



Linguae &

Rivista di lingue e culture moderne

2
2006

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“That question’s out of my part” Preparing and performing Shakespearean character

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From the mid-1970s through much of the 1990s, the neo-Marxist critique of the ‘essential self’ of ‘liberal humanism’, with some help from neo-Freudian theory, led to a widespread rejection of traditional character criticism (often derogatively termed ‘Bradleyan’) – even to a dissolution of the very concept of character. Shakespeare’s protagonists, no longer studied as lifelike, sovereign individuals endowed with agency, were broken down into subject-positions, vehicles of impersonal discourses, competitors in the linguistic market, wielders of politeness strategies, textual figures or bundles of semes, and the like. Approaches of this kind offered new and powerful critical strategies for historicizing dramatic characters and identifying the ideological underpinnings of their construction¹. As a result, few critics were still prepared to tackle them in mimetic terms as ‘imagined persons’, although some strands of psychoanalytical criticism, thanks to their emphasis on the limits of conscious rational agency, continued to hold their ground.

More recently, the mimetic study of Shakespearean ‘character’ has returned from banishment, much fortified and enriched by being able to build on the positive side-effects of the materialist critique. Character, it seems, has a ‘quiddity’ after all, though an extraordinarily complex, multi-dimensional one. The come-back of Shakespearean character study was epitomized by Bert O. States’s brilliant *“Hamlet” and the Concept of Character* (1992)², which successfully re-established the specificity of character without ever losing sight of its *constructed* nature as verbal artefact. Yet this timely revival was limited by a ten-

¹ To mention just a few important, differently-orientated studies: Belsey (1985), Halpern (1991), Magnusson (1999), Sinfield (1992), Siemon (2002).

² This was preceded by another significant, general study: Edward Burns, *Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage* (1990).

dency to confine the concept of character within the fictional world and to see it as encapsulated in the author's script. In such a perspective, the actor's role was seen as essentially 'ministerial'³, subservient to the task of vehicling or at best embodying a character already available, fully-fledged, in the written text – with the help of careful critical excavation.

The last six or seven years have seen a paradigm shift. Increasingly responsive to theatre history studies and performance studies, various scholars have begun to relocate 'character' in/as a nexus involving script, actor, audience and the social and material circumstances of performance. Robert Weimann (2000), who for decades has been reminding us of the fertile tension between presentation and representation, play and mimesis in early modern drama, has insisted we should make room in Shakespeare studies for the "actor's voice" alongside (and inside) the "author's pen". In pioneering articles, Peter Holland (1988) and Lois Potter (1989) had already begun to sketch out some specifically theatrical aspects and resources of character and their relevance to Shakespeare. Now a younger generation of critics has begun to document the *constitutional* role of the actor and theatrical conditions in the creation of Shakespearean character⁴. Lesley Soule Wade (2000) has brilliantly shown that much of the fascination of Rosalind in *As You Like It* is a product of the boy-actor's self-consciously ambivalent status as both theatrical entertainer or 'player' and impersonator of a fictional being. Bridget Escolme (2005), studying a number of recent Shakespeare productions, has thrown new light on how actors and audiences collaborate in the production of 'stage-figures' in which character and actor merge in a new, hybrid entity. Tiffany Stern has done some exciting excavations into the way early modern actors prepared for performance and how this may have affected the representation of *dramatis personae* in the London theatres.

It is this last topic that I would like to examine here by discussing some aspects of Stern's volume *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (2000) in relation to a book by Patrick Tucker, *Secrets of Acting Shakespeare: The Original Approach* (2002). The two books offer, respectively, a historical study and a practical-theatrical application of what is argued to have been the early modern London actors' approach to performing their roles. The books are related more than just by their focus: Tucker is Stern's uncle and was responsible for arousing her interest in Elizabethan and Jacobean actors' 'part'-learning procedures thanks to his stage experiments with a "Cue Script" method developed in the context of the Shakespeare's Globe project. Tucker documents over ten years of what he calls "presentations" of Shakespearean drama and

³ I have borrowed Michael Bristol's term. See Weimann 2000: 103.

⁴ David Wiles (1987) made an important early step in this direction in relation to Shakespeare's clowns.

relies to some extent on Stern's work to justify his claim to fidelity to the original production conditions.

Stern shows that the hectic season of London theatre companies like the Chamberlain's/King's Men had a profound impact on the way actors prepared their parts. Performing in six different plays a week, and introducing a new play every fortnight left actors with precious little time for collective rehearsal during the playing season (which occupied a large part of the year):

Though three weeks seems to have been the usual length of time for preparing a play, there is no evidence to suggest that more than the traditional single group rehearsal was held within that period, as private learning ('study'), often with a teacher, was the most important part of preparation. For superior players this teacher was sometimes the playwright; major players instructed lesser players. 'Study' seems to have involved teaching a part by imitation; it was not a creative event, nor did it encourage textual exploration and discovery, so that there is little justification for claiming that texts were substantially revised by actors in preparation. On the contrary, actors' revision tended to happen in performance itself, when the actor was free from teachers. In terms of readying a performance, group rehearsal was only actually necessary for parts of plays that could not be learnt alone – songs, sword-fights, quick changes etc. [...]. (Stern 2000: 121-2)

Most of an actor's preparation time was thus spent privately conning his individual 'part': i.e. the transcription on a separate scroll of his speeches, preceded by their cues, in a single sequence. The one surviving theatrical part from the pre-1642 London theatre – Alleyn's part of Orlando in Greene's *Orlando Furioso* – does not identify the previous speaker, provides only two or three isolated cue words, and gives only a minimum of stage directions and business. Stern also argues that

Plays often indicate that an actor has privately learnt his role, but does not know what parts his fellow actors are playing [...], or whom he is supposed to be addressing [...]. [...] Having parts with cues rather than a whole play meant that actors learnt their own fragment in isolation from the story that surrounded it. For this reason, they did not have a natural sense of the play as a whole; a fact that was reflected both in the way they performed when together, and [...] in the way they revised their lines. Authors wrote for learning of this kind, and the parts they produced contained the information players needed for solo practice. [...] The cueing system allowed players to act a play with knowledge only of their own parts, and therefore made it possible to put on productions with minimum preparation.

[...]

Individual instruction meant that the entire learning process – even the discursive process – had happened by the time the group rehearsal was called: what an actor brought to rehearsal was not a part to be worked on, but a completed performance often bolstered by outside authority. At the same time, 'instruction' had left actors little opportunity to contribute anything of their own to their parts, and I will argue

that they sometimes counteracted this by modifying their lines in performance, using extemporization and textual change as means of asserting themselves in their parts against the constraints of enforced action. (*ibid.*: 64-6; 70)

These are salutary reminders of the profound differences between acting then and acting now. I think, however, that we need to be rather cautious when bringing them to bear on the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. Some of the evidence from plays-within-plays (*ibid.*: 64-6) upon which Stern draws is difficult to evaluate since they are often comic parodies of inferior or amateur actors, and hence may represent the exception rather than the rule.⁵ We need not doubt that even polished actors occasionally fumbled cue lines and 'threw' the next speaker, but I think we need to be wary about assuming that actors in a company as professional as Shakespeare's were *often* uncertain of whom they were addressing or who would be addressing them. There is evidence, it is true, that the first, 'trial' performance was seen as a kind of public dress rehearsal and that some of these problems might have been belatedly ironed out there. But a highly experienced, tightly-knit group of company 'sharers' (shareholders) and apprentices, living elbow to elbow, would surely have seized every opportunity during the preparation phase to swap notes about the scenes they were involved in. Moreover, as Scott McMillin has demonstrated, boys playing women's roles interacted to a very large extent with the leading actors to whom they were apprenticed and by whom they had been individually instructed⁶. Altogether, then, probably over ninety percent of the lines were spoken by leading adult and boy actors who had various ways of filling out the picture of what was going to happen onstage⁷. What I am suggesting then, is that while the actors may have had a relatively monadic sense of their own character's 'character', they were nevertheless in a position to be reasonably aware of how their part fitted into the script as a whole, even if they did not (normally or necessarily) have access to a full script. They did, in any case, have easy access to what was called the 'plot', since this would have been pegged up in the tiring house before the performance⁸: from this they

⁵ Leah Marcus in fact describes some of these as "mocking references to *marginal* actors" (my italics) and warns that: "actual plays must be used with caution as evidence of playhouse practice" (Marcus 1996: 158; 159),

⁶ "More than half of Desdemona's cue lines are given her by one character, Othello. More than half of the cue lines she gives are answered by one character, Othello. More than half of her speeches can be rehearsed with one actor, the actor playing Othello, and probably that is how they were rehearsed. The master actor probably rehearsed the boy-actor one-on-one, teaching the boy how to respond, teaching him enunciation, gesture, and movement" (McMillin 2005: 234-5).

⁷ In *Othello*, for instance, Othello, Iago, and Desdemona alone speak over two-thirds of all the lines (Grote 2002: 134).

⁸ A plot in this sense was a playhouse document containing a "schematic analysis of

could find out/remind themselves which other characters they would be interacting with, and a little bit about stage business, positions, etc. So by the time of the première it seems likely that they would have resolved most elementary doubts of this kind. And after all, Shakespeare himself was around every day to dispel these, and the book-keeper/prompter could surely have been persuaded to allow at least the sharers an occasional glimpse at the full script. Moreover, the actors with shares in the company must have obtained a rough idea of whom they were going to interact with from the author's initial reading of the play to them as well as from their collective discussion about casting.⁹

There probably remains more research to be done into how important it was for an actor in Shakespeare's company to be 'perfect' in his utterance of cue-words in actual performance. Stern, comparing the shortened Folio version of *Hamlet* with the second quarto (1604), has usefully drawn attention to how an over-long play was probably abridged for performance:

The revisions that are made to the parts are, in most cases, cuts of passages that occur in the middle of speeches. This makes cue-script sense: revise a speech in its centre and the cues are not affected; moreover, for cuts of this kind, the revision could be marked on the scroll itself, saving the necessity of writing out a new part. (*ibid.*: 107)

Clearly this kind of abridgement procedure would economize time and effort for all involved and would reduce the risk of mishaps if for some reason the actors had previously learnt a version that was too long for performance. A comparison of abridgement in the Folio *Hamlet* with cutting in the short, 'bad', quarto (Q1, 1603), however, suggests a more complex picture. While the copy for the Folio *may* have preserved a few traces of actual performance in the shape of actors' interpolations, Q1 carries innumerable traces of actors' performance variants: substitutions, inversions, paraphrases, factual errors, and a plethora of phatic and emphatic interpolations or modifications¹⁰. Moreover, compared with F, a large number of cue lines have been cut, inverted or paraphrased, apparently without 'throwing' the next speaker. What

the entries and exits of the characters with addition of the actors who filled the various roles and of the properties required" (Greg 1923: 2).

⁹ According to Marcus (whom Stern does not cite) "successful Elizabethan actors had to have prodigious and highly trained memories, combined with great flexibility. Given the London deathrate and the high incidence of disease, they were well advised to "know" whole plays—not only a single part—but neither they nor Shakespeare appeared to have worried about whether they were letter perfect" (Marcus 1996: 160).

¹⁰ There is now a broad consensus that Q1 *Hamlet* is a post-performance text rather than an earlier author-draft of Q2.

this seems to suggest, then, is that Shakespeare's sharers, who must have been fast on their feet and past-masters at team-work, had evolved modes of stage communication (verbal and non-verbal) that enabled them to recognize when to deliver their lines even in the absence of specific cue words. This seems to have gone hand in hand with the development of considerable improvisational skills, and not just among the clowns¹¹. If this is the case, then the potentially 'monadic' approach to character resulting from actors' studying how to 'passionate' their parts in relative isolation would probably have been offset by an ongoing openness and responsiveness towards the behaviour of the other actors. This would contribute to reinforcing the *dynamic* dimension of the character's fictional identity, what we might call its 'discourse biography' – the history of its pragmatic behaviour in verbal interactions that accrues to the 'character' of a *dramatis persona*.

Tucker's experiments, which inspired and were inspired by Stern's work, are a rather extreme application of the part-based actors' preparation method. They mount a frontal attack on Stanislavskian and director-centred modes of preparation, in a successful attempt to free the creative (and nervous) energies of actors during the performance itself.

We started by just sending the actors their Cue Scripts [i.e. a transcription of their lines interpolated with the cue words of the preceding speaker] and telling them on the day where they came from and went to. It soon became apparent that the actors needed to tell each other certain things. For example, King Lear wanted someone to hand him the map when he stuck his hand out, so we invented a time when the actors could do this and named it Burbadge time. [...] This Burbadge lasts between one and one and a half hours. (Tucker 2002: 38)

Burbadge time is just sufficient, say, to organize entrances and exits and sort out stage business like that just mentioned, but is in no way a *rehearsal* as such. The only guidance given by Tucker himself to actors is what he calls "verse nursing":

Each actor comes to me for a one-on-one verse session [...] The actors go over all their lines with only their cues being given to them, and they are never told how to act, and certainly not given any attitudes of emotions, but are simply challenged with "Have you found this clue?" and – crucially – "What are you going to do about it?" A verse nurse session has become the time when the actor is confronted with the clues given in the rest of this book, and asked to wonder why, at this particular time, his character changes from poetry to prose, or from complex to simple language, and, the

¹¹ The first quartos of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), *Henry V* (1600), and *Hamlet* (1603) all seem to be post-performance texts and show signs of improvisation in the roles of leading sharers – for instance, in roles like Romeo, Mercutio, Fluellen, and Hamlet himself.

glory of it all, why they are changing from *you* to *thee*. It is in these sessions that the actors find their characters take hold, and get the framework their acting will fit into.

This process is one of actor empowerment [...]. (*ibid.*: 39)

By keeping Burbadge time down to between one and one and a half hours Tucker puts his actors in a more extreme predicament than Burbadge and his busy colleagues would probably have experienced in the original company. The (sought-after) result is that Tucker's actors have full responsibility for creating their character from the clues contained in their monadic strip of text, and have no idea before the first performance how the other actors will have interpreted or will play their characters, or indeed, often, who the other characters they will be interacting with *are*. For one actress, this meant jettisoning

everything I had previously clung on to as necessary for creating a character: building a history; finding physical characteristics; discussing relationships with other characters; analyzing what other characters say about you. (*ibid.*: 190)

This was replaced by the excitement of discovery on stage, in the heat of performance. As another actress reported:

Revelations in performance are frequently spectacular. To me the greatest are when the sheer performance begins to throw you yourself into the emotions of the character. (*ibid.*: 191)

A male actor stressed how

The personal, spontaneous reactions of the actor on stage become entwined with the reactions of the character to each moment in the play, so the audience see "real" surprise, confusion, or joy. The audience share these moments and in the unravelling of the story, which creates a wonderful relationship between actors and audience. (*ibid.*: 192)

Can this tell us something about the nature of early modern performance and characterization? It may help us to recapture a sense of the possible excitement or elation accompanying the moment of discovery as actors plunged relatively unprepared into the onstage interactions on the first afternoon. It may help us to imagine a kind of 'playing-to-the-moment' in which actors were genuinely informed, surprised, or discomfited by the speeches of their fellow-actors and had suddenly to 'pronounce' (i.e. enunciate with correct stress and intonation) their own speeches in a way they may not actually have prepared for. On the other hand it may not. We may wonder whether early modern professionals had the same existential priorities as these contemporary English actors – spontaneity, authenticity, thrills – or whether they would

not be more concerned with providing the audience with well-pronounced poetry or prose matched by suitably expressive rhetorical ‘action’ (i.e. gestures, facial expression, movements).¹² In other words, whether, rather than seeking theatrical excitement, they would not have been more concerned with identifying and effectively presenting the ‘passions’ supposedly encoded in their own parts, regardless of how the other actors actually presented theirs. It is hard to know, perhaps impossible. We certainly should not underestimate the way fictional speech acts would be recontextualized, enriched, or even radically modified by being uttered in the temporal and material conditions of the early modern stage, by actors with well-known, socially-connoted stage *personae* and before audiences with complex and conflicting socio-cultural affiliations. Nor, as I suggested above, should we undervalue the evidence of a degree of collaborative improvisation even in serious drama. This, however, is rather different from what Tucker’s actors report about their relationship to their characters. There seems to be an underlying ambiguity in the assumption that, thanks to being ‘blinkerer’ (my term, not Tucker’s) and having to adjust their responses on the instant to the performance of their interlocutors, their ‘real’ emotions somehow come to be identified with those of their characters. We might perhaps identify a set of ‘interactive emotions’ that could run parallel on the planes of character and actor: surprise, sudden amusement, perplexity, embarrassment, etc. – in other words, the kind of emotions frequently aroused by the potential *unexpectedness* of what your interlocutor says or does to you. But can we imagine actors authentically feeling *loathing*, *hatred*, or *lust* for the right target¹³? And if they did, where might the emotion *end*? In seriously wounding a colleague in a stage sword-fight? In real murders or passionate embracings behind the scenes? And how would the *audience* perceive even what I’ve called the actors’ spontaneous ‘interaction emotions’? Would they ascribe them to the fictional persons as ‘character-effects’ that go to make up their ‘discourse biography’? Or would they perceive them, more banally, as little more than sparks given off by monadic dodgem-cars bumping against each other without any real communication? Faced with this kind of blinkered performance, there is, after all, a danger that spectators might step out of *their* role

¹² On “pronunciation” and “action” see Stern (2000: 72-76).

¹³ The ambiguity will be further highlighted if we think what this might mean in terms of illocutionary acts. Keir Elam (1980: 170) points out that it is “the audience’s task to interpret the physical ‘sayings’[of the actors] on stage as higher-order speech events in the dramatic world”. What Tucker’s actors seem to be doing is taking responsibility for fictional speech acts and uptakes as if they were their own. One could imagine some hilarious offstage scenarios if this were carried to its logical conclusion – offstage recriminations like “How dare you call me a lily-livered boy!” or “But you just said you’d kill me with much cherishing!”.

in the fictional make-believe game and become detached observers watching with wry amusement the plight of actor X or actress Y in a sort of reality show. Alternatively spectators might watch them with a warmer kind of personal curiosity – like when we watch our children performing in school plays.

Dynamic realities like theatre are always hard to rationalise about, not least because we can't simultaneously participate and rationalise *during* performance. What kind of awareness of unity or coherence of character, for instance, do we have during performance, if any? These seem, on the other hand, to be a major preoccupation when we rationalise from reading. Perhaps what we can do, at this chilly distance, is become more aware that the kind of communication we observe and participate in at the theatre is highly stratified. Leaving aside the upper layers added by disguise and play-acting *within* the fiction, we can distinguish between three basic levels: (a) the fictional communication between characters (mimesis); (b) the real *sui generis* communication between the actors as stage-figures – i.e. actors-playing-characters (professional work and skill); (c) the stage-figure's communication with the audience (playing, entertainment). The last two actors quoted above seem to be reporting about the “entwining” of (b) with (a), and the impact of this on (c). But what is being entwined exactly? While it makes sense to talk of characters' emotions as being real *within* the fiction, and to talk of actors making-believe (with the collaboration of a make-believing audience) that they possess or are possessed by these emotions, to identify these emotions with those produced by the surprises, perplexities, embarrassments and discoveries of blinkered stage performance seems to be stretching a point. It would perhaps be better to see the Cue Script method as a mode of energizing: the nervous energy (not to mention adrenalin) released by the need for lightning reactions to both the fictional communication (a) and the stage communication (b) is, in the pact of make-believe implicitly stipulated between actors and audience, ‘mapped onto’ or ‘read as’ the emotional vitality of the fictional person. In this view, for instance, Lady Macbeth's suspicions that Macbeth may not have the courage to seize the crown would be energized or vitalized by the fact that the actress really doesn't quite know how the Macbeth actor will respond to her incitements as she utters them – though it's hard to imagine any trained actress (or actor) possessing this kind of virginity with regard to Shakespeare's major characters.

It is significant that most of the complete plays presented by the Original Shakespeare Company have been comedies. Tucker's and the actors' accounts constantly refer to the intense hilarity aroused in both actors and audience by the surprises and discoveries that occur onstage during a blinkered performance. Here, for instance, is what Tucker writes about the end of *Cymbeline*:

that finale was about the best we have ever done. The audience rolled with laughter at the realizations going on onstage, and when the Soothsayer rattled off his final speech, it brought the house down [...] It was a tremendous end to a great show, with the packed house going off having delighted in such entertainment, and a lot of actors having had no idea they were going to be in a play with such varied moments, *Jupiter* flying in and all. (*ibid.*: 165-6)

There may be a message here for those interested in the conditions of early modern performances. What Tucker's approach seems to have done is foregrounded those *other* "purposes of playing" that the humanistically-trained Hamlet looked down on, but which, as Robert Weimann has taught us, were so typical a part of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatrical experience. Performance as play, skill, extemporizing, risk-taking, sport, when the mimetic actor yields to the performative player, when the fictional story surrenders to ludic entertainment. Tucker rather ruefully concludes the previous passage:

One person not enjoying the proceedings was the Globe's artistic director, who felt that it was too trivial an interpretation, and our subsequent application to play our first tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, on the Globe stage the next year was turned down. (*ibid.*: 166)

It is a matter of priorities: 'interpretation' of the sacred *text* or 'celebration' of a communal ritual of release? Tucker's Cue Script method may be a rather radical version of early modern preparation techniques, but it does offer a useful analogue of the kind of dialectic between "writer's pen" and "actor's voice" that so energized the London theatre in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

While we may not want to go along with all the assumptions and findings of the two authors, we must be grateful for their contribution to enriching the ongoing discussion into the nature of Shakespearean character and dramatic-theatrical character in general. We may look forward to further development of these topics in Tiffany Stern's forthcoming book, in collaboration with Simon Palfrey, *Shakespeare in Parts*, due out in 2007 with Oxford University Press.

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