



An H.E.B. Paperback

Shakespeare's Dramatic Style

John Russell Brown



JOHN RUSSELL BROWN

*Shakespeare's
Dramatic Style*

ROMEO AND JULIET

AS YOU LIKE IT

JULIUS CAESAR

TWELFTH NIGHT

MACBETH



HEINEMANN
LONDON

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Preface

THIS book starts as a guide on 'How to read Shakespeare'. But it also raises major issues about our understanding of Shakespeare: how much should we read as if we were directors of productions, or actors, and how can we do this? to what extent did Shakespeare allow us to read ourselves and our own concerns into his plays? where and how did he allow for a variety of interpretations? where are the plays intentionally ambiguous? when are words important, when silence or gesture? how are the meanings of silence and gesture controlled? in what ways, and by what means, is Shakespeare a realistic writer? how can we recognize major dramatic crises, especially those which depend on the excitements of acting? how much was Shakespeare confined by the conditions of theatrical performance in his own day?

In fact, no one with a mind open to Shakespeare's dramatic style could write a simple book: the style is not simple. Once we start asking questions about the first impressions we have gained, whether from productions or from readings, we are caught up in one of the most fascinating, minutely worked and, in several senses of the word, *large* creative achievements that the world has known. We can seek simple responses among others, but we must always be prepared for complicated explanations. The writing of this book was a sustained adventure in understanding, and I hope, above all, that the record of my thoughts will encourage readers to undertake such investigation for themselves.

The five plays I have considered are among those most frequently performed and read. Four of them I have directed in England or the United States: *Romeo and Juliet* and *As You Like It* at the Playhouse, Cheltenham, *Macbeth* at the Everyman, Liverpool, and *Twelfth Night* at the Playhouse, Pittsburgh, and for Channel 13 TV, New York. I am greatly indebted to my casts

for their contribution to my knowledge of these plays. *Julius Caesar* I have often seen in performance, notably at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon; I am especially indebted to the 1968 production there.

Texts have been quoted from *The Players' Shakespeare*, ed. J. H. Walter, by kind permission of the editor and the publishers, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, London. I have occasionally simplified the stage-directions, reverting to the bare indications of the original editions.

JOHN RUSSELL BROWN

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PART ONE

1 *Introduction*

MY AIM is to teach how to read Shakespeare's text creatively, to show by example how to explore, sift and possess a passage for oneself in something like its full theatrical life.

The literary qualities of a Shakespeare play are easily enough grasped, once they have been described, but not its theatrical energy and life; for this, the best way that I have found is to study comparatively short passages in great detail and in a theatrical context. I do not want to nail down 'meanings' or offer 'interpretations', but to consider what the words ask actors to do, and what the enacted drama may do for an audience in performance. By opening our minds to every discernible detail of short moments of a play in performance, we may meet with Shakespeare's dramatic imagination at work, with all the richness and subtlety of his involvement in a three-dimensional, almost living, image of life. In short, my book is an introduction to Shakespeare. But not because it is elementary or because it provides the basic facts and commonly accepted opinions: it tries to effect an introduction.

I would most like to teach a method, a means of careful, patient encounter which my readers can then follow, adapt and, no doubt, simplify for themselves. I have found that to talk about a play's significance or meaning is to recount one's own opinion or someone else's. Opinions are plentiful, and they can be well informed, up-to-date and, sometimes, imaginatively arousing. But there is no substitute for an open encounter on one's own account with what happens in a play. Without reaching all the time for significance or interpretations, we can remain open-minded before a play, choosing one moment and then another; we can turn it first this way and then that, observing, marking and trying to respond imaginatively to what is there, hidden within

the words printed on the page. There will be time enough to evaluate what we have found when the special effort required for this kind of introduction has been, for the time being, exhausted. The first and demanding step is to encounter the text of the play and all its manifold implications and suggestions, each for oneself.

Some method, some introductory procedures, are necessary. Otherwise we may get lost in those aspects that most easily catch our attention. I do not mean the aid of editorial annotation and glossaries; these cope with the obvious difficulties brought about by changes in the language, life and ideas of men. Of course we should pay attention to footnotes. The further and more persistent trouble is that the printed words are only clues to Shakespeare's plays, and we must learn to seek out, within them and beyond them, the full heard, seen and experienced image of life of which they are only one element – and sometimes not the most important.

How can we sit down and 'read' a play? It is at least as specialized an activity as reading a musical score so that we hear the music in our imagination; only words do not indicate time, pitch, and volume like musical notation. It is like imagining a landscape from 'reading' a map; or judging the personality and physical presence of some unknown writer of a letter. It is like trying to imagine a dramatic episode in real life, not by listening outside the closed door of a room you know as people you know are talking, but by reading a transcript of what was said, with little or no indication of the setting and no previous knowledge of the participants. But the task is not quite as hopeless as it might appear, for Shakespeare chose words that do reveal other elements of the situation, such as tone of voice and speed of delivery – if we know how to look for these clues to the physical and temporal drama.

Take a simple example: when we watch a play in performance certain words will stand out, force themselves upon our attention. However the production is staged and performed, some words in the performance of the play are as if they were in great capital letters; others are almost invisible: and yet on the printed page every letter is the same size, no word standing out from its fellows.

Or suddenly all attention in a theatre is focused upon a silent figure, perhaps walking off stage while others speak: for this on the printed page there is simply the one word 'Exit', which cannot suggest the manner of leaving the stage nor the way in which the silent character has usurped attention when the printed page is full of the words of others. We must learn to read a text so that such theatrical facts are clear to us, in the theatre of our minds.

Of course it is helpful to see plays in performance. But this is no substitute for learning to see and hear them for ourselves. Firstly, while a play is in performance we must yield to its momentary excitements and cannot wait, even if we wished to, to make sure we have responded fully to what is happening, or to verify and extend our impressions. Secondly, every production is limited in its achievement: unsuitable stage or auditorium, too little rehearsal time, too much or too little money to be spent, some inadequate casting, and always the particular talents and individual ambitions of director, designer and actors – all this affects what we see and hear. Constant theatre-goers will be satisfied, because each new production has its own revelations, and so a complex understanding of a play can be built up over the years. But we cannot always see the plays we want to study in an appropriate number of varied and imaginative productions. If we are interested in Shakespeare on our own accounts, there is no other course but to learn to see and hear the plays for ourselves. In this way we will always imagine our own production; we shall learn from the productions of experienced actors and directors, but we shall also confront Shakespeare independently, so that his plays will seem to reflect our world and extend our own imaginations. We shall keep the plays in continuous rehearsal in our own minds.

I believe it is only after we have gained some knowledge of what the printed words imply in terms of performance, when we have a grasp of the dramatic style of a play, that the wider questions of criticism and scholarship are truly valuable. Then we are able to test the value of each opinion by our own response to the text, and be in a sure way to become responsible critics in our turn.

2 The Evidence

BEFORE considering how to realize the theatrical life implicit in the printed words of Shakespeare's plays, we must take time to ask how reliable those words are as evidence of Shakespeare's intentions. His plays are quite unlike those of a contemporary dramatist printed from typescripts prepared from their author's autograph copies, and corrected at proof stage by the author himself.

Shakespeare seems to have taken little or no interest in the publication of his plays. Many were printed only after his death and, as far as we know, he proof-read none of the earlier publications, as did some of the more literary dramatists of his time. Some of the early editions were printed from very ill-prepared manuscripts, or from two different copies simultaneously. *Romeo and Juliet*, the first play considered in this book, is an interesting example. The earliest edition appeared in 1597 and is called, today, the 'Bad Quarto': 'Quarto' because, in common with most other plays printed in a volume of its own, it was printed on sheets of paper each folded twice to form four leaves; and 'Bad' because it is obviously far from the text Shakespeare wrote or the Chamberlain's Men performed. This was a 'pirated text': probably some actors had copied down what they could remember of the play and were paid a pound or two for their labour by a publisher eager to issue a version of a popular success. It has many omissions; it is often ungrammatical, unmetrical and confused; not a few lines make nonsense and more are trite or clumsy. The most interesting feature is perhaps some stage directions which read like eye-witness reports of performance: '*They whisper in his ear*'; '*Enter Juliet somewhat fast, and embraceth Romeo*'; and so on. Two years later the 'Good Quarto' appeared from a different publisher. For the most part this seems to have been set from one of Shakespeare's own manuscripts, with stage-directions that vary the names of

characters and with some passages repeated in amended versions, so that the printed text gives the author's first thoughts and his developed version side by side. But in the printing-house there was also a copy of the Bad Quarto, and sometimes, perhaps when Shakespeare's handwriting was particularly difficult to read, the compositor consulted this pirated text and reproduced its reading. The most consistent use of the Bad Quarto was between I. ii. 52 and I. iii. 34. These two editions – each imperfect – together with the Folio edition of 1623 that was printed from a second printing of the Good Quarto, are the only evidence we have of Shakespeare's play and so, in choosing passages for close examination and exploration, we should make sure that the text is wholly from the Good Quarto and without hints of repetition or incomplete composition.

The other plays considered in this volume have less complicated textual histories, each first appearing in the collected Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays of 1623. *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* were printed from the prompt-book used by the King's Men, the company in which Shakespeare himself was an active proprietor, or, possibly, from a transcript made from this source. The other two plays are also dependent on theatrical manuscripts, *Julius Caesar* being printed from a transcript of a prompt-book that was quite possibly in Shakespeare's own handwriting, and *Macbeth*, less fortunately, from a version prepared for court performance and possibly altered by cuts and additions for this occasion. For each play of Shakespeare's it is necessary to find out about its textual authority and bear this in mind while trying to discover the full implications of its words.

When the manuscript reached the printing-house all was not straightforward. Here more corruptions inevitably ensued, especially in spelling, elision, use of italics and capitals, verseline, arrangement of stage-directions and so forth. In a play, these can be details of large consequence. Consider the one-word speech: 'No!' Perhaps it should read 'No?', or, more simply, 'No.' It might be a line by itself, breaking the flow of iambic pentameters, or possibly it should be fitted in at the end or beginning

of another verse-line whose slight irregularity could contain this one stress without disturbing the underlying metrical pattern. For a text written to be spoken these details are of great importance.

Read the following speech aloud, pausing appropriately at each mark of punctuation:

O, by your leave, I pray you,
I bade you never speak again of him:
But, would you undertake another suit,
I had rather hear you to solicit that
Than music from the spheres.

Then read this following version, also aloud and pausing according to the weight of the punctuation:

O by your leave I pray you.
I bade you never speak again of him;
But would you undertake another suit
I had rather hear you, to solicit that,
Than Music from the spheres.

The first is from III. i of *Twelfth Night* as it appears in the Globe Shakespeare, one of the most commonly used texts; the second is from the Folio of 1623; and the second to my ear gives an eagerness and sharpness of mind that are hidden by the sensible, decorous punctuation of the modern editor's version. The speaker is Olivia, a young girl in love for the first time.

Or consider Brutus soliloquizing in his orchard:

He would be crown'd:
How that might change his nature, there's the question.
It is the bright day that brings forth the adder;
And that craves wary walking. Crown him? – that: –
And then, I grant, we put a sting in him,
That at his will he may do danger with.
The abuse of greatness is, when it disjoins
Remorse from power: and, to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections sway'd
More than his reason.

Read that version aloud first, and then this:

He would be crown'd:
 How that might change his nature, there's the question?
 It is the bright day, that brings forth the Adder,
 And that craves wary walking: Crown him that,
 And then I grant we put a Sting in him,
 That at his will he may do danger with.
 Th'abuse of Greatness, is, when it dis-joins
 Remorse from Power: And to speak truth of *Caesar*,
 I have not known, when his Affections sway'd
 More than his Reason.

Some of this is not easy to read: but clearly it has different emphases, especially around the crucial 'question' and 'Crown him that'. Perhaps the capital letters suggest special emphasis, as the 'M' for 'Music' in the last line of the Folio version of Olivia's speech – but then it is surprising that 'question' is not so emphasized, unless Brutus reaches the point almost in spite of himself. . . . It is a subtle business to translate printed punctuation into speech.

One more example, from *Macbeth*, shows how much a single comma can accomplish:

When the hurly-burly's done,
 When the battle's lost, and won.

Remove the Folio's punctuation after 'lost', as almost every modern editor has done, and the antithesis with 'won' is not so assertive or threatening.

Unfortunately we cannot simply prefer the punctuation of the earliest editions. Some of these, as we have seen, are based on transcripts of Shakespeare's papers or of the prompt-book, and therefore a scribe might have modified the original markings. But, more than this, the printing-house changed such details. First, there may have been a 'house style', a general tendency in the printing-shop to punctuate (and spell) in certain ways regardless of the author's preferences. Then each compositor had favourite mannerisms: these can be traced by work on second editions where the copy from which the new text was set is available for

comparison. Some compositors neglected commas; some frequently changed full-stops to colons or semi-colons; some added punctuation almost at random. These matters depended on personal taste, but also on the availability of type. Sometimes it is possible to calculate how many colons or commas were available to a compositor amongst his type and to observe where he ran short of one or the other and had to make substitutions. In the small printing-houses of Elizabethan London this often happened. The wonder is that the punctuation of their editions is as sensitive as it sometimes seems.

Three further factors modified the printed text. First, two compositors, with different habits and degrees of skill, sometimes worked on a single text. Secondly, the manuscript copy was sometimes marked (or 'cast-off' as it was called) so that the book could be set out of consecutive order: this could allow two compositors to work simultaneously and, more importantly, allow less type to stand, set-up, waiting to be placed in the printing machine. When the copy was cast-off in this way, it was sometimes done inaccurately so that the compositor had to spin out, or compress, some verse-lines towards the end of a page in order not to leave a space or over-run: so the verse arrangement could be seriously, and in very confusing ways, disturbed. Compositors also moved or modified stage-directions, or even omitted speeches, to the same end. Thirdly, the correction of proof-pages, when there was time for this, often introduced fresh errors. It was not often that the corrector referred back to the manuscript copy, so that he corrected only obvious errors, and only by his own sense of what was right. In this way punctuation, unusual words – and Shakespeare often invented words as he wrote – stage-directions, surprising speeches, could all be smoothed out of existence.

Clearly we must be careful in choosing what we ascribe to Shakespeare. For the closest examination, we must find 'good' passages from 'good' texts. We must pay no attention to the punctuation of modern editions, and treat that of the original editions with extreme scepticism or, where practicable, bibliographical expertise. Irregular arrangements of verse are significant

only where there was no occasion for adjusting the cast-off copy; generally it is safe to accept a 'broken line' only where the metre seems to require it and no space on the original printed page has been saved or gained.¹

Stage-directions and implications of stage activity in the dialogue require careful consideration too. Various manuscript plays have survived from Shakespeare's day (though no more than a few hundred lines of an unperformed play in Shakespeare's handwriting – the collaborative *Sir Thomas More*) and, from these and from printed plays, we know this: few scenes would be marked with a description of the location of the action; act or scene divisions would not always be marked; essential entries and exits, or directions for 'stage business, stage properties or costume changes might also be missing, misplaced or inaccurate. Plays printed from prompt-books were more consistent in marking entries; those from authorial manuscripts more descriptive in stage-directions. To gain a fair knowledge of what Shakespeare wanted to happen on the stage requires minute consideration of printed directions and textual inferences, together with a general knowledge of the Elizabethan playhouses and methods of play production.

This last requirement, in turn, requires practice and imagination, for Shakespeare's theatre is lost, of course, and must be reconstructed in our minds with as much co-ordination as possible. In my view, and in my experience of staging the plays, the most important features of that theatre were these:

The companies were permanent, run by eight to a dozen actors. They performed many different plays in repertory, rather like a modern opera company. They usually staged the plays in 'real' or modern dress – just extra-fine or apt versions of ordinary clothes; 'Roman' plays were something of an exception here. Music and rudimentary sound effects – drums

¹ Scholarly editions of Shakespeare's plays, such as the Arden, Signet or New Penguin (or the more recent volumes of the New Cambridge Edition), give accounts of the authority of their texts. For a general view of the subject see W. W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio* (Oxford University Press, 1955).