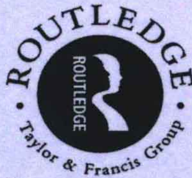
Shakespeare and Modern Theatre

The performance of modernity

Edited by
Michael Bristol and Kathleen McLuskie,
with Christopher Holmes

Accents on Shakespeare



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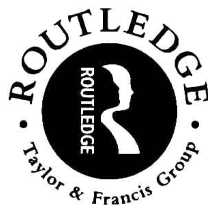

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Contributors

Michael Bristol is Greenshields Professor of English Literature at McGill University. He is the author of *Big Time Shakespeare, Shakespeare's America / America's Shakespeare*, and *Carnival and Theatre.*

Jean-Michel Déprats is Senior Lecturer in English Literature and Theatre Studies at the University of Nanterre (Paris X). He has written many articles in the field of Shakespeare studies, in particular on Shakespearean theatre productions and on problems of translation. He has done more than twenty translations of Shakespeare's plays for the principal theatre companies in France, including la Comédie Française, le Theâtre de l'Odéon, le TNP de Villeurbanne. His translations extend beyond Shakespeare to include J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World,* an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando,* Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore.* He is now completing a bilingual edition of *Shakespeare's Complete Works* for Gallimard.

Hugh Grady is Professor of English at Beaver College and author of *The Modernist Shakespeare: Critical Texts in a Material World* (1991) and *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (1996). He has also published numerous articles in *Modern Language Review, Comparative Literature, Shakespeare Quarterly, Textual Practice* and elsewhere.

Catherine Graham is an Assistant Professor of Drama in the School of Art, Drama and Music at McMaster University. Her research interests include the study of dramatic performance as a form of social thought, issues in cross-cultural performance, and the theoretical and practical problems posed by interdisciplinary

approaches to performance. She has published on Irish, English-Canadian, Québecois and First Nations' popular theatre and is currently working on a book-length study on community-based theatre in Canada, the USA, the United Kingdom and France.

Christopher Holmes is completing his Ph.D. dissertation on 'Calendars, Customs, and Early Modern Literature' at McGill University. His article 'Why Brutus Can't Tell Time: Interpretive Fashion and *Julius Caesar*' will appear in *Early Modern Literary Studies.*

Kathleen McLuskie is Professor of English at the University of Southampton. In 1999 she became Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Southampton. Her research centres on early modern theatre with a special interest in feminist criticism and theory, the commercialization of theatre and post-colonial cultural production. She is currently editing *Macbeth* for Arden III and working on a book on the commercialization of early modern theatre. Her publications include: *Renaissance Dramatists* (1989), *Dekker and Heywood: Professional Dramatists* (1994), and, with Jennifer Uglow, an edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*, by John Webster (1989).

Irena R. Makaryk is Professor of English at the University of Ottawa. Her teaching and research interests embrace Shakespeare, Renaissance, comparative, and Slavic drama. She is the author of numerous articles, editor or co-editor of eight books, including *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* and (with Diana Brydon) co-editor of *'A world elsewhere': Shakespeare in Canada*, the first book to examine the reception and history of Shakespeare in Canada. She is currently at work on a major project on Les' Kurbas, Shakespeare and the early Soviet period.

Maarten van Dijk teaches drama at the University of Waterloo. He has performed, directed, and written on Brecht and Shakespeare. Since 1994 he has been managing editor of *The Brecht Yearbook.*

Sarah Werner has taught Shakespeare and theatre classes at the University of Pennsylvania, McGill University and George Washington University. Her book *Shakespeare and Feminist Performance: Ideology on Stage* is forthcoming from Routledge.

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W. B. Worthen, Professor and Chair of the Department of Dramatic Art at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of *The Idea of the Actor: Drama and the Ethics of Performance*; *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*; and *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*. He has written widely on drama and performance theory, and is currently completing a book entitled *Shakespearean Performativity*.

Paul Yachnin is Professor of English at the University of British Columbia. His first book is *Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Making of Theatrical Value* (1996); his second, co-authored with Anthony Dawson, is *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England: A Collaborative Debate* (Cambridge, forthcoming). He is an editor of the forthcoming Oxford edition of *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, and editor of *Richard II*, also under contract with Oxford. His book-in-progress, *Shakespeare and the Dimension of Literature*, argues that literature's political importance is an effect of the long rather than the short term.

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's 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' towards 'context' has increasingly been the concern of critics and scholars since the Second World War: 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 its 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 towards 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 over recent 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 critical activity 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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Irena Makaryk, 'Shakespeare Right and Wrong', *Theatre Journal* 50: 2 (1998), pp. 153–64, is reprinted with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press. © The Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Introduction

MICHAEL BRISTOL and
KATHLEEN McLUSKIE

The essays in this volume explore the institutional practices that shape contemporary performances of Shakespeare's plays. At the start of the twenty-first century, film, video, and to a more limited extent, live performance have overtaken the printed book as the primary means of access to cultural experience for a significant fraction of the population. Many students have their defining encounter with Shakespeare by way of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* or Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, films that have been widely praised for their accessibility. The current preoccupation with the accessibility of performances has apparently been achieved at the expense of those traditional notions of authority that had such tremendous urgency for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. There's a whole lot of Shakespeare going on and modern performances often take outlandish liberties with these valued works. But performance is not well understood as a derivative form that owes its social dignity to the originary force of a text. The stage has a constitutive power or authority in its own right (Weimann 2000: 1–17). The common aim in these essays is to take the notion of performance seriously in both a theoretical and a historical sense. But the contributors here understand that it doesn't help to replace reified notions of textual authority with a vague, diffuse and poorly delineated notion of 'performativity'.

Given the widespread availability and the convenient packaging of Shakespeare in performance, is there any reason to expect

people to read the plays any more? After all, whatever Shakespeare wrote was intended as the script for staged performance, not for study in a printed book. And even the notion of an authoritative text has been discredited by recent developments in editorial scholarship. The diminished authority of the printed text has been accompanied by accelerating change, instability, and a relentless demand for innovation in the performance of Shakespeare's plays. The changing institutions of modern cultural production, in particular the development of new technologies and the advance of commercial mass culture, have fundamentally transformed the ways in which theatre artists struggle to realize their artistic vision. Theatrical producers, actors, designers, as well as cultural consumers have to find ways to cope with the exigencies of global markets, universal diaspora, and instantaneous mass communication.

Coleridge thought it would be better if Shakespeare's plays were never staged at all. The only way to experience the real pleasures of the verbal imagination, he claimed, is through the silent encounter between the written text and the isolated reader. And it remains a commonplace, at least among the reading public, that the movie is never as good as the book. But for much of the twentieth century it has seemed possible for serious readers to enjoy Shakespeare on stage without giving up the more difficult pleasures of traditional literary experience. This sense of a reasonable accommodation between printed text and theatrical performance is the guiding intuition in Helen Gardner's essay on 'The Directors Theatre' (1982). Gardner was an editor of early modern texts with a profound commitment to the idea of authorial intention and meaning. Still, she clearly enjoyed the way his plays were staged, at least in 'the years from the early nineteen-twenties to 1960, when Shakespeare in the study and Shakespeare in the theatre came together' (Gardner 1982: 67). The 'straightforward playing' of actors in this tradition provided vivid emotional experience without challenging the authority of the text as it was understood by meticulously trained readers.

Gardner's work as a textual editor was undoubtedly central to her experience as a theatre-goer. The reconciliation of text with performance during the 'classic age' was fully achieved when theatrical producers demonstrated their willingness to rely on professional redactions of early modern quarto and folio editions. The costly theatrical spectacles of the Restoration and Victorian

stage disappeared as much closer attention was paid to the forms of poetic language transcribed in the early texts. Even Coleridge might have been able to enjoy these productions. Although Gardner herself doesn't make the connection, her account of the 'classic age' of Shakespearean performance corresponds roughly to the great period of the high modernism in theatre and in the arts more generally. It would be easy to show what high modernist aesthetics looked like since its visual contours are clearly evident in architecture, painting and industrial design. But it is far less easy to say exactly what the scenic environment of early-twentieth-century modernism was really all about or even to identify its most definitive forms of expression.

Hugh Grady, in his *Modernist Shakespeare* (1991), has argued that Shakespeare gave to modernism an unusually powerful resource for articulating its own contradictions. Shakespeare's themes of power, self-fashioning, and social transformation express the pathos of Western modernity with extraordinary vividness. At the same time his works represent a powerful desire for social coherence and meaning. For the modernist theatre, Shakespeare represents the possibility for the celebration of modernity's themes of emancipation and for resistance to modernity's chronic dislocations. Richard Halpern's *Shakespeare Among the Moderns* argues that 'high modernism' dominated reception of Shakespeare during the first half of the twentieth century and continues to exert a decisive influence right up to the present (Halpern 1997: 2). Halpern believes that the success of modernism in 'securing a base' in universities is an important reason for its continuing influence. More important however, is 'the fact that the modernist reading responded to a novel set of social, cultural, economic and political developments which have evolved, but not disappeared. The modernists' reading of Shakespeare has not vanished, because the world that gave birth to it has not' (Halpern 1997: 2).

In her essay on 'The Directors Theatre' Helen Gardner chronicles the waning of this paradigm, not only for theatre but for literature as well. The theatre she enjoyed so much during the 'classic age' of the repertory companies was a reader's theatre, a theatre oriented to the rewards and the pleasures of the printed text. This theatrical regime came to an abrupt end for her with Peter Brook's landmark production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Helen Gardner liked and trusted actors. She acknowledges that

she enjoyed the exuberance and playfulness of their work in Brook's *Dream*. But when she learned of the intellectual collaboration linking Brook's production with Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964) she felt somehow violated.

> I had no idea that I was witnessing a sex-orgy, that Oberon was punishing his wife Titania by making her commit bestiality, or that in the persons of Oberon and Titania, Theseus and Hippolyta were working out their own sexual problems, or any of the dreary absurdities and solemn nonsense with which Kott has smeared the play.
>
> (Gardner 1982: 71)

The significance of Gardner's grievance is easy to misunderstand. It's not just the sex. What ended for Gardner with Brook's *Dream* was her belief that Shakespeare's plays could actually be performed without compromising the experience of literature as a practice of disciplined and careful reading. It suddenly became apparent that performance could succeed perfectly well without the support of a large, well-informed reading public and even without literature itself.

Gardner's feelings should not be dismissed as feckless nostalgia; her sense of loss has been reiterated many times (Kermode 1999). It has been central to the contest over Shakespeare that has recurred throughout the twentieth century. For although a pleasurable relationship between text and reader is still available, it has no unique purchase on the cultural production of public discourse about Shakespeare. The experience of reading Shakespeare can only be shared through other institutions of culture – the theatre, the education system, the literary journals – institutions that compromise the intense personal connection between text and reader. In any case, it is of the essence of live theatre that its moments of pleasure cannot be reproduced or repeated; they leave, as Prospero puts it, not a wrack behind. What is left is the endless echoing discussion *in language* of their aesthetic and their meaning. So Gardner enjoyed the Brook production but hated the explanatory critical gloss.

Perhaps because of her recoil from a new, sexualized, discourse of theatre criticism, Gardner did not dwell on the important continuities between Brook's production and the work of the theatre practitioners of the early twentieth century: the extent

to which both articulated the intellectual crisis of modernism. Peter Brook's restless, eclectic search for new theatrical styles has always been in the service of a theatrical experience whose satisfying sense of authenticity will transcend the language of Shakespeare's plays, allowing an almost mystical communication between performance and audience, a union of past and present unmediated by institutions or the material circumstances of particular performance events:

> The Shakespearean theatre speaks simultaneously in performance to everyone, it is 'all things to all men', not in general, but at the moment when it's being played, in actual performance. It does so by reconciling a mystery, because it is simultaneously the most esoteric theatre that we know in a living language, and the most popular theatre.
>
> (Quoted in Williams 1988: 144)

These words could be echoed in numerous statements made about theatre since the early twentieth century and they would be endorsed by many theatre practitioners working today. However they elide a number of key concepts which are much harder to reconcile in material practice. The real 'mystery' at the heart of theatre is in the gap between the commercial realities of play production and the aspiration to communicate with a coherent, inclusive audience.

Every performance of a play by Shakespeare requires complicated negotiation between the demands of the play-text and the exigencies of the moment of its performance. The thought and feeling of the author continues to resonate even in historically distant contexts. At the same time, an actor's performance can reveal a semantic intonation that would not have been intelligible to the author's own public. The straightforward playing that Helen Gardner enjoyed so much in the repertory theatres of the classic age seemed to her to make genuine dialogue between these terms possible for the first time. This is the great achievement of the modernist theatre, for which Gardner credited William Poel's pioneering use of the platform stage, Gordon Craig's minimal, non-representational scene designs, and Harley Granville-Barker's work with 'virtually uncut' quarto and folio texts (Gardner 1982: 65). The governing impulse in these artistic initiatives is frankly and very boldly experimental, rejecting the lavishly overblown

style of the Victorian stage with its lumbering machinery in favour of the stripped-down immediacy of the actor reading 'the words Shakespeare had written for them to speak' (1982: 65). In the theatre of the 'classic age' as Helen Gardner conceives it, experimentation is welcome and indeed necessary. But the aim of theatrical innovation is discovery of what is in the text's expressive structure.

One way to discover what's in a Shakespeare play is to reconstruct its historical context, a course of action recommended by Brecht: 'What really matters is to play these old works historically, which means setting them in powerful contrast to our own time' (1965: 63). William Poel, Harley Granville-Barker, William Bridges Adams and Nugent Monck all worked from the premise that historical fidelity to Elizabethan staging practices would permit the essence of the play to reveal itself. The success of these Elizabethan reconstructions enabled theatre artists to discover and to work with the underlying performance structure of the Shakespearean script. Modernist productions of Shakespeare gradually began to move away from the historicist preoccupation with literal fidelity to early modern forms of theatrical representation. Directors and designers began to focus on the formal qualities of Shakespearean works – space, structure, language, and above all visual style.

These concerns were expressed in a trend towards abstraction, especially marked in Edward Gordon Craig's scenography. Though his scenic devices of flats and screens were often comically impractical – he suggested vaguely that they needed no more than 'three girls, three pairs of scissors & innumerable pieces of paper' for their realisations (quoted in Flannery 1976: 270) – his overall aim, like Brook's, was to substitute abstract mood for the specificities of historical reproduction and pictorial scenery. The use of masks and the dominance of the scenic architecture subordinated character and narrative to a more abstract evocation of Beauty. As he put it in the first issue of *The Mask*, his manifesto journal of the new theatre movement:

> Once let the meaning of this word 'Beauty' begin to be thoroughly felt once more in the theatre, and we may say that the awakening day of the theatre is near.
>
> (Quoted in Flannery 1976: 246)

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