

dered yard; yet the dusk pulsed with happiness.

She felt unusually light of heart as she went toward home, smiling at her foolish

imagination, which had created a radiant Miss Lavina in Chinese attire. So silly! Miss Lavina was lying in the cemetery, between Captain Cyranus and Celia his wife.

# Did Shakespeare Write His Plays to Fit His Actors?

MANY REASONS FOR THINKING THAT THE MASTER DRAMATIST, LIKE A LONG LIST OF OTHER SUCCESSFUL PLAYWRIGHTS, MOLDED HIS CHARACTERS TO SUIT INDIVIDUAL PLAYERS IN THE COMPANY AT THE GLOBE THEATER

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IN an interesting and scholarly study of the organization of the "Elizabethan Dramatic Companies," Professor Alwin Thaler points out that the company of the Globe Theater in London, to which Shakespeare belonged, continued to contain the same actors year after year, the secessions and the accessions being few and far between; and he explains that this was "because its members were bound to one another by ties of devoted personal friendship." He notes that I "have emphasized the influence exerted upon Shakespeare the playwright by his intimate knowledge of the men for whom his work was written," and adds that "there can be no doubt that in working out some of his greatest characters he must have remembered that Burbage was to act them."

Then Professor Thaler files a caveat, so to speak:

But the Shakespeare muse was not of that sorry sort which produces made-to-order garments to fit the tastes and idiosyncrasies of a single star. Far from being one-man plays, the dramas were written for a great company of actors. And Richard Burbage, I imagine, would have had little inclination to surrender his place among his peers for the artificial and idolatrous solitude of modern stardom.

In this last sentence Professor Thaler confuses the issue. The question is not whether Burbage wanted to go starring, supported by a more or less incompetent

company, but whether Shakespeare did, on occasion, choose to write a play which is in fact a made-to-order garment to fit the idiosyncrasies of a single star. And when it is put in this way, the question is easy to answer.

We know that Burbage played *Richard III*, and if there ever was a star part, if there ever was a one-man play, if there ever was a piece cut and stitched to the measure of the man who first performed it, then it is "*Richard III*." Here we have a dominating character to whom all the other characters are sacrificed. He is etched with bold strokes, whereas they are only faintly outlined. So long as *Richard* is powerfully seized and rendered, then the rest of the acting is relatively unimportant. *Richard* is the whole show. And while there is only a single star part in "*Richard III*"—Eclipse first and the rest nowhere—there are twin star parts in "*Macbeth*," which are vigorously drawn while the other characters, as Professor Bradley has noted, are merely brushed in.

Now if this proves that Shakespeare's muse was of a sorry sort, then that heavenly visitor is in no worse case than the muse of many another dramatist. Sophocles is reported to have devised his great tragic parts specially for one actor, whose name has not come down to us. Racine wrote "*Phèdre*" and "*Andromaque*," his masterpieces, for Mlle. de Champmeslé. Ros-

tand wrote "Cyrano de Bergerac" and "Chantécler" for Coquelin. Sardou wrote "Fedora" and "Théodora" for Sarah Bernhardt. The younger Dumas wrote the "Visite de Noces" for Desclée. Giacometti wrote "Marie Antoinette" for Ristori and the "Morte Civile" for Salvini. D'Annunzio wrote "La Giaconda" and the "Città Morta" for Duse. Bulwer wrote the "Lady of Lyons" and "Richelieu" for Macready. Gilbert wrote "Comedy and Tragedy" for Mary Anderson. Ernest Legouvè has told us in detail the circumstances which led to his writing, in collaboration with Scribe, "Adrienne Lecouvreur" for Rachel. Jules Lemaitre has recorded how and why he came to compose "L'Age Difficile" for Coquelin; and Mr. Augustus Thomas has told us how he came to write "In Mizzoura" for Nat Goodwin.

The line stretches out to the crack of doom. When Shakespeare chose to produce made-to-order garments to fit the idiosyncrasies of a single actor, he was in very good company, ancient and modern. And we may go further and assert that very few of these plays are any the worse because they were made to order.

The great dramatists, whose works we analyze reverently in the study, were all of them, in their own time, successful playwrights, desirous of arousing and retaining the sympathetic interest of contemporary playgoers, and stimulated now and again by association with the most gifted and accomplished of contemporary actors. If they had not made their legitimate profit out of the histrionic ability of the foremost performers of their own time and country, they would have been neglecting golden opportunities.

Those who best know the conditions of play-writing will be the least likely to deny that not a few of the greatest characters in the drama came into being originally as parts for the greatest actors. Of course, these characters are more than parts; they transcend the endowment of any one performer; they have complexity and variety; they are vital and accusable human beings; but first of all they were parts more or less made to order.

In many cases we know the name of the actor for whose performance the character was conceived—Burbage for one, Mlle. de Champmeslé for a second, Coquelin for a third. And in many another case we lack

definite knowledge and are left to conjecture. There are peculiarities in the "Medea" of Euripides, for instance, which seem to me to point to the possibility that it also was a made-to-order garment.

To say that Sophocles and Euripides possibly did this cutting to fit, that Shakespeare and Racine and Rostand indisputably did it, is not to imply that they did it always, or even that they did it often. Perhaps they did it more often than we shall ever know; perhaps they had special actors in mind when they created characters which are not star parts. And this suggests a broadening of the inquiry.

#### SHAKESPEARE AND HIS COMPANY

After asserting that Shakespeare's were "far from being one-man plays," Professor Thaler reminds us that Shakespeare's dramas were written "for a great company of actors"; and what is true of Shakespeare "holds good also of the Elizabethan drama in general. Its breadth and variety may be ascribed in no slight degree to the fact that the organization of the dramatic companies provided the great poets of a great age with ample facilities for the interpretation of many characters and many phases of life."

This prompts a question as to whether Shakespeare may not have fitted other actors who were his associates at the Globe Theater, besides Burbage. That he did deliberately and repeatedly take the measure of the foremost performer in the company, and that his dramatic genius was stimulated by the histrionic talent of Burbage, I do not doubt. We cannot help seeing that Shakespeare's heroes gradually become older as Burbage himself advanced in years, *Romeo* being intended for a fiery young fellow, and *Lear* being composed for a maturer man, who had become a more consummate artist.

I have suggested elsewhere the possibility—to my own mind a probability—that Shakespeare inserted the part of *Jaques* into "As You Like It" specially for Burbage. The dramatist took his sequence of incidents from Lodge's "Rosalynde," in which there is no character resembling *Jaques*; and *Jaques* has nothing to do with the plot. He remains totally outside the story; he exists for his own sake; and he may very well have been thrust into "As You Like It" because Burbage was too important an actor to be left out of the cast, and because *Orlando* was not the kind of

part in which Burbage, at that period of his artistic development, could appear to best advantage.

If Shakespeare made parts thus adjusted to the chief performer at the Globe Theater, may he not also have proportioned other and less important characters to the capabilities of one or another of the actors whose histrionic equipment he was in the best possible position to appreciate aptly, since he was acting every day by their side? Is this something to which the greatest of dramatists would scorn to descend? Has this ever been done by any other playwright in all the long history of the stage?

When we turn the pages of that history in search of support for this suggestion, we find it abundantly and superabundantly.

#### OTHER AUTHORS WHO WROTE FOR ACTORS

The succession of comic operas which Gilbert devised to be set to music by Sullivan reveal at once that they were contrived with reference to the capacity and the characteristics of the chief members of the company at the Savoy Theater. The sequence of broadly humorous pieces—farces which almost rose to be comedies and comedies which almost relaxed into farces—written by Labiche and by Meilhac and Halévy for the Palais Royal were all so put together as to provide appropriate parts for the quartet of comedians who made that little house the home of perennial laughter in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

At the same time Meilhac and Halévy were contriving for the Variétés the librettos of "Barbe Bleue," "La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein," "La Belle Hélène," and "La Périhole," a famous series of opera bouffes enhanced by the scintillating rhythms of Offenbach, and adroitly adapted to the special talents of Schneider, Dupuis, and several of the other more or less permanent members of the company.

Almost simultaneously Augier and the younger Dumas were giving to the Comédie Française their social dramas, always carefully made to order to suit the half-dozen leading members of the brilliant company Perrin was then guiding. Augier's "Fourchambault" and Dumas' "L'Étrangère" are masterpieces of this profitable utilization of the pronounced personalities of the performers. "L'Étrangère," in particular, would have been a very different play if it had not contained characters

made to order for Sarah Bernhardt and Croizette, Got and Coquelin.

A little earlier the series of blank-verse plays written by Gilbert for the Haymarket Theater, of which "Pygmalion and Galatea" won the most popularity, had their leading characters plainly made to order for Mr. and Mrs. Kendal and for Buckstone himself. And just as "Richard III" and "King Lear" are none the worse because the central character was conceived also as an acting part for Burbage, so Gilbert's blank-verse pieces, Augier's social dramas, Meilhac and Halévy's farcical comedies, lost nothing by their owing some proportion of their inspiration to the necessity of fitting the accomplished comedians by whom the outstanding characters were to be impersonated.

I venture to express the opinion that this desire to bring out the best the several actors had to give was helpful rather than not—stimulatingly suggestive to the author when he was setting his invention to work.

When we turn back the pages of stage history from the nineteenth century to the eighteenth, we find perhaps the most striking of all instances of made-to-order parts—an instance which shows us not one or two or three characters in a play, but almost every one of them, composed and elaborated with an eye single to the original performers. "The School for Scandal" has been seen and read by thousands who have enjoyed its effective situations, its sparkling dialogue, and its contrasted characters, without any suspicion that the persons of the play were made-to-order parts. Yet this undisputed masterpiece of English comedy is what it is because Sheridan had succeeded to the management of Drury Lane, where Garrick had gathered an incomparable company of comedians; and in writing "The School for Scandal" the author peopled his play with the characters which the members of this company could personate most effectively.

King was *Sir Peter*, Mrs. Abington was *Lady Teazle*, Palmer was *Joseph Surface*, Smith was *Charles Surface*; and they were so perfectly fitted that they played with effortless ease. So closely did Sheridan identify the parts with the performers that when a friend asked him why he had written a five-act comedy ending in the marriage of *Charles* and *Maria* without any love-scene for this couple, he is reported to have responded:

"But I couldn't do it. Smith can't make love, and nobody would want to make love to Priscilla Hopkins!"

#### MOLIÈRE AND HIS PLAYERS

It may be objected that Sheridan and Augier and Dumas were after all dexterous playwrights, and that no one of them is to be ranked with the truly great dramatists. They might very well be willing, once in a way, to turn themselves into dramaturgic tailors, although this is a servile complaisance of which the mighty masters of the drama would never be guilty—from which they would shrink with abhorrence.

But if we turn the pages of stage history still further back, from the eighteenth century to the seventeenth, we discover that Molière did this very thing, the adjustment of a whole play to the actors who were to perform it, not once, as Sheridan did, but repeatedly and regularly and in all his pieces—in his loftiest comedies no less than his broadest and most boisterous farces. And there will be found few competent critics to deny that Molière is one of the supreme leaders of the drama, with an indisputable right to a place by the side of Sophocles and Shakespeare, even if he does not climb to the austere and lofty heights of tragedy.

The more we know about the art of the theater, and the more we study the plays of Molière, the more clearly do we perceive that he was compelled to do persistently what Sheridan did only once. The company at the Palais Royal was loyal to Molière; nearly all its leading members came to Paris with him, and remained with him until his death fifteen years later. This company was strictly limited in number; and as it had a permanent repertory, and stood ready to appear in any of its more successful plays at a moment's notice, outside actors could not be engaged for any special part. Molière could not have more persons in any of his pieces than there were members of the company; and he could not put into any of his pieces any character for which there was not a competent performer in the company.

No doubt he must at times have felt this to be a grievous limitation. That he never dealt with maternal love may be accounted for by the fact that he had no one to play agreeable old women—the disagreeable old women were still undertaken by men, in accordance with medieval tradition. We

know the name of the male actor who appeared as *Mme. Pernelle* in "*Tartuffe*," as the wife in "*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*," and as the *Comtesse d'Escarbanas*.

Molière wrote many parts for his own acting; and as he was troubled with a frequent cough, he sometimes made coughing a characteristic of the person he was to act. His brother-in-law, Béjart, was lame; and so Molière described a character written for this actor as having a limp. His sister-in-law, Madeleine Béjart, was an actress of authority; and so the serving maids he wrote for her are domineering and provocative. But when she died and her place was taken by a younger actress with an infectious laugh, the serving maids in all the plays that Molière wrote thereafter are not authoritative, and they are given occasions for repeated cachinnation. And as this recruit, Mlle. Beauval, had a clever little daughter, Molière does not hesitate to compose a part for a child in his "*Malade Imaginaire*."

When we have familiarized ourselves with the record of the leading man, La Grange, of Madeleine Béjart, of Catherine de Brie, and of Armande Béjart—Molière's wife—we find it difficult to read the swift succession of comedies without constantly feeling the presence of the actors inside the characters written for them. We recognize that it was not a matter of choice, this fitting of the parts to the performers; it was a matter of necessity. Even if it may have irked him at times, Molière made the best of it, and probably found his profit in it.

#### THE ACTORS AT THE GLOBE THEATER

Now Shakespeare was subject to the same limitations as Molière. He composed all his plays for one company, the membership of which was fairly constant during a score of years and more. It was also a repertory company, with frequent changes of bill. It could never be strengthened by the special engagement of an unattached performer; it had to suffice, such as it was.

So far as we can judge by the scant external evidence, and by the abundant internal evidence of the plays written for them by Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, and the rest, the company was composed of unusually competent performers. It is unthinkable that Shakespeare should have plotted his superb series of tragedies, making more and more exacting demands on the impersonator of



his tragic heroes, unless he had a confident assurance that Burbage would be equal to them. And this confidence could not fail to be a stimulus to him, encouraging him to seek out stories for the ample display of his friend's great gifts.

From all we have learned of late about Shakespeare we are justified in believing that he was a shrewd man of affairs, with a keen eye to the main chance. He was a sharer in the takings at the door; and he could not but know that those plays are most attractive to the public which contain the most parts demanding and rewarding good acting. So we must infer that he put into his plays the characters in which he judged that his comrades could appear to best advantage. He not only wrote good parts for good actors, he wrote special parts for special actors, shaping his characters to the performers who were to impersonate them. In other words, he provided, and he had to provide, made-to-order garments.

That he did this repeatedly and regularly, just as Molière was to do it three-quarters of a century later on the other side of the Channel, is plainly evident, although we do not know the special qualifications of his actors as well as we know those of Molière's. But we cannot doubt that the company contained one actor of villains—of "heavies," as they are now termed in the theater. I hazard a guess that this was Condell, afterward the associate of Hemming in getting out the First Folio; but I must admit that this is only a guess. Whoever he was, Condell or another, he was entrusted with *Iago*, with *Edmund* in "King Lear," with the *King* in "Hamlet," and with the rest of Shakespeare's bold, bad men.

We know that there were two low comedians in the company, who appeared as the two *Dromios*, as the two *Gobbos*, as *Launce* and *Speed*; and we know also that one of these was Will Kempe, and that when he left the Globe Theater his place was taken by Arnim. Now we can see that the *Dromios*, the *Gobbos*, *Launce* and *Speed*, are merely "clowns," as the Elizabethans called the funny men—"Let not your clowns speak more than is set down for them." These, and the corresponding parts in Shakespeare's earlier plays, including *Peter* in "Romeo and Juliet," are only funny men, with little individuality, almost characterless; and we may reasonably surmise that this was due to Shakespeare's

own inexperience in the delineation of humorous character. But we may, if we choose, credit it also to the fact that Will Kempe was only a funny man, and not a character-actor.

We can find support for this theory in the superior richness and stricter veracity of the low-comedy characters composed by Shakespeare after Arnim took Kempe's place—*Touchstone*, *Dogberry*, the porter in "Macbeth," the grave-digger in "Hamlet"—comic parts which are also real characters, equipped with more or less philosophy. And again this may be ascribed either to Shakespeare's own ripening as a humorist, or to the richer capacity of Arnim. But why may not these two causes have cooperated?

Then there is the brilliant series of parts composed for a dashing young comedian—*Mercutio*, *Gratiano*, *Cassio*, *Laertes*. That these successive characters were all entrusted to the same performer is beyond question, and it seems to me equally indisputable that Shakespeare knew what he was doing when he composed them. He was assured in advance that they would be well played; and there is no reason to doubt that in composing them he profited by his intimate knowledge of the histrionic endowment of the unidentified member of the company for whom they were written, giving him nothing to do which he was not capable of doing well, and giving him again and again the kind of thing that he had already exhibited the ability to do well.

Another group of parts is as obviously intended for an actor who had shown himself to be an expert in the impersonation of comic old women, boldly characterized, broadly painted, highly colored in humor—*Mrs. Quickly*, who appears in four plays, the nurse in "Romeo and Juliet," and *Mrs. Overdone* in "Measure for Measure." Here again I venture the guess that this low comedian may have earlier been cast for the *Dromio* and the *Gobbo* which was not given to Kempe. And I wish to record my regret that we cannot pick out from the list of the company at the Globe the name of the "creator" of *Mrs. Quickly* and her sisters, any more than we can identify the "creator" of *Mercutio* and his brothers.

In my biographies of Shakespeare and of Molière I have dwelt in ampler detail with this dependence of the two greatest dramatists of the modern world upon the actors who were their comrades in art and their

friends in life. I have here adduced only a part of the testimony which goes to show that both the English dramatist and the French were visited by the same muse—whether of a “sorry sort” or not must be left for each of us to decide for himself.

#### THE QUESTION OF ARTISTIC FREEDOM

“It is not more difficult to write a good play,” so the Spanish dramatist Benavente has declared, “than it is to write a good sonnet; only one must know how to write it, just as one must know how to write a sonnet. This is the principal resemblance between the drama and the other forms of literature.”

The writing of a sonnet imposes very rigorous restrictions on a poet. He must utter his thought completely in fourteen lines, no more and no less, and these lines must conform to a prescribed sequence of rimes. But the masters of the sonnet have proved that this enforced compression and this arbitrary arrangement may be a help rather than a hindrance—not a stumbling-block, but a stepping-stone to higher achievement.

May not the limitations under which Shakespeare had to work, may not the necessity of cutting his cloth to fit his comrades—may not these enforced conditions have also been helpful and not harmful? And if this be possible and even probable, what warrant have we for thinking scorn of the great dramatist because he was a good workman, making the best of the only tools he had? In disposing important characters to the acting of Burbage, Shakespeare was probably no more conscious of being cribbed, cabined, and confined than was Milton when he shut himself up in the narrow cell of the sonnet.

The artist must be free to express himself; but he attains the loftiest freedom when he accepts the principle of liberty within the law. Many of the masterpieces of the several arts have been produced under restrictions as rigorous as those of the sonnet—and most critics will agree that they have been all the finer because of these restrictions.

The architect, for one, does not choose what he shall build; he has perforce to design an edifice for a special purpose on a special area. The mural painter has a given wall-space assigned to him, where his work is to be seen under special conditions of light; and often his subject is also prescribed for him. The sculptor is sometimes subordinate to the architect, who decides upon the size and the subject of the group of statuary needed to enhance the beauty of a building.

The artist who modeled the figures in the frieze of the Parthenon had little freedom, and yet he wrought a mighty masterpiece. Michelangelo’s “David” is what it is because the sculptor was asked to utilize a block of marble of unusual size and shape; and his “Last Judgment” is what it is because he accepted the commission to decorate the wall above the altar of the Sistine Chapel. In fact, Michelangelo’s muse was “of that sorry sort which produces made-to-order garments to fit the tastes and idiosyncrasies of a single” patron.

If Shakespeare adjusted his characters to the actors who were to play them, he was doing what Molière was to do; and his companionship is honorable. He was doing what the sculptor of the Parthenon did, and the painter of the Sistine, no more and no less; and he stands in no need of apology.

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#### THE COURTLY AGE

THE courtly age of gallants gay,  
Of doughty knight and graceful page!  
Swift-moving time has swept away  
The courtly age.

Now, strutting on life’s fickle stage,  
The politicians stamp and bray,  
And in long verbal tilts engage.  
Fine manners have outlived their day,  
Rule and misrule a warfare wage;  
Unseenly haste has held at bay  
The courtly age!

*William Hamilton Hayne*

# *The* STAGE

*by* Matthew White, Jr.



CLARE EAMES AND FRANK REICHER IN A SCENE FROM JOHN DRINKWATER'S LATEST HISTORICAL PLAY, "MARY STUART," PRODUCED FOR THE FIRST TIME ON ANY STAGE AT THE NEW RITZ THEATER IN NEW YORK

*From a photograph—Copyrighted by William Harris, Jr.*

WHILE the stage has not disdained to borrow ideas from the screen—witness the fade-outs in "Smilin' Through" last season and in "Mary Stuart" this year—the motion-picture folk are evidently bent on getting as far away from the spoken drama as possible. For years certain rooters for the film have been arguing for the banishment of all explanatory subtitles, and at last, with Charles Ray in "The Old Swimmin'-Hole," they have achieved their aim, not a word being flashed on the silver sheet that isn't part and parcel of the action itself.

I didn't care for the result. I was constantly beset with the conviction that

the devisers of the scenario were under a handicap in being compelled to move their story only in a direction in which explanatory leaders would not be necessary.

My notion of the ideal picture is one in which all the arts may be freely employed toward the perfecting of the product. I see no reason why words should be barred from a cinema because they are not pictorial, any more than why scenery should be banished from the stage because it is not put together by means of the alphabet. Indeed, I find the subtitles a pleasant variant to the constant succession of pictures, and I predict that it will be a sorry day for the movies when they cease to be employed.