READING SHAKESPEARE

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second edition

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Preface

This is a book on reading Shakespeare, on Shakespeare as read, on Shakespeare through reading. For students, as for many others, this is how Shakespeare first appears, as words on a page; later, as performance on a stage. Reading the printed words involves imagining an action – imagining it as fully as possible, imagining the words as spoken, imagining their speakers.

Reading Shakespeare introduces 20 of Shakespeare's 39 plays, and his Sonnets, prefaced by a sketch of his life and of the theatre of his day. It is not written for the specialist, and its aim is to be helpful rather than novel. It brings in contexts of an historical, cultural and literary kind, but keeps its eye on what immediately arises from the reading of the text of a play or a poem. Plays are especially open to variety in interpretation. There is no exclusively right reading of a play, least of all of a play by Shakespeare, though there are mistaken readings.

The focus of this book, as its title suggests, is on the experience of reading the plays. William Shakespeare first put himself before the public by publishing two long narrative poems and putting his name to them. The poems proved popular and were often reprinted. By 1594 he had a name as a poet. His new plays now went into print: 18 of his plays were printed in his lifetime, half of these being reprinted. In all, at least 39 editions of single plays by Shakespeare appeared before his death in 1616. In the collected edition of his drama, the famous First Folio of 1623, the 18 already published plays were joined by 18 not previously published.

Readers of Shakespeare's plays assume that he wrote them to be read as well as performed. Performance has been a focus of recent Shakespeare scholarship, seeing him rather as a scriptwriter for the theatre of the Early Modern period than as a poetic dramatist of the Renaissance – different descriptions of the same animal. The texts of his plays have also been approached less as the product of a writer, more as a by-product of company performance.

These emphases correct a purely literary approach. Yet many of Shakespeare's plays were published in the 1590s, so he wrote for readers as well as for performance. Some of these plays are literary in another way, their success depending upon the recognition of stylistic parody, as in scenes of *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Henry IV*. A fully literary status for Shakespeare's plays was asserted in the Folio of 1623. Ben Jonson, in his prefatory verses, 'To the memory of my beloved, the Author, Master William Shakespeare', placed him above all other European dramatists, classical or contemporary, claiming that 'He was not of an age,

but for all time.'[1] After four centuries, this claim does not seem as presumptuous as it must have sounded in 1623.

Reading and performance are reciprocal parts of the one process, each feeding and needing the other. This introduction to Shakespeare treats his play-texts as dramatic literature for imaginative reading. A play's text is the formula for its physical enactment, a formula enabling theatrical revival; but it is also more. A sense of what an emphasis on performance can leave out may be what led a Swiss scholar, Lukas Erne, to conceive his *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, published in 2003.[2] The need for a book with such a title might once have seemed surprising, but the book is persuasive in documenting the evidence that Shakespeare wanted his plays to be read as well as seen, arguing also that he produced long versions of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* – too long to be acted. Erne also shows that by 1598 Shakespeare's plays were praised as literature and anthologised as such: extracts from them appeared in *England's Parnassus*, 1600, an anthology of non-dramatic verse, and in another similar anthology. Jonson's claim that we should see the drama of Shakespeare as the supreme classic of European literature was accepted by John Dryden, who died in 1700, and assumed by Alexander Pope, who edited all the plays in 1723. Greek tragedy was part of Greek literature and Shakespeare's plays were part of English literature. So much was taken for granted by John Keats when in 1817 he entitled a poem 'On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again'.

In the last days of 1623, the First Folio, a bumper book of Shakespeare plays, was for sale in St Paul's Churchyard. A boy at St Paul's School nearby, John Milton, had just turned 16. He was a keen reader: 'After I was 12 years old,' he later recalled, 'I rarely retired to bed from my studies till midnight.' Milton read the First Folio, and contributed a sonnet to the Second Folio of 1632. This, his first published poem, begins: 'What needs my Shakespeare for his honoured bones ...' In headlining the words 'my Shakespeare', Milton recalled Ben Jonson, who had proudly written 'my ... Shakespeare' three times in his famous poem in the First Folio. Milton was well aware that Jonson had known Shakespeare personally, whereas he, Milton, knew Shakespeare through reading. His sonnet testifies devoutly to the 'deep impression' left on him by 'his' Shakespeare's 'Delphick lines'. The teenage Milton may have been the youngest person to have come to know Shakespeare chiefly by reading the plays, though his poems 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' suggest that he attended plays by Jonson and Shakespeare. The theatre records for the years 1623–1642 are patchy but they do not show Shakespeare revivals as prominent; not all his plays will have been put on. But the 1623 Folio made Shakespeare's drama available as a whole, for reading and rereading. We missed the performances of 400 years ago, but, thanks to the Folio, the plays are still with us.

Reading Shakespeare looks at half of the surviving plays, and at the Sonnets. It is written throughout on the assumption that the reader's curiosity about Shakespeare

is not (repeat not) confined to a single play about to be studied or seen. The book is intended to be read as a whole, to offer an idea of the shape of Shakespeare's writing career. Accordingly, discussions of single plays are not self-contained but vary in length and approach, purposely avoiding a standard formula. Some go into detail; others will summarise a story or explore a specific theme or an aspect of more general relevance. Plot summary flattens and simplifies, but is sometimes necessary. In the case of a play not yet read, reading a sketch of its story helps build a larger idea of Shakespeare. General topics are handled in the introductory sections, and may reappear. Consideration of language, and also of the role of verse, is deferred until after an account of Shakespeare's earliest plays. Two chapters are devoted to single plays: Chapter 6, on *The Merchant of Venice* , shows how subsequent history can affect a play's reception. Chapter 8 addresses Horatio's question to the audience at the end of *Hamlet* : 'What is it you would see?' – a question about the nature of tragedy. I repeat that the book is written to be read through as a whole; readers who then wish to review all that's said on a particular issue should look at the Contents page as well as the Index, which lists topics as well as the titles of plays.

Reading Shakespeare begins with a sketch of Shakespeare's life and work, then looks more closely at 20 plays, though with varying degrees of fullness, and at the Sonnets. Nearly everything Shakespeare wrote gets a mention, since a sense of the order of composition of his work helps in understanding each part of it. Some of this information is also given in tables and chronological lists.

Most readers of this book are likely to have met Shakespeare by reading a play in an English class at school. A play can live on the page as well as on the stage. Indeed, to be fully understood it has to be read as well as seen. Between 1642 and 1660, Shakespeare's plays lived only in print, since Parliament had closed the theatres. This introduction is addressed primarily to those whose access to his work, however often they may see it performed on stage or screen, has been nourished by reading and imagining it. 'In recent years, it has become all the more necessary to read William Shakespeare. We live in a visual, rather than an oral, culture.'[3]

Shakespeare remains central to the idea and practice of English as a university subject, although there are now degree courses in the subject where he is the only required author from before 1800 or even later, which makes it hard to see him historically. The premium on 'research' in universities has led to premature specialization, and lecturers on Shakespeare are often specialists. Specialists are useful but can be territorial; and Shakespeare does not belong to specialists, or to academics, or directors, but to audiences and readers.

Why add a pebble to the pyramid of books piled on Shakespeare? Because, in an age of professional specialisation, I believe that what many students of English need, and some might appreciate, is a modest and fairly basic introduction to reading his

work. The primary aim of the book is to facilitate the reading of Shakespeare, not (repeat not) to offer a guide to current commentary on his work.

As Samuel Johnson put it in the Preface to his edition of Shakespeare's Plays (1765), 'Let him that is yet unacquainted with the powers of Shakespeare, and who desired to feel the highest pleasure that the drama can give, read every play from the first scene to the last, with utter negligence of all his commentators.'[4]

Table 1: Order of Composition

The chronology is conjectural, especially for the first plays. Later dates are firmer, but many remain approximate.

1589–92	*The Taming of the Shrew*	
1590–1	*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*	
1591	*2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI*	
1592	*1 Henry VI*	
1591–2	*Titus Andronicus*	[1592–3 *Venus and Adonis*]
1592–4	*Richard III*	[1593–4 *Lucrece*]
1594	*The Comedy of Errors*	[1593–1608 *Shake-speares Sonnets*]
1595	*Love's Labour's Lost*	
1595–6	*Richard II*	
	Romeo and Juliet	
1595–6	*A Midsummer Night's Dream*	
1595–7	*King John*	
1596–7	*The Merchant of Venice*	
1596–7	*1 Henry IV*	
1597–1601	*The Merry Wives of Windsor*	
1597–8	*2 Henry IV*	
1598	*Much Ado about Nothing*	
1599	*Henry V*	
	Julius Caesar	
	As You Like It	
1600–1	*Twelfth Night*	
	Hamlet	
1601–2	*Troilus and Cressida*	
1603–4	*Measure for Measure*	
1604	*Othello*	
1605	*All's Well that Ends Well*	
	Timon of Athens	
1605–6	*King Lear*	
1605–6	*Macbeth*	
1606–7	*Antony and Cleopatra*	
1607–8	*Pericles*	
	Coriolanus	
1609–11	*The Winter's Tale*	
1610–11	*Cymbeline*	
1611	*The Tempest*	
1613	*Henry VIII* (with John Fletcher)	

Some parts of *Edward III* (1594) are now thought to be by Shakespeare.

Table 2: Chronology of Publication

Thirty-six plays were collected and published in *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, the edition of 1623 known as the First Folio (F1). At Shakespeare's death in 1616, 18 plays had appeared in Quarto format. A Quarto (Q) is a small, unbound book, like a modern paperback, retailing at sixpence. (An Octavo is half the size of a Quarto.) F1 is a large thick book, its pages twice the size, with two columns of text to the page. It sold at one pound sterling, 40 times as much as a Quarto; the buyer would then pay for it to be given a leather binding.
The Quartos and Octavos, listed in order of printing, with dates of later editions:

1593 *Venus and Adonis*	15 more Qs & Octavos to 1636
1594 *Lucrece*	8 further Qs & Octavos
1594 *2 Henry VI*	1600, 1619
1594 *Titus Andronicus*	1600, 1611
1595 *3 Henry VI*	an Octavo
1595 *Edward III*	(see footnote on facing page)
1597 *Romeo and Juliet*	1599, 1609, 1622?, 1637
1597 *Richard II*	1598, 1598, 1608, 1615, 1634
1597 *Richard III*	1598, 1602, 1605, 1612, 1622, 1629, 1634
1598 *1 Henry IV*	1598, 1599, 1604, 1608, 1613, 1622, 1632, 1639
1598 *Love's Labour's Lost*	1631
1600 *2 Henry IV*	
1600 *The Merchant of Venice*	1619, 1637
1600 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*	1619
1600 *Much Ado about Nothing*	
1600 *Henry V*	1602, 1619
1602 *The Merry Wives of Windsor*	1619, 1630
1603 *Hamlet*	1604/5, 1611, 1625, 1637
1608 *King Lear*	1619
1609 *Shake-speares Sonnets*	
1609 *Troilus and Cressida*	
1609 *Pericles*	1609, 1611, 1619, 1630, 1635
1622 *Othello*	1630
1623 First Folio: *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*	

1631 *The Taming of the Shrew*

1632 Second Folio

1634 *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (with John Fletcher; not in F1)

Venus and Adonis, printed before any play, was reprinted more often than any play, perhaps due to its erotic subject matter. Thereafter most new plays were published in Quarto until *Hamlet*. Between *Hamlet* and the First Folio, only three plays appeared in Quarto. Thirteen later plays first appeared in the Folio, as did five earlier plays. There were more readers for history than tragedy, more readers for tragedy than comedy.

Acknowledgements

Anyone who writes on Shakespeare writes by reflected light. It would seem odd to thank Ben Jonson or Dr Johnson, or to select from among their many successors, so I record thanks here only to those who helped directly: Barbara Murray and Andrew Murphy at St Andrews, and more especially Neil Rhodes. Emma Smith of Oxford very kindly read through the manuscript of a new acquaintance, reducing the number of my errors. My thanks to Mary Alexander for patient support (and very much more); to Jenna Steventon and Rachel Bridgewater, encouraging editors; to Peter Kelly and Michael Lynch, who cast me as Bottom; and to those who alerted me to errors in the first edition: Lucy Alexander, Richard Connolly, Lukas Erne, Leo Maidlow Davis, Peter Milward, and John and Clare Saunders.

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a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum* [Jack of all trades], is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.'[2]

Robert Greene's deathbed fears proved prophetic. Greene's 'puppet' could indeed fill out a line of blank verse, and the *fac totum* could indeed 'do everything' in the theatre, write as well as act. Shakespeare, then aged 28, had certainly learned from the work of the University Wits – Lyly, Marlowe, Peele, Lodge, Nashe, and Greene himself – and knew how to write a play. In 1594 he was about to become the leading Shake-scene in England. In the year of Greene's death, 1592, the theatres closed, as bubonic plague killed one in ten of London's 200,000 people. In 1593 and 1594 death removed the two leading tragic dramatists, but not by disease: Thomas Kyd died after torture by the authorities; his associate Christopher Marlowe was killed in an obscure brawl in a tavern, possibly a political murder. At the same time, John Lyly gave up writing his fashionable comedies, despairing of Queen Elizabeth's stingy patronage. In these two years Shakespeare completed and published two acclaimed long poems. So by the time the theatres reopened in 1594, Greene's 'puppet' and 'upstart crow' was a recognised poet. The first work to which he attached his name, and by which he made his name, was *Venus and Adonis*, 1593. This was followed by (*The Rape of*) *Lucrece*, 1594.[3] These are accomplished and sophisticated poems, one comic, the other tragic, each of well over a thousand lines, recounting erotic episodes from classical literature in a smoothly artificial verse. They are largely composed of oratorical speeches of seduction, but these eloquent persuasions do not persuade the person to whom they are addressed. Venus does not persuade Adonis; Tarquin does not persuade Lucrece; Lucrece does not persuade Tarquin. These elegantly printed poems were immediately successful, the first reprinting far more often than any of his plays, and were presumably rewarded by their dedicatee, the Earl of Southampton. At 30, Shakespeare was famous as a poet. He seems, however, to have decided at this point that his future as a writer lay in the commercial theatre in which he had started.

The plays he wrote from 1595 onward show an advance on his earlier work. For the next 20 years he was the leading playwright, providing his company with about two plays a year until 1603, then about one a year until 1610, when he spent more time in Stratford, leaving Ben Jonson as his leading successor among the many writers for the stage. Shakespeare had completed his poems at the right moment. 'There is a tide in the affairs of men,' says Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, 'which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune' (4.3.218–19). Just at the moment Greene, Kyd, Marlowe and Lyly were taken from the race, Shakespeare hit his stride as a playwright. His work shows intelligence, eloquence, ambition and knowledge of the theatre. But he also had good timing. Printed discussion of politics was under state control, as was the Church of England. If religious subjects were not allowed on the stage, other issues could be ventilated there, as long as nothing was too identifiable.

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