

DISCOVERING SHAKESPEARE

A New Guide to the Plays

John Russell Brown

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JOHN RUSSELL BROWN



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The Duchess of Malfi (Revels Plays)

Preface

Readers who are familiar with professional scholarship and criticism will appreciate how much I have benefited in writing this book from the work of others who have studied Shakespeare's plays in performance. Other readers who work in theatre will recognise just as easily how much I owe to the actors, directors, designers and stage-staff with whom I have worked on productions and in workshops. I hope, too, that my students and colleagues at the University of Sussex and at the Folger Library, Washington D.C. will realise that I have shared my thoughts and methods of study with them, and gained by the exchange.

Indeed, in preparing this book, I have drawn on such a wide experience that I am quite unable to trace the beginning or development of each idea or start to acknowledge my innumerable debts. I cannot express adequately a gratitude of which I am constantly aware. By great good fortune, this new guide to Shakespeare's plays is a product of a long collaboration. It is wholly mine only in the writing.

Two particular debts I can, however, acknowledge and do so with grateful pleasure: to Penny Admiraal for typing out my first drafts and corrections; and to Derick Mirfin of Macmillan for guiding the book from typescript to its final form with uncommon vigilance and generosity.

JOHN RUSSELL BROWN

NOTE ON TEXTS

References to Shakespeare's texts in this book are to *The Complete Works* edited by Peter Alexander (Collins, London and Glasgow, 1951), save for those instances, clearly indicated, where a different edition is cited for particular comment.

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I

Introduction

Our response to Shakespeare's plays has been changing slowly, and with difficulty, during the last twenty years, but now the time has come for a decisive revolution.

Readers and critics have become increasingly aware that the plays were written for performance and reveal their true natures only in performance. We have adapted our study accordingly, modifying literary criticism as best we can and remembering, whenever possible, to pay attention to stage-directions, meaningful gestures, impressive silences, and other theatrical features. But that, I believe, is no longer good enough. I have based this new guide on a new premise: that we should read and study the plays as if we were rehearsing them, and that we should then attempt to imagine performances. I have tried to show how every reader can use imagination and experience in the same way as an actor does, and how everyone can learn from what happens in a theatre during performance. So the texts of Shakespeare's plays can reveal living images of life.

Occasionally I take issue with other books and with current methods of editing or criticism, but I have no wish to denigrate Shakespearean scholarship and literary expertise. If this new road to a fuller enjoyment is followed, many earlier studies will contribute in new ways to the different engagement.

Part of the revolution I seek is a change of priorities. Character-analysis and the search for an underlying theme must wait until after the play has begun to come alive in a reader's imagination – with all the excitement and strength of theatrical performance, and with the sudden revelations and slow revaluations which are the ordinary signs of vitality in rehearsal. Semantic footnotes must be relegated to a position consonant with a primary concern for speech and action; they must not be allowed to shoulder out of sight the textual difficulties that are discovered in rehearsal. A reader's enquiry about a text is not finished when all the hard words are made plain; this should be a continuous accompaniment to the more extraordinary and more demanding task of

exploring the many ways in which an actor can breathe life into the words, the many indications in the text of how an actor should speak his lines, and the many clues to what should happen on stage. As hard words are only a small part of speech, so speech is only part of continual stage-action; and individual actors are only a part of the interactions of a number of actors who are each informed by the words of the complete text and each full of independent, creative energies.

The basis of this new guide to Shakespeare's plays is the art of the actor. By adapting an actor's means of exploration to his own needs, a reader can 'possess' a text in a lively and personal way, and start upon his own act of discovery. But a reader must also respond like an audience and develop, as a modern director will do, a sense of the whole: the interaction of performances, the effect of spectacle, rhythm and music, the varying focus and the changes in an audience's sense of illusion and reality, lies and truth.

Occasionally I propose very painstaking work, which many readers of this book will lack time to undertake, but I do not wish to undervalue a simple reading of a text which accepts whatever pleasures occur naturally and easily; indeed I argue that this should be a repeated element of any serious exploration. I hope that my readers will be led to a reappraisal of Shakespeare's plays by the argument of the whole book and by the new readings of some of the greatest of them with which it is illustrated; I also hope that they will be drawn into the more difficult ways of study that I propose, by making discoveries for themselves wherever this guide speaks most usefully to them. I trust they will then find their own, less methodical, ways of responding to the texts.

It is commonly said that the pleasure of reading Shakespeare and the rarer pleasure of seeing a wonderful production of one of his plays are distinct from one another. Frequently the gap is huge, but the two experiences should be of the same kind and draw strength from each other. Performance is set over against reading only because the texts are often read and studied as if they were long poems or most peculiar novels. This book tries to give a theatrical understanding to readers and to introduce ways of developing a theatrical imagination in order that readers and playgoers alike may enjoy the plays as mirrors that reflect, in animated and revealing detail, the world we live in and ourselves.

2 | *Shakespeare Dead and Alive*

Shakespeare's texts are alive on the stage, as part of living images of life itself. New revelations are registered with each theatrical season as actors, designers, directors, musicians and managers collaborate in the endless quest for productions that will engage their audiences. But, in our minds, as we respond to performances, there is a still more various and intimate life. All theatrical realities and limitations may be forgotten, as the plays are recreated in our imaginations, drawing on whatever we have experienced or dreamed before that time of performance. An exhilarating interplay between these elements—Shakespeare's text, its theatrical enactment and our own thoughts and feelings—can transport us into a fabulous world, full of surprises and deep pleasures. This book is about that process.

Staging the plays is the surest means of bringing them to life, but it is neither the only one nor the most generally available. Millions who have never entered a theatre appreciate Shakespeare's writings. Millions of playgoers enjoy the experience of reading the texts when they are at home or alone. In these private encounters we progress at our own pace, wherever and whenever we please. Personal involvement can then be strongest—unless we are among the few who perform on stage—and the plays are then most capable of reflecting our own concerns, transforming, enriching and clarifying them. I think, too, that an imaginative response to reading the plays is the most likely way to catch an impression of the very sound, the unique touch, of Shakespeare's own voice. This may be true even for actors, because the practicalities of stage-craft and the limits of personal achievement do not intrude at those times, or deflect attention. Certainly the plays can be vitally alive as we read with performance in mind, and this book is about that process too. I want to consider how best to read, what kinds of attention are good, what specialised knowledge is helpful, and the reasons for all this.

I will also argue that there are times when we should examine the plays as if they were inert, a sequence of words or arrangements of letters

on the page of a book, all of equal size and style, static, definite and open to prolonged enquiry. Such an objective scrutiny is not so easy as it may sound, because the dead text of Shakespeare's plays is very unlike an ordinary corpse. It has an obstinate way of returning to life as a play in our minds, even as we study it meticulously, counting its commas or noting its auxiliary verbs. But the distinction between death and life should be remembered, because only when we observe the plays as fixed objects can we be precise and definite, or pay attention to problems involving the transmission of what Shakespeare actually wrote, the errors of scribes and compositors, the relevance and varying authority of stage-directions and punctuation, the possible suggestions or imprecisions of each word free from the constraints and influences of its dramatic context. Much of this study is highly specialist and takes more time than most of us can spare, but every reader can enjoy some dissection. These enquiries have their own fascination, as myriads of linguistic possibilities are revealed and the sharp, minutely crafted substance of the text is more precisely appreciated. The words themselves can hold our attention, on their own account, without the constantly changing and finally elusive images which are the concomitant life they were designed to have in our minds. This book is also about these investigations, when for short periods we actually possess and master the words that Shakespeare wrote and they stop dead in their tracks.



The fact that the corpse won't lie down, that the distinction between Shakespeare dead and alive has to be carefully watched and protected, signals one of the first assumptions to be made in our approach to the plays. When a scholar wants to trace the progress of a broken piece of type used in the original printing and is peering into a composite photographic image of multiple copies of a first edition, a light may flash suddenly in his mind rather than on the screen. This reader is not trying to wrest a meaning from the text and is careless of his imaginative engagement, but some phrase springs into unquestionable life, awakening earlier memories or striking new conceptions in some unforeseen and challenging way. Such unscheduled moments of creative response are often deep because they are uncensored, and they can make a lasting impression. What is true for the bibliographer can also be true for any other reader. Anyone who enjoys the plays in the theatre where they are most alive will profit by spending some time in more objective, more 'deadly' pursuits.

Certainly we must not always try to wrest a meaning out of Shakespeare's plays or strive to possess them thoroughly. We should

allow them to surprise us by remaining open to unexpected suggestion. Near the beginning of his career, Shakespeare gave Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost* a warning against laborious study:

Small have continual plodders ever won,
Save base authority from others' books, . . . (I i 86-7)

(According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'plodder' first entered the language in that sentence.)

A new guide to Shakespeare's plays must start by emphasising the need to remain open to whatever the plays offer, however strange that may seem. We should be watchful when we stumble on hitherto unnoticed words and phrases, or on the necessity of silence; or when we catch strange echoes between scene and scene, or find ourselves misreading a speech or entertaining apparently unconnected ideas and images. In one of his last plays, *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare has Pisanio make the outrageous claim that 'Fortune brings in some boats that are not steer'd' (iv iii 46), and goes on to prove him right by the action of the play. The same I think must be said of our attempts to understand and enjoy Shakespeare. We need good pilots and practice at the helm, but experience and strict study are by no means all-sufficient.

For example, we should value the general, confused impression of a first and perhaps hurried reading, as the unexplored territory of the text still lies stretched out before us. What we see then has the force and clarity of our first view of a country or city that we have never previously visited. Our minds seek a resting place but do not expect to feel at home; our senses are keyed up for adventure and responsive to new impressions.

I remember the first time I read *Much Ado About Nothing*. People were talking, lightly and continually; they were spirited and volatile, for ever moving in and out of sight. Sometimes a light would flash, but then this busy world became dark, crowded and heavily furnished. Occasionally I heard music, but it was quickly challenged by the pressures of words and actions as talkative people teased, taunted, questioned and attacked each other. Other passages were slow, heavy and sustained, very unlike the brittle instability of the rest of this play. And then, after a wordless dance, the play was over: something had happened off-stage that should not be considered until tomorrow, but somehow the other issues had been momentarily forgotten. The life of this comedy seemed fugitive, its brightest moments being the most unknowable, hidden behind many words, outbreaks of laughter, anger or triviality.

I first read *Julius Caesar* as a schoolboy; all my attention was on the role of Flavius which had been allotted to me when the class combined to read the play aloud. The first scene was difficult, almost unintelligible;

the next scene, when Flavius entered but said nothing, a let-down. The rest has left no impression. When I next read the play, some ten years later, the whole text seemed tough, long, tense and, somehow, white. I hardly know, today, why it seemed so blanched, quiet and even eerie, despite the large-scale and violent scenes. For all its broad scope, the play made a narrow progress. Together with the obvious realignments and manoeuvres of the main action, there was a series of small, hard, vital centres of attention.

These first views must be criticised and often lost to sight, but they are of crucial importance if the plays are to come alive in our own individual imaginations. Even when we are familiar with a play and return to read it again after two or three years, some sense of new discovery will come immediately and we should try to retain it. On reflection it may be very obvious: perhaps the way in which Othello is so isolated in Acts iv and v, when many other characters are dropping away. Or a re-reading may be dominated by the way in which Othello's speech anchors progressively on grand and basic ideas: fool, devil, soul, body, husband, wife, honest, good, life, death, heart, soul, heaven and hell; towards the end splendid images still flare upwards – 'chaste stars', 'monumental alabaster', 'flaming minister', 'Promethean heat' – but the key words are devastatingly simple: cause, soul, blood, die, light, love, weep. Recognition of these basic facts may spark off a new set of questions: how many Othellos have spent their tears as fast their final words indicate? How many have moved in their last moments with the huge weight and delicacy – the fine judgement and intimacy – that replace more raw and primitive passions? Sometimes a re-reading can awaken an elementary question, not previously considered: for example, 'Why should Othello die?'

Directors and actors, when beginning to work on one of Shakespeare's plays, will cultivate consciously a fresh approach, and try to read the text as if it were entirely new. This is not because they want to be innovative or fashionable. They have to alert themselves just as they are, just at that instant, to the task of staging the play: this will be, inevitably, the grounds from which their production or performance will spring. So should a student prize the effect of a 'first reading', however much he changes this first view in the light of further analysis, exploration, information, judgement, imagination and re-creation.

Shakespeare's plays should be alive in each individual mind. They thrive in the level of our dreams and with the immediacy of our personal and exact experience. A personal engagement must be sought from the start, and renewed constantly.



As time passes our view of each play will change, because we ourselves alter and our knowledge of the text becomes more complete. It will change, too, as we grow more capable of retaining more than a few plays in our minds at any one time. Whenever the life that we imagine in a play becomes fixed and familiar, it is time to question our engagement: we should probably turn to something else. Or we can read a scholarly book, or go to see a production.

Scholars often denounce theatre productions that give very slanted views of the plays: a cowboy *Much Ado*, a *Measure for Measure* set in the consulting rooms of Dr Freud's Vienna, an *As You Like It* as a baroque opera, or a *Hamlet* chopped up, weighted down with electronic theatricality, and served with a dash of obvious nudity, sadism or childish, bubbling vitality. Other Shakespeareans express their weariness with the long file of books, each one claiming to pluck the heart out of a complicated mystery. But these interpretative and explicatory excesses mark the essential diversity of the plays' appeal, and their tractability. If we hesitate before a transformation on stage or a narrow thesis in a well-argued book, it is the rider and not the horse that we should question and, if necessary, reject. Every new interpretation is calculated to catch our attention, and the best response is to welcome each as a new filter through which to see the plays for ourselves. When held between a viewer and an object, the filter obscures something and, at the same time, brings other features into unusual prominence. Tonal variations have been modified and so some features are obscured and something hitherto inconspicuous is lightened. We can enjoy any eccentric production or academic study, so long as we use it to quicken our own response. They all represent errors and perceptions other than our own, and so reveal aspects of the plays' life that we might never notice without their help or obstruction.

A natural desire in all students is to 'understand' a play and so possess it thoroughly. But this aim is possibly more foreign to the nature of Shakespeare's texts than the changing aspirations of the most individualistic theatre director. The study of Shakespeare is an endless quest which we must follow with enterprise and a kind of carelessness. Certainly it is a waste of time to fulminate against those who proclaim they have found the one secret or to barricade one's own temporary certainties against renewed attack. If statement is brought against statement, one filter replaced by another, a new look always encouraged, then direct engagement is more likely to follow and our pleasure to grow. Shakespeare should never be a closed subject in any mind.

So much is generally recognised in the busy theatrical profession. Only practical considerations of large auditoriums and the economics of play production prevent a revolution in our way of staging

Shakespeare. When a theatre director is producing a play for a long run in a modern theatre, certain ideas and discoveries have to be held firmly by everyone concerned; otherwise the expensive set will be found to be awkward, costumes and movements will express the wrong ideas, and the actors' confidence will be undermined. Naturally the plays are mettlesome in performance, changeable and enticing; always the author tends to be several steps ahead or to one side. Even when a director is restrained by practical considerations, his mind is liable to rush on ahead or retreat rashly from some expediency: certainties vanish from his mind.

John Barton, whose productions at Stratford-upon-Avon have seemed to be strong and clear, has protested vigorously that he is 'simply unable to form and articulate opinions about plays'. He was asked to lecture on the *Henry IV* plays, immediately after directing them; on being announced he stood up, but said nothing: 'I heard a little voice saying, I have no views on *Henry IV*. I paused for a long time, and said, "Any questions?"'.¹

Because of the nature of Shakespeare's mind and the theatrical medium for which he wrote, the aim of a student should be, not a settled understanding, but an imaginative and responsive engagement. Both reader and actor can enjoy a continuously changing and developing awareness of Shakespeare's text which draws on the individual's own experiences – literary, theatrical, political and personal – and interacts with them.

Shakespeare's writings are wide open to individual imaginative exploration. In part, this is a consequence of a life spent working for a theatre. Shakespeare knew how plays come alive on the stage and how actors create characters out of an interaction between the text and their own beings and imaginations. His theatre was different from any we know today, but the essential act of performance was the same. Plays were given an exact and personal life by the meeting of individual actors before particular audiences on specific days: they took on different appearances with each change in the cast and with each day of performance. The accident of an entry occurring a little earlier than usual could alter the effect (and therefore the meaning) of the following line. The comparative tiredness or vitality of the two actors in the last fight of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* could swing an audience's sympathies in one direction or the other. An actor's hesitation could undermine the strength of an assertion or suggest a depth of feeling that could surprise the dramatist as much as an audience that was seeing the play for the first time. The mirror that a play holds up to human nature is not a scientific instrument but a part of nature itself, unpredictable and fascinating in its own being. A confident, accomplished dramatist will

allow his play to breathe, so that it draws upon the life which actors and audiences offer to each performance.

The very substance of drama is changeable, and a reader must recognise this fact as much as a dramatist, even though it is more difficult to do so. It is very likely that the reader has never seen actors testing one interpretation against another in rehearsal. Most modern theatres show only productions that are carefully controlled so that they give a clear – and therefore a strong – enactment of a single interpretative idea. At school or university the reader may have been trained to read a text so that he can be sure that he understands precisely what is on the page: whereas he should have been encouraged to play with conjecture and to enter imaginatively within a forever-changing image, or mirage, of another life.



Throughout the twentieth century, critics have reminded their readers that Shakespeare's plays are plays, that this dramatist gave little or no attention to having his texts printed for readers, that words are only part of a performance. But still, even in these latter days, a 'new guide' to Shakespeare is needed because so many earlier aids to study have paid no more than lip-service to the theatrical element in which Shakespeare's works truly and changeably live.

One of the commonest ways of considering the plays 'as if in performance' is to look for visual as well as verbal clues. But the search for 'actions' implicit in the text, in addition to those explicitly required by stage directions, can lay the same dead hand on a play's imaginative life as an exclusive concern for words. It can raise a false dichotomy between speech and gesture, words and show, and prevent any just appraisal of the continuous, complex and coherent human image. Readers who respond in this way may end up clutching a few straws, separate from the play's natural life, just like those who insist that the words of a text are the only reliable (because the only 'fixed') indication of Shakespeare's creation.

Critics who consider the theatrical element of the plays in a wider sense may still experience their own difficulties which are betrayed by vague and sometimes condescending references to particular performances. For example, Harry Levin in his *The Question of Hamlet* (1959) claims that: 'It has taken more bookish Shakespeareans many generations to understand the controlling importance of stage performance' (pp. 131–2). But Professor Levin's attention to theatrical dimensions is no more than incidental to his basic argument. He refers to actual performances to exemplify critical attitudes. Sarah

Bernhardt's Hamlet is said to be part of the 'romantic legend of a weakling, too delicate for this world' (p. 5). Edwin Booth is identified as 'a romantic actor' and is said to be typical of those who found 'congenial' the assumption that 'Hamlet was really the victim of the mental disease he claimed to be simulating' (p. 111). Levin has little time for either of these critical notions and so his theatrical instances are presented only for ridicule. In support of an interpretation he rates more important, he introduces a new paragraph with reference to Tommaso Salvini, and the actor is given a vague puff of commendation: 'one of the most celebrated Hamlets of theatrical history'. We are told he was able to sum up his part 'in a single trait: *il dubbio*' (p. 74). But, having provided this entrance for the theme of doubt, Salvini slips out of the mind of the critic as the latter proceeds with a long quotation from Erasmus who is said to be borrowing from Plato. On each of these occasions a particular theatrical reference has been used, not very precisely, as a kind of exfoliation of a more serious discourse on the play. Each of them could be cut without loss. If this is all Professor Levin can draw from his theatrical knowledge, it is not surprising that the words cited earlier stand thus in fuller quotation:

It has taken more bookish Shakespearians many generations to understand the controlling importance of stage performance; now that such understanding has been reached, there may be some danger of overemphasis.

Words *versus* action and study *versus* theatre are conflicts that should never be accepted or adjudicated. A reader of Shakespeare is like a performer or an audience, and has no true option but to respond imaginatively to a whole, human and only partly perceived living-image.



The text of each play has to be set in motion in the mind as if it were part of a performance in a theatre. Natural instinct helps, but most readers need to make a conscious effort to do this and they will look around for help. Annotated editions of Shakespeare might seem the most likely recourse, but the principles on which these aids to study have been compiled are indebted so heavily to semantics, literary detection and the pursuit of a definitive text that their footnotes are of little help. Consider, for example, the exchange between Alonso and Prospero, and the latter's charge to Ariel at the conclusion of *The Tempest*:

ALON.

I long

To hear the story of your life, which must
Take the ear strangely.