history, aligning Shakespeare's Cleopatra with another contemporary 'black' queen, Anna of Denmark. Ironically on the modern stage, the same productions which continue – even in multi-cultural Britain – to white out Cleopatra habitually insert black bodies at her side. So what work – political, cultural, theatrical – does the black body of the woman do in Shakespeare today?

The politics of representation I see operating so prejudicially in Chapter 3 are taken up, reframed, in Chapter 4. My topic is the designed body. Seeing Shakespeare himself as the first designer of Shakespeare and surveying some of his original design instructions, I argue that costume in the theatre is the most conspicuously charged material for writing a politics of the body, and assess the power the designer has in our contemporary 'designer's theatre' to determine both the discursive space a role occupies and how the audience reads it. Seeing women's roles as particularly vulnerable to design decisions – such that costume changes

habitually mark changes in character – I use *Troilus and Cressida* to study the problematics of design. As its core conceit this Shakespeare playtext foregrounds ‘change’ (from changed minds and changed husbands to hostages exchanged) and locates in an exchange of tokens a costume change that plays against the text to register visually the crisis that annuls the lovers’ vows. Reading Helen as Shakespeare’s design coup for his play, I read productions at the RSC since John Barton’s (in)famous 1968 *Troilus and Cressida* as setting a very different agenda for the work design performs in a theatre of theatricalized sexuality.

My last chapter offers a close reading of one body in play: here, I remember Zoe Wanamaker playing Emilia in *Othello*. As an act of memory that re-performs performance, this chapter serves as a practical demonstration of the kind of performance studies theorized throughout the rest of the book. Emilia’s need to remember, to gossip, to re-cite Desdemona’s ending and retell it ‘with a [crucial] difference’ brings *Othello*’s narrative to a conclusion unanticipated by Iago’s ugly manipulation of the cultural tropes that successfully stifle her voice – until she’s confronted with the body of Desdemona stifled. But Emilia’s remembering and her ‘tattling’ likewise collect up ideas about performance and bodies in play that have been circulating from my opening chapter, and reconfigure them. Thus, Emilia’s need to tell, to ‘bode’, and to ‘bode’ in the body, offers me a final paradigm for what I want this book to offer.

Just as I understand that in writing performance I’m writing myself and staking a claim in theatre that is as much heuristic as historic – I want to ‘see better’ – so I understand that all the bodies in play on Shakespeare’s stage are anamorphs. They’re bogus proxies whose fake effects produce, in spectators, real affect, ‘real tears’ that we shed, as Tony Dawson says, ‘on account of what we recognize as unreal feelings’.<sup>9</sup> Theatrical bodies work like those optical instruments, those ‘perspectives’ Bushy describes in *Richard II*, ‘which rightly gazed upon / Show nothing but confusion; eyed awry, / Distinguish form’ (2.2.16–24). ‘Eyeing awry’, like ‘vexed looking’, is a standard viewing procedure in the theatre, where we know, as the Chorus in *Henry V* tells us, we’re looking at ‘mockeries’. Paradoxically, however, theatre’s equivocating bodies ‘lie like truth’. Seeing those bogus, feigning, anamorphic bodies in play, we spectators learn to ‘distinguish form’, to re-cite and remember our own histories, by ‘minding true things by what their mockeries be.’

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