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Acting Restoration Shakespeare

The term ‘classical theatre’, often reduced to Shakespeare, denotes a niche segment of the theatrical profession today. We speak of leading classical actors like Harriet Walter and Kenneth Branagh, visionary classical directors like Katie Mitchell and Thomas Ostermeier, and prestigious classical theatre companies like the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon and Shakespeare’s Globe in London. Drama students the world over worry about their classical audition monologue. A defining element of classical drama is that it feels different from modern or contemporary drama in practically every way: narrative, structure, characterization, language, ideology, and the demands it makes upon actors and directors. Today, working in classical theatre is rhetorically constructed as the worthy but poorly recompensed alternative to the tarnished but lucrative experience of appearing in soap operas or action movies. Being a Shakespearean remains a mark of esteem and prestige in the entertainment industry, a last holdout of Bardolatry’s cultural capital. If you want money, land a role in a sitcom. If you want respect, play Cleopatra. A piteous predicament, as Juliet’s Nurse would say.

But it’s our predicament. It never arose in the Restoration, when acting and staging Shakespeare were not so very different from acting and staging any other type of play. It bears recalling

that every dramatic work performed in the Restoration – old, new, or adapted – was written within a fairly narrow chronological span. Fewer than fifty years separate Shakespeare's last play written for the King's Men from Davenant's first production for the Duke's Company. In the 1660s, Shakespeare's plays were old enough to feel behind the times – hence, they needed revising – but not so old as to have petrified into unalterable classics or forgettable relics. True, Dryden lauded Shakespeare as one of the 'Gyant Race, before the Flood'.¹ But the destructive flood waters of the Interregnum had at last receded. Now was the moment to restore Shakespeare to the London stage, which meant adapting his plays to become good vehicles for modern actors and receptive to interpolated music and intermedia spectacle.

In adapting Shakespeare's plays to align with Restoration theatrical sensibilities, Davenant showed that he was not fixated on reviving an 'authentic' Shakespeare. Indeed, the normative discourse of Shakespearean authenticity that has characterized a fair amount of theatre scholarship and theatre practice over the past century did not exist in the Restoration. For the founder of the Duke's Company, the question was not how to return to Shakespeare but how to *recycle* Shakespeare so that (as we discussed in the previous chapter, on repertoire) his plays could channel the imagination and energy of the Restoration stage. In his 1663 poem addressed to Charles II, Davenant made clear his ambition to 'reform the publick Mirrour' – his preferred image for the stage – so that the 'Dead' may teach 'their living Race'.² Making good on that vow, Davenant preserved Shakespeare for posterity by making Shakespeare his contemporary, thus establishing a precedent whose artistic vitality and timeliness have never waned.

In a corresponding way, Davenant seems to have felt no driving obsession to recreate how actors performed Shakespeare's roles in Shakespeare's time, assuming (which we do not) that such specific knowledge survived into the 1660s and beyond. Cherished anecdotes about Davenant teaching Betterton to act Hamlet in the same way that Shakespeare

taught actors in the King's Men are less empirical realities than meditations on the Restoration theatre's historiographical fragility, an argument we elaborate later in this chapter. After all, how could Davenant's new scenes in *Macbeth*, new characters in *The Tempest* and new plot in *The Law Against Lovers* recuperate a performance precedent? The material was new, so by definition there was no precedent.

If acting Shakespeare had been the secret of success for a Restoration theatre company, then surely Killigrew would have produced more of the many Shakespeare plays for which his company held the performance rights. But the very idea of a 'Shakespearean' actor would have made little sense to performers like Thomas Betterton and Mary Saunderson or to spectators like Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys. There were good plays, there were bad plays. There was good acting, there was bad acting. That Shakespeare eventually became the standard by which great acting was judged speaks to the exceptionality of Shakespeare the dramatist as articulated and reinforced by the cultural nationalism of Bardolatry that David Garrick advanced in the second half of the eighteenth century. But for a Restoration actor, performing Shakespeare was not something exceptional. And so, in this chapter we contend that Davenant, instead of being guided by a particular vision for acting Shakespeare, was guided by a grand holistic vision for the theatre that could be realized in part by acting Shakespeare.

The acting company

Restoration acting cannot be usefully discussed in the abstract, because it was mostly undertaken by a small, precise, and knowable group: the successive members of the Duke's Company and the King's Company. In the late autumn of 1660, the new patentees dissolved their short-lived united company and set about forming their own separate companies. Davenant (as discussed in Chapter 2) gravitated toward the cohort of younger and less experienced male actors who had

been performing under John Rhodes's management at the Cockpit in Drury Lane. On 5 November 1660, he formally engaged his new recruits: Thomas Betterton, Thomas Sheppey, Robert Nokes, James Nokes, Thomas Lovell, John Mosley, Cave Underhill, Robert Turner and Thomas Lilleston. Henry Harris, although not part of Rhodes's company, was named in the contract as both actor and painter. The agreement stipulated that these men – who became sharers in the new company – would perform 'all manner of tragedies, comedies and plays' in any theatre in the Cities of London and Westminster 'until the said Sir William Davenant shall provide a new theatre with scenes'. While Davenant prepared his scenic theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields, his newly assembled company took up residence in the old Salisbury Court Theatre and began acting there no later than 29 January 1661, when Pepys saw a performance of John Fletcher and William Rowley's *The Maid in the Mill*.³

But the Duke's Company was lacking something: women. Through his involvement with court masques in the 1630s and early 1640s – productions in which female royalty, courtiers, and singers took the stage – Davenant first learned how to create performances that included women. Queen Henrietta Maria, adorned in a Caroline version of Amazonian dress, played the heroine in *Salmacida Spolia* (1640), a character who wondrously appears descending from heaven in a stage machine designed by Inigo Jones.⁴ In the dedicatory letter addressed to the Duke of York in the 1673 folio edition of Davenant's works, Mary Davenant respectfully notes (as we observed in Chapter 1) that the late queen consort 'often smil'd upon his Endeavours'.⁵ In the 1656 private staging of *The Siege of Rhodes* at Rutland House, Catherine Coleman sang the role of Ianthe and a still unidentified woman appeared as Roxalana. Thus, when the patent companies established themselves in 1660, Davenant enjoyed the advantage of being the only person in the London theatre world with significant experience of collaborating with women and creating dramatic characters expressly for them. This expertise markedly influenced his Shakespeare adaptations, which are notable for

their expanded opportunities for female performers, including new scenes for Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth and new female roles in both *The Tempest* (Milcha, Dorinda, and the breeches role Hippolito) and *The Law Against Lovers* (Viola, younger sister to Beatrice). Among Davenant's first group of actresses, Mary Saunderson played Lady Macbeth, Jane Long acted Lady Macduff and in all likelihood Hippolito, while Mary ('Moll') Davis as Viola sang 'Wake all ye dead!' and danced a lively saraband with Benedick, Balthazar, and Beatrice to the percussive rhythm of castanets.⁶ The invented role of Viola added little to the hybrid plot of *The Law Against Lovers* – but added a great deal to the performance.

The presence of women on the Restoration stage was neither guaranteed nor universally welcome. Women are not mentioned in the initial royal warrant of 21 August 1660. No evidence suggests that the insurgent companies at the Red Bull, Salisbury Court and the Cockpit in Drury Lane included actresses in the spring and summer of 1660. The young actor Edward Kynaston, praised by Pepys as 'the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life', successfully reprised the Elizabethan convention of boy actors by playing female roles at the Cockpit in the summer of 1660.⁷ Indeed, the first reference to a female performer in the English Restoration theatre is a complaint from the older men in the King's Company – who all started as boy actors before the Civil War – that Killigrew had 'obliged' them to 'act with women'.⁸

Davenant, however, was always committed to including women in his company, and in 1664 mounted a novel production of *The Parson's Wedding* with an all-female cast, no doubt seeking to exploit the sexual charms of the actresses. His initial terms of agreement with the male actors granted him ten out of fifteen shares in the Duke's Company in recognition of the costs he would incur for looking after and training all the 'Women that are to performe or represent Womens parts'.⁹ William and Mary Davenant welcomed four of the new actresses – Hester Davenport, Mary Saunderson, Mary Davis and Jane Long – into their home, built adjacent to

the new theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields. The female recruits lacked not just experience, but role models: there were no legendary predecessors to learn from because they themselves were the first generation. No one understood this unusual circumstance better than Davenant, who took it upon himself to instruct the women and, effectively, to become their guardian, in a female version of the traditional male apprentice system. The fact that Mary Saunderson, one of the Duke's Company's first female actors, married Thomas Betterton, one of the Duke's Company's first male actors, speaks to the household sensibility that Davenant fostered, in which unity triumphed over division.

Davenant's close custody of his actresses may now seem paternalistic, but his methods were unquestionably successful. Whereas Killigrew soon quarrelled with his senior actors, Davenant inspired confidence and loyalty in the Duke's Company's actors. A good number of Davenant's first cohort of male actors were tradesmen or shopkeepers. Having come of age as apprentices, they understood the need for an acknowledged 'master' craftsman to train the rising generation. They would have brought to the theatre the bonds of solidarity and fraternity inculcated in them by London's venerable livery companies. Granted, some turnover in actors was a fact of life in the Restoration theatre, especially when younger women married or became mistresses to aristocrats or even to a monarch.¹⁰ But because Davenant's company was well-managed, it enjoyed greater stability in personnel than did Killigrew's company.

The long-term value of stability in the acting ensemble cannot be underestimated, because the Restoration theatre, for all its visual display and machine marvels, was essentially an actor's theatre. Every new play performed by the Duke's Company – whether Davenant's semi-operatic version of *Macbeth* (1664), George Etherege's comedy *Love in a Tub* (1664), or the Earl of Orrery's tragedy *Mustapha* (1665) – was written or adapted with particular actors in mind. Indeed, the same quartet of leading actors appeared in all three productions:

Thomas Betterton (Macbeth, Lord Beaufort, Solyman the Magnificent), Mary Saunderson (Lady Macbeth, Graciana, Roxalana), Henry Harris (Macduff, Sir Frederick Frolic, Mustapha), and Jane Long (Lady Macduff, Widow Rich, Zarma). Davenant knew that scripts had to accommodate actors, not the other way around. Shakespeare had known the same, because his plays had also been written with specific performers in mind. As a theatrical vehicle, a Restoration play – like a pre-1642 play – was a function of who would perform it. Such bespoke dramaturgy is especially apparent with actresses. Davenant created the role of Beatrice's younger sister Viola in *The Law Against Lovers* so that Mary Davis could play to her strengths: singing and dancing. According to Pepys, Davis was so talented that her presence in the Duke's Company made up for the loss of Hester Davenport, whose departure risked 'spoil[ing] the house'.¹¹

A few years later, in 1664, Davenant needed a new play with a pair of contrasting female roles to compete with the success of Sir Robert Howard and John Dryden's *The Indian Queen*, a heroic tragedy embellished with music, dance and supernatural spirits. (The King's Company had produced *The Indian Queen* to compete directly with the Duke's Company's lavish and successful production of *Henry VIII*.) The result was his adaptation of *Macbeth*, which featured a greatly enhanced role for Lady Macduff, who becomes not just the moral counterpoint to Lady Macbeth but an eloquent dramatic heroine in her own right. The breeches role of Hippolito in Davenant and Dryden's version of *The Tempest* – a character whose scenes are replete with sexual innuendo – was doubtless invented as yet another opportunity to showcase the erotic appeal of women on the Restoration stage, as was Davenant's decision to cast a woman as Ariel. It cannot be emphasized enough that when Davenant adapted Shakespeare he did so with his own actors in mind – their strengths, their limitations, their allure, their temperament – a collaborative awareness that led him to expand some roles, eliminate others, and invent new ones altogether. He knew – as Shakespeare before him

knew – how to create productions that showcased his company's actors.

Davenant did not live to see the full results of his artistic leadership, one of which was the enduring popularity of star performers. Some of the greatest Restoration actors – Thomas Betterton, Anne Bracegirdle, Elizabeth Barry – held the stage for decades, regularly appearing several times each week. Retaining favourite actors was important for a company's success because their appeal was a major reason why audiences returned to the theatre, often watching multiple performances of the same play. Pepys, who saw Davenant's *Macbeth* at least four times in eleven months, always noted with disappointment when Betterton did not perform: 'I was vexed to see Young (who is but a bad actor at best) act *Macbeth* in the room of Baterton [*sic*], who poor man is sick!'¹² Pepys's regret that Betterton did not play *Macbeth* captures something of the aura that encircled Restoration theatrical stars, who became identified with the roles they acted.¹³

Whether low comedian or tragedy queen, a Restoration actor's claim to a role was ironclad. Once cast in a part, an actor would normally continue to play it in subsequent revivals. In a repertory system, where any of twenty or thirty plays might be performed on short notice, the link between actor and role (as we have previously noted) was less a tribute to individual performers than a practical necessity.¹⁴ In Betterton's last full theatrical season, he was still performing Shakespeare's great tragic heroes: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Lear*. The role of *Hamlet* belonged especially to Betterton throughout his long career, as noted in the preceding chapter. That his ageing figure and weakened form were eventually incongruous with the youthful Prince of Denmark was poignantly apparent to every spectator. That Betterton's physique was less than heroic – 'short thick neck', 'stooped in the shoulders', 'corpulent body', 'thick legs with large feet', as detailed in Anthony Aston's unsparing head-to-toe inventory – had always been apparent.¹⁵ Yet none of these incongruities mattered when compared to the unshakeable bond between the greatest actor

and his greatest part. Indeed, the main reason we have multiple eyewitness accounts of Betterton as Hamlet – beginning with Pepys the spectator writing in his diary in 1668 and ending with Richard Steele the critic writing pseudonymously as ‘Mr Greenhat’ in *The Tatler* in 1709 – is that Betterton owned the role for decades. Nor was the link between actor and role limited to a handful of company members. Cave Underhill played the First Gravedigger in *Hamlet* for the Duke’s Company in 1661 and then for decades afterward, reprising the comic role for his benefit at Drury Lane in 1709.

The difficulty of performing so many different roles on short notice – and having to perform on 200 days during a season that ran from October to June – was reduced by the highly efficient custom of actors specializing in a ‘line of business’: heroine, hero, villain, lover, fop, ingénue, or clown. ‘[E]very significant actor in the Restoration,’ as Peter Holland has observed, ‘had some clearly defined type of role in comedy and another in tragedy at each stage of his [or her] career’.¹⁶ Thus, Betterton played Hamlet and Falstaff in the same season, an unlikely scenario for an actor today. Far from restricting opportunities, lines of business ensured that certain kinds of roles would always be available to certain kinds of actors. When Davenant and Dryden adapted *The Tempest*, they knew from the outset that Betterton was destined to play Prospero – the ruler, the protagonist – while Henry Harris was well-suited for Ferdinand – a lover who could sing John Banister’s charming ‘Echo Song’. Jane Long, skilled in breeches roles, would have been the logical choice for Hippolito, a sexually titillating role that would never have been played by the stately Mary Saunderson. In this way, Restoration actors built up a repertoire of physical behaviours, emotional comportment, and vocal expressions that matched the types of characters they regularly played. Thus, when learning a new part, Restoration actors did not start from scratch; rather, they drew upon their own embodied repertoire to create a new character. In turn, accumulated expertise in character types reduced a company’s need for lengthy rehearsals. A Restoration actor – just like their

Elizabethan and Jacobean predecessors – could easily play four different roles over six days, with not much notice as to which play was going to be performed and when.

Diversity in the Restoration theatrical repertoire – tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, history, dramattick opera – reminds us that the real fault line in productions was *genre*, not playwright and not whether a play was old, new, or adapted. For actors, it didn't much matter if a tragedy was written by Shakespeare, Davenant, or the Earl of Orrery. What mattered was knowing that the play was a tragedy and not a comedy. Thus, for Betterton, playing the title role in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and Solyman the Magnificent in Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* (Parts 1 and 2) and Orrery's sequel *Mustapha* were all of a piece: each character was a monarch, each play a tragedy, each production rich in music and lavish in scenery and costume. Genre itself determined how an actor approached the script and performed a character, drawing on the kinetic and expressive conventions of a particular line of business. This consistent pattern of theatrical practice resists any easy assumption that acting Shakespeare in the Restoration was a distinctive or exceptional undertaking.

Training

The master-apprentice system of training boy actors – who, in time, became adult actors – worked well for the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. All instruction was conducted in-house and over a sufficiently long period to ensure a reliable supply of future talent.¹⁷ Yet what worked before the Civil War would not work after the Restoration. As Davenant surely understood, resuming old ways of actor training was not viable. Boys were no longer needed. Women, who were needed, could not legally become apprentices. And yet the women in the Duke's Company had to be instructed by someone because they had no experience whatsoever. Appointing stage veterans to train the beginners was no easy task, because almost all the

experienced actors – that is, the middle-aged men who had begun their careers as squeaking boys – belonged to the King's Company. Davenant's male actors had little experience: for the most part, just several months of performances under John Rhodes at the Cockpit.¹⁸ Neither company could afford to spend years grooming the next generation of performers. Sooner rather than later, Davenant and Killigrew needed performers they could confidently put on the stage. There were princes and princesses to act.

Over time, senior members in both companies would be expected to train and mentor novices. In the final decade of his career, Betterton was paid the handsome sum of fifty pounds per annum – in addition to his earnings as actor and manager – for teaching younger members of the company. Mary Saunderson is particularly remembered for successfully training the young Anne Bracegirdle. Many newcomers eventually learned the art of acting by playing first in Dublin or the English provinces, with the most talented being hired by the London theatres. But all that lay in the future. In 1660, no such career paths existed. Yet theatres were open for business, and their managers needed actors.

Killigrew, who had no experience in supervising actors, seems to have rushed to open the doors of his theatre on Vere Street, putting women on the stage before they were ready to perform in public. In January 1661, Pepys complained that the King's Company's production of Middleton's *The Widow* was 'wronged by the womens [*sic*] being much to seek in their parts', meaning that their performances left much to be desired.¹⁹ By contrast, Davenant seems to have been as meticulous in actor training as he was in every other aspect of theatre management. The Duke's Company waited, perhaps for months, before it started performing at Salisbury Court, its initial home while Lisle's Tennis Court in Lincoln's Inn Fields was turned into a theatre. Logic alone suggests that Davenant used this interval to prepare his less experienced company. His decision to have several actresses lodge in his home – a paternal act recalling the inclusion of boy apprentices in a master's

household – made sense from a practical standpoint. By eroding the boundary between private and professional life for his female actors, Davenant was better able to instruct them in the art of playing, helping them to ‘improve themselves daily’.²⁰

Evidence suggests that early on Davenant worried about not having a sufficient number of actors. In August 1662 a warrant was issued compelling the actor John Richards, who had accepted an engagement with a Dublin theatre, to ‘return at once’ to the Duke’s Company in London. The order’s legal basis was Richards’ position as a servant to the Duke of York; but the reason for demanding his return was that Davenant needed him in the company (even though Richards played mostly minor parts) and was anxious about further defections.²¹ Indeed, both patentees recognized a longer-term need to develop future talent. Their solution was to create an acting school that was allied to the patent companies but also sufficiently distanced from them. This new establishment for teaching young actors was called a nursery: a place set apart where ‘infant’ actors could be ‘nursed’ until they were ready to join the professional companies.

The history and practice of Restoration nurseries is sketchy, but a rough outline emerges in the surviving documentation. In 1663, Davenant and Killigrew cheated their rival George Jolly out of his theatrical patent – given to him separately in December 1660 by Charles II, who had enjoyed Jolly’s performances at the Frankfurt Fair in 1655 – and then used the appropriated patent to establish the first Nursery.²² By the following spring, they had persuaded the Attorney General to grant them a license:

to erect and make a theatre, and to gather together boyes and girls and others, to bee instructed in the nature of a Nursery, for the trayneing upp of persons to act playes, to bee from time to time approved by the said Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant. . . . [and to] remove the said boyes and girls and other actors soe to bee there instructed, for the supply of each of their said companies. . . .²³

From the outset, the Nursery was intended to be a public theatre (though of lower status) whose sole purpose was to supply the patent companies with trained actors. In a final move toward consolidating the patent duopoly, the license further stipulated that Jolly's anomalous patent was to cease. Eventually, the aggrieved George Jolly settled for being paid to run the Nursery on the patentees' behalf.

In the summer of 1664, not long after the Attorney General issued his license, Killigrew told Pepys that he intended to set up a Nursery in Moorfields where plays and operas would be performed, the latter with singers recruited from Italy.²⁴ Nothing came of Killigrew's bold plans. But we know from a reprinting of James Shirley's *The Constant Maid* that a Nursery operated in Hatton Garden no later than early 1667.²⁵ It might have lasted there only a few years, because in the spring of 1669 Elizabeth Pepys told her husband that she attended a performance at the 'New Nursery', relocated to Killigrew's original theatre in Vere Street.²⁶ In 1671, the widowed Mary Davenant moved the Nursery to the Barbican over the objections of the local residents in the parish of St. Giles-without-Cripplegate.²⁷ The Barbican nursery lasted at least until the late 1670s, when Dryden satirized it in his *MacFlecknoe*:

. . . a Nursery erects its head,
Where Queens are form'd, and future heroes bred;
Where unfledg'd actors learn to laugh and cry,
Where infant punks their tender voices try,
And little *Maximins* the gods defy.²⁸

Dryden's mockery of juvenile actors failing to impersonate great dramatic characters was anticipated by Samuel Pepys, who on his first visit to the Nursery in Hatton Garden in 1668 praised the music and the theatre itself for being 'better than we looked for', but lamented that the acting in Thomas Kyd's tragedy *Jeronimo is Mad Again* was 'as bad as could [be]'. Indeed, he and other audience members openly '[made] sport

at the folly of their Acting' during the performance. Upon more charitable reflection, Pepys decided that the Nursery was worth visiting, if only to witness 'the different growth of people's abilities by practice'.²⁹ He returned the next day, curious to discover whether the novice actors 'did a comedy better then [*sic*] a Trajedy [*sic*]'. He discovered that 'they do it both alike, in the meanest manner'.³⁰ The comedian Joseph Haines, one of the few well-known Restoration actors who began their career at the Nursery in Hatton Garden, delivered part of the prologue to the King's Company's production of Thomas Duffett's *The Mock-Tempest* (1674), a satire of the Dorset Garden production (which we discuss in Chapter 6).

The nursery system of actor training seems to have died out by the early 1680s, which stands to reason. In 1682 the companies merged to form the United Company, thus consolidating all theatrical activity under a single management. Colley Cibber recalled that when he joined the United Company in 1690, 'young persons desirous to be actors' were required to serve a probation of six to twelve months during which they received no salary.³¹ With more than two decades of professional experience behind them, the company's senior members were well-equipped to make actor training a primarily internal matter.

Rehearsal

The chequered history of actor training in the Restoration was separate from the instructions given to actors in rehearsal.³² After the company's manager selected a new play to perform, the manuscript was read aloud to the entire company by the author or adapter. Roles were then assigned to the acting ensemble, usually based on seniority and customary lines of business. The company's prompter then prepared the 'book': the annotated full script, detailing entrances and exits, scene changes, music and sound cues, and directions for any special effects. Each actor received his or her 'part' – cues and lines for

their character, written on a roll of paper – but not the full script.³³ (The same practice had been followed in the pre-Civil War theatres.) Because most Restoration plays were performed before they were printed, Davenant's actors did not have access to the full text of any new or adapted play. In the 1660s, the lag time between performance and publication was often years. Pepys saw Davenant's *Macbeth* in 1664 but the adaptation was not printed until 1674, likely in response to a quarto version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* printed a year earlier that falsely advertised itself as 'Acted at the Duke's Theatre'.³⁴

When it came to plays by Shakespeare, members of the Duke's Company could in theory get a sense of the full play by reading it in the bulky and expensive folio text or (where applicable) the smaller and less expensive quarto text. But in practice such return to the textual source was unlikely, given that Betterton himself seems not to have owned a single Shakespeare play text until 1709 – a year before his death – when he acquired a copy of Nicholas Rowe's six-volume edition of the plays.³⁵ As Barbara Murray has argued, in the 1660s it was not so easy for anyone – reader, actor, playgoer – to acquire direct knowledge of Shakespeare's dramatic corpus.³⁶ Moreover, Davenant's adaptations were often so thorough and so inventive that the Shakespearean source text would have been only moderately useful to the Duke's Company's actors and perhaps a downright hindrance, given that Davenant routinely made small changes in diction that substituted the denotative for the connotative: 'the last *minute* of record time,' 'out *short* candle,' as Restoration *Macbeth* precisely soliloquized. If you were cast as Lady Macduff in Davenant's version of *Macbeth*, the folio text gave you almost no idea of the five scenes in which you appeared because Shakespeare never wrote them. The situation was worse if you played Hippolito or Milcha in the Dryden-Davenant *Tempest*: those characters appear nowhere in the folio text because they were invented by the adapters. But the situation was not much better if you played Prospero or Miranda, because just under a third of Shakespeare's text survived in the adapted version.³⁷ If you

acted in *The Law Against Lovers* you would struggle to find the exact source text, because Davenant's play mixed *Measure for Measure* with *Much Ado about Nothing*. Thus, even when performing Shakespeare, Restoration actors developed their characters mostly by relying on their 'parts', without fully knowing the larger narrative, the relationships between characters, and whether the words they spoke were written by Davenant or Shakespeare.

When Davenant gathered his company for group rehearsals, much of the time was likely devoted to practicalities of staging: marking out entrances and exits; working out songs, dances, and fights; running through scene changes; and setting up any 'discoveries' – that is, pictorial groupings of actors placed behind upstage shutters who were 'discovered' onstage at the beginning of a scene when the shutters were pulled back into the wings.³⁸ Pepys once attended an early evening rehearsal of the King's Company during which they staged the dances for the next day's performance.³⁹ Surviving evidence suggests that there was little directorial blocking in the modern sense. Generally, actors entered and exited through the traditional proscenium side doors, taking focus in a scene when it was their turn to speak and retreating when another character spoke. As we described in Chapter 3, much acting took place on the forestage, the area closest to the audience and with the best lighting (chandeliers and a row of candles placed across the front of the stage). Yet the scenic area at Lincoln's Inn Fields – a more intimate venue than the later Dorset Garden Theatre – was close enough to the audience that it could also be used for acting. As Tim Keenan has noted, no stage direction in any play written for performance at Lincoln's Inn Fields indicates that actors moved down to the forestage after a discovery.⁴⁰

When actors did not speak for a considerable stretch of time, they might break character. Betterton, a scrupulous performer, complained that actors in secondary roles took themselves out of the performance, 'whispering to one another, or bowing to their Friends in the Pit, or gazing about'.⁴¹ He did not exaggerate: Elizabeth Pepys was mightily irritated that the

actress and singer Elizabeth Knepp kept winking and smiling at her husband during the King's Company's performance of *The Heiress*.⁴² The liberties that some Restoration actors took during a performance suggests that the purpose of collective rehearsal was less to craft an ensemble production than to ensure that the company knew how to get through the play: cues and lines, entrances and exits, musical episodes, and staging for group scenes like dances or swordfights. Precision in performance was not always achieved. Pepys's occasional complaint that some actors didn't know their lines reflects both the pressures of a repertory system and perhaps reluctance to memorize lines from a play that might last only two or three performances and then vanish from the repertoire. Disappointed with the Duke's Company's first performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1662 – none of the actors had memorized all their lines – Pepys vowed never again 'to see the first time of acting'.⁴³

An actor's detailed character work was best accomplished not in group rehearsals but in what Restoration actors called private 'study'. Charles Gildon, in his pseudo-biographical *The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton* (1710), purports to quote the late actor reflecting on the importance of such study:

When I was a young Player under Sir *William Davenant*, we were . . . obliged to make our Study our Business, which our young Men do not think it is their duty now to do; for they now scarce ever mind a Word of their parts but only at *Rehearsals*, and come thither too often scarce recovered from their last Night's Debauch; when the Mind is not very capable of considering so calmly and judiciously on what they have to study, as to enter thoroughly into the Nature of the Part, or to consider the Variation of the voice, Looks, and Gestures.⁴⁴

The Betterton quoted here is a figure of Gildon's creation, but the comments are nonetheless revealing. When 'Betterton' championed private 'Study', he did not mean anything bookish or theoretical. Rather, he meant the process by which an actor

charted a dramatic character's sequential emotions ('passions', 'humours') throughout the play and the corresponding embodied signifiers – gestures, poses, facial expressions, movements and vocal intonations – that best expressed those emotions.⁴⁵ Good actors worked diligently at this task, bringing to group rehearsals a sufficiently worked out physical and vocal plan for their character. The actor's 'study', which no doubt was refined or adjusted in rehearsal, was accomplished without much knowledge of the full play, let alone familiarity with how fellow actors crafted their own performances.

This approach to acting was not so much applied to play scripts as derived from them. Restoration playwrights, because they presumed the power and significance of an actor's overt emotional display, created characters who recognized the emotional states of others more by the outward physical signs of those emotions than by their representation in language. In a scene created by Davenant for his *Macbeth* adaptation, Lady Macduff and Macduff encounter witches who sing joyfully about regicide. (We discuss this scene at greater length in the next chapter.) After the witches disappear, Lady Macduff notices – before her husband utters a word – that the witches have frightened him: 'Why are you alter'd, Sir? Be not so thoughtful'.⁴⁶ Her words respond to Macduff's changed appearance and attitude, and thus depend on the actor playing Macduff shifting his expression from confident to rattled *before* Lady Macduff speaks. In a similar way, the guilty Alonzo in Davenant and Dryden's version of *The Tempest* is distraught after witnessing the haunting Masque of Devils: '[T]hey have left me all unman'd; / I feel my sinews slacken'd with the fright, / And a cold sweat trills down o're all my limbs'.⁴⁷ Such lines are a gift for a Restoration actor – precise instructions – because they explain not just the character's emotion at a particular moment ('fright'), but also what that emotion feels like to the character ('unman'd', 'a cold sweat') and what it looks like to other characters and to the audience ('sinews slacken'd'). Davenant knew how to write for actors: he gave them lines that made their work easier.

For any Restoration actor, guidance received from the playwright, the company manager, or a senior actor was valuable. Betterton was proud that he and Elizabeth Barry, his leading lady from the 1680s onwards, always 'consult[ed] e'en the most indifferent Poet in any Part we have thought fit to accept of'.⁴⁸ Davenant was known for tutoring his actors individually; and although hard evidence is scarce, it seems plausible that rehearsals under Davenant were not cursory. The comparatively small number of plays allocated to the Duke's Company in 1660 meant that Davenant could devote more time to rehearsing each play, including treating multiple performances as rehearsals in front of an audience. As Deborah C. Payne has observed, the performance calendar in *The London Stage*, although incomplete, suggests that the Duke's Company staged two or three plays a month in the early 1660s while the King's Company presented six or eight plays a month.⁴⁹ In his biography of Betterton, Gildon constructs Davenant's leadership of the Duke's Company as a lost golden age of discipline and high standards in the acting profession. In 1710, a young actor might get away with showing up hungover and unprepared at a morning rehearsal. But not in the 1660s, when Davenant was the controlling figure in the room, especially when rehearsing his own adaptations of Shakespeare.

Considered together, the importance of an actor's private study, the reliance on 'parts', the rhetorical features of acting, and the absence of a modern stage director yield a crucial insight: Restoration theatrical performance was not primarily about actors creating an illusory dramatic world to which audiences surrendered. If anything, Restoration theatrical experiences were richly performative and inclusive: actors sometimes didn't know their lines; the dramatic text was bracketed by prologues and epilogues addressed directly to the audience; the production was infused with music and dance; actors shifted their attention from the stage to the audience and back again; the prompter calling the cues with bells and whistles was heard throughout the entire theatre; changes of scenery were not just visible but enjoyable to the audience;

candles in the auditorium were never extinguished, turning the entire playhouse into an arena for performances by both actors and spectators, each commenting on the other. Within this holistically performative world, the dramatic text was but a single component. It was no accident that Pepys's highest praise for Davenant's *Macbeth* was neither for the play nor the acting, but for the entire production's 'variety' and 'divertisement' [*sic*].⁵⁰

Acting Shakespeare in the Restoration

Critics and commentators in the eighteenth century tended to look back disdainfully on Restoration actors, with the exception of celebrities like Elizabeth Barry or Thomas Betterton. In 1759, Thomas Wilkes regretted that Restoration performers had mistaken 'turgid vociferation' and 'unnatural rants' for 'the best display of the heroic and tender passion'.⁵¹ John Haslewood, despite having been born during the reign of George III, complained that Restoration tragedians 'strutted and bellowed, in a tone as far from the manner of life as the language [they] recited'.⁵² Such critics insisted that the 'natural' style of acting realized in their own time first by Charles Macklin and then by his famed successor David Garrick best captured histrionic excellence. Because 'the established maxim of our modern Stage is always to keep Nature in view', Wilkes proudly elaborated, 'Acting is in a far greater perfection than it ever was in the days of our forefathers'.⁵³ Persistent comparisons between the greatness of 'our modern Stage' and the embarrassing defects of 'our forefathers' can hardly be surprising. After all, which theatrical era ever promoted itself by claiming that the best actors were the dead ones? The long history of acting criticism does not reveal which style is superior, as if any such transtemporal judgement could be credibly reached. Rather, it reveals that acting has a *history*, as does dramatic literature and scenography and theatre architecture. Like all histories, the history of acting provokes disagreements.

When understood through historiography, generations of judgements about acting style become less compelling, not least because style is necessarily timebound and ephemeral: ‘so far out of the reach of Description’, as Cibber lamented in 1740 when he tried to recreate on the page the famous actors that he had first seen in 1690.⁵⁴ We know from eyewitnesses that Henry Harris played Cardinal Wolsey with ‘State, Port, and Mein’; that Thomas Betterton was ‘the Muse of *Shakespear* in her Triumph’; and that ‘to the last’, Mary Saunderson was ‘the Admiration of all true Judges of Nature, and Lovers of *Shakespear*’ (Figure 7 depicts Harris as Wolsey).⁵⁵ Yet if such testimonies felt insufficient to those who wrote them – ‘how shall I shew you *Betterton*?’, Cibber agonized – then how

FIGURE 7 *Henry Harris as Cardinal Wolsey in Shakespeare's Henry VIII*, print by Henry Edward Dawe, 1820. Folger Shakespeare Library, Art File H314 no. 1. Reproduced under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

much less sufficient must they be for posterity.⁵⁶ When it comes to the question of what acting Shakespeare in the Restoration entailed, the interesting answers look beyond matters of style and focus on the values, epistemologies and cultural assumptions that made a historically specific acting method intelligible and meaningful to its historically specific audience. As Joseph Roach has observed, the theory and practice of acting are 'right and natural for the historical period in which they are developed and during which they are accepted'.⁵⁷

One assumption about Restoration acting that we explore in this chapter is that Shakespeare offered Davenant and the Duke's Company a way to place the Restoration theatre into a historical narrative that bridged the gap of the Civil War and the Interregnum. This narrative emerges in *Roscius Anglicanus*, particularly in the passages when John Downes fixates on the story of Davenant teaching Betterton how to act Shakespeare. Downes was responsible for promoting in print the oral tradition that Betterton's performances could be traced back to Shakespeare's instruction to the actors in the King's Men who created the parts.⁵⁸ Writing in 1708, the retired Duke's Company's prompter recalled not just the afternoon performances but also the morning rehearsals for *Henry VIII*, first staged by Davenant at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1663:

The part of the King was so right and justly done by Mr. *Betterton*, he being Instructed in it by Sir *William*, who had it from Old Mr. *Lowen*, that had his Instructions from Mr. *Shakespear* himself, that I dare and will aver, none can, or will come near him in this Age, in the performance of that part.⁵⁹

We have no idea on what basis John Downes believed that William Shakespeare taught John Lowin who taught William Davenant who taught Thomas Betterton, but the story is possible. Lowin, who lived until 1653, was still with the King's Men in 1635, when he spoke the prologue to Davenant's *Platonic Lovers* at the Blackfriars. Tradition claims that Lowin, one of the principal actors named in the First Folio, played the

title role in *Henry VIII* when it was first performed at the Globe in 1612 or 1613. And surviving documents – such as the cast list for Jonson's *Catiline* (1611) – place the actor with the King's Men around that same time.

But what matters about this passage from *Roscius Anglicanus* is not the accuracy of how it maps lines of theatrical inheritance but the reason why that particular mapping was needed. The importance of genealogy to historians at the time was not to settle points of scholarship but to provide something socially useful: a sense of self for individuals or institutions. Thus, what mattered in Downes's genealogy of Shakespearean acting was less its clarification of past theatrical practices than its clarification of present-day mentalities. What matters for the Restoration theatre was that an appeal to ancestral wisdom could restore a normative theatrical past. It wasn't just that theatre was once again part of public life and leisure; it wasn't just that performances resumed after an eighteen-year hiatus; but rather, theatre was being restored in a particular way. In the strut and fret of the Restoration actor, Downes insisted, acting as Shakespeare knew it – as Shakespeare created it – could be seen. Theatres had been closed for nearly two decades, yet nothing was lost.

At least for Downes, acting Shakespeare was always normative. It wasn't simply that an actor must act well, but that acting well meant to act 'justly'. In his account of *Hamlet* – a play famously fixated on ghosts, surrogation, and 'counterfeit presentments' – Downes's language was stronger still. Davenant taught Betterton 'every Particle' of the role; and it was by the younger actor's 'exact Performance' of what he learned that his reputation rose:

The Tragedy of *Hamlet*; *Hamlet* being Perform'd by Mr. Betterton, Sir William (having seen Mr. Taylor of the Black-Fryars Company Act it, who being Instructed by the Author Mr. Shaksepeur) taught Mr. Betterton in every Particle of it; which by his exact Performance of it, gain'd him Esteem and Reputation, Superlative to all other Plays[.]⁶⁰

Roscius Anglicanus insisted that there was something prior to the actor, something foundational that demanded his or her loyalty. It wasn't that Betterton relied on a pre-existing script; indeed, Davenant's rewritings of Shakespeare call into question the very idea of a continuous textual tradition. Rather, the point was that Betterton, when instructed by Davenant, relied on a continuous *performance* tradition, an embodied repertoire handed down from actor to actor like a family heirloom. In this uninterrupted line of theatrical succession, Davenant was the crucial link between past and present.

Why would it be necessary for the theatrical present to look like the theatrical past? Because Downes was trying to do something more than compile a calendar of Restoration performances. He was trying to shape a theatrical canon. And for a canon to possess integrity and authority, it must amount to more than a miscellany. As John Guillory has reminded us, canons are functions not of texts but of the institutions that safeguard and promote them.⁶¹ The Duke's Company under Davenant's leadership must be understood as a canon-forming institution. Gerard Langbaine, in *An Account of the English Dramatick Poets* (1691), described himself as a 'Champion in the Dead Poets Cause', defending Shakespeare, Jonson, and Fletcher.⁶² We might call Downes a 'Champion in the Dead Actors' Cause', in that he presented the actors who first performed Shakespeare as having inaugurated an unbroken tradition that lived on in the Restoration. No details of that embodied tradition are specified, but it doesn't matter. What matters is the assurance that, whatever its substance, this tradition was exemplified in the person of Thomas Betterton, the actor who learned the art of acting from Sir William Davenant. From this rhetorical perspective, the most important attribute of acting Shakespeare in the Restoration was not what it looked like but what it achieved. Its achievement was to answer the urgent historiographical question posed by the closure, suppression, and reopening of the theatres: What would be *restored* in the Restoration theatre?