

# Reading in and of Shakespeare

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## Abstract

Drawing on early modern to contemporary practices, this essay explores the dynamics of Shakespearean play readings. Dramatization of the reading of letters in early modern plays, for instance, suggests that the act of reading functions rhetorically to allow one person (the reader) to experience a situation from the perspective of another (the letter writer) or, in more devious ways, to falsify the voice and ethos of the letter writer. Historically, many readings have been amateur productions, aimed at improving and entertaining the readers. Readings by professional companies, by contrast, can be used to evaluate plays for future production or to present inexpensively unfamiliar plays that could not be produced as stage performances. In either case, the assumption of "voice" in the act of reading continues to attract participants, a sign that the unpredictability and power of this largely unexplored art form deserves further attention.

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## A Contingent and Accidental Art Form

The reading of *Dr Faustus* that took place on the first night of the 2006 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Philadelphia was a typical example of the genre. A group of amateurs read a complete play, at sight, without costumes, props, or movement. I don't imagine that most of them had any theory about why they were doing it or how they should do it, and I have no idea why anybody turned up to listen to it. For anyone watching a reading — especially of a play such as *Faustus* that it is sometimes possible to see in the theater — a performance without special effects, or *any* visual effects, must inevitably be "second best." On the other hand, for the readers, many of them no doubt frustrated actors, the event may well be a sublimation of theatrical ambitions. Does the play reading ever go beyond this halfway status to become an art form in its own right? I would argue that it does — but not by trying to be one. Its form is one of which the contingent and the accidental are essential components.

There is more than one kind of play reading. There can be a one-person reading. Some of us do these in the privacy of our own homes, but, as Ann Thompson's essay shows, one-person readings used to be a favorite activity for retired actors. Dramatists also used to read their plays

aloud to the cast (Holland 1991, 8-29). Both Napoleon (in 1816) and Richard Wagner (in 1880) gave readings of the *Oresteia* to a select group of listeners (Goldhill 2006, 3). And I once had a job reading Shakespeare plays aloud to a retired businessman, taking all the roles myself. When, as in the more usual reading, roles are divided among actors, some groups assign them beforehand; some at the last minute; some, to ensure absolute fairness, read round the room, speech by speech, or recast after each act. In the interest of full disclosure, one group in California requires the organizer to divide the roles and indicate them on a spreadsheet (Morris 2003, D1-2). Some long-established play reading groups prepare their roles, wear costumes, and improvise props and movement; these are usually the groups whose members, as in the California example, take turns meeting in each others' houses and end with a big meal. The "Read Not Dead" series run by Globe Education in London features professional actors who have one rehearsal with a director. Cynics might say that these are just the Globe's way of pacifying the scholars who keep pestering it to revive obscure plays, without committing financial suicide by actually doing so. Other companies, including the Royal Shakespeare Company and the actors at the Blackfriars Theatre at Staunton, Virginia, hold play readings in order to decide which plays are worth reviving in full-scale productions.<sup>1</sup> But some of the readings, as is evident from Lucy Munro's review in *Shakespeare Bulletin*, have given great pleasure in themselves and shown ingenious ways of dealing with the limitations — or characteristics — of the form, such as the hand-held script (Munro 2004).

It might seem that the one common factor in all these play readings is simply that no one has to learn lines. Nowadays, most people are terrified when they have to memorize anything and assume that everyone must always have felt like this, in which case play reading could be traced back almost as far as play acting itself. I suspect that this is not the case, however. Memorization probably seemed less daunting in the early modern period, not only because it was such a common part of the educational process, but also because the alternative would have been reading aloud from difficult handwriting. Alfred Harbage once argued that the immensely long *Shepherds' Paradise* of Walter Montague, performed in 1633 by Henrietta Maria and her ladies, must have been a play reading: "One cannot believe that these fragile-brained ladies of the court committed to memory such limitless stretches of opaque prose; one pictures them with script delicately poised in their jewelled hands" (Harbage 1964, 14). Even if these ladies were as silly as Harbage imagined, merely reading the lines would have defeated the purpose of helping the queen improve her spoken English. Moreover, the production was rehearsed for three months under professional direction, and the performance date was postponed from late November to early January because some of the ladies were not yet ready, which as Sarah Poynting says, implies that they were expected to

learn their parts (Poynting 1997, viii-ix). There had been plenty of time to make copies of this particular manuscript; it is worth remembering, however, that even when plays existed as printed texts, the only groups of people who could read them aloud were those who could afford to buy more than one copy. Even in the nineteenth century, books probably had to be passed from hand to hand. The introduction to one Shakespeare edition specifically designed for reading aloud, *The Boudoir Shakespeare: Carefully Prepared for Reading Aloud, Freed from All Objectionable Matter, and Altogether Free from Notes*, imagines "three or four" readers taking all the parts, with others presumably just listening (Cundell 1876, 5).<sup>2</sup> The kind of play reading we are accustomed to is a later development, dependent on the availability of inexpensive editions or, more recently, inexpensive ways of copying.

Peter Holland's essay about the practice of authors reading their plays to the company points out that the authorial reader was "neither lecturer nor actor" (Holland 1991, 8). One might rephrase this comment to say that the reader of a play is *both* lecturer and actor, not so much acting the roles as indicating *how* they should be acted. This is one respect in which actors are like the profession with which they had the most uneasy relationship, the preacher. An Injunction from the first year of Elizabeth's reign underlined the importance that the Church of England gave to the communication of the Scriptural text to the congregation:

All Ministers and Readers of publique Prayers, Chapters, and Homilies, shall be charged to read leasurely, plainly and distinctly, and also such as are but meane readers, shall peruse over before once or twice the Chapters and homilies, to the intent they may read to the better understanding of the people, and the more encouragement of godlinesse. (Barker 1600, 53)

Thus, in the context of the church service, the purpose of a reading — as opposed to the sermon where the preacher could draw on his own emotional power to affect the audience — was to enable the audience to understand the text. The same emphasis on clarity can be found in a work addressed to clergymen in 1855, Richard Cull's *Acoustics and Logic in their Application to Reading Aloud* (1855). In reading aloud, Cull insists, "all egotism must be in abeyance." The speaker "must remember that he is simply the mouth of another, although he is engaged in the noble work of breathing vitality into the words of his author" (Cull 1855, 5). In practice, of course, "vitality" might cover a wide range of styles. The sense of being simply a mouthpiece for their author can also be found in the theater — notably, as one might perhaps expect, in Jonson's interpreters. When *The Alchemist* was revived early in the Restoration, a Prologue apologized for the inadequacies of the actors, who were uncomfortably aware that the original cast had been trained by Jonson, "Line by Line, each Tittle, Accent, Word" (Wilkinson, quoted in Herford and Simpson 1950, 228).

### Allowing for Vox

One can imagine how dependent actors must have been on the author's initial reading-as-demonstration when one sees how inconsistently reading aloud is indicated in the early modern play text. Sometimes quoted speech is printed in italics, sometimes the text gives a direction: "reads," or "a letter."<sup>3</sup> The trick of writing letters with double or incomplete meanings, so as to implicate the reader in the guilt of interpretation, has its counterpart in these stage letters — an extreme case is "Shall Rome, etc." in *Julius Caesar* (2.1.46).<sup>4</sup> When characters read aloud on the stage, they sometimes replicate the difficulties that the actors must have had with their scripts. Take the final scene of *Twelfth Night*, which reflects a new self-consciousness about the whole process of reading aloud. Feste belatedly produces the letter that Malvolio wrote to Olivia from his "dark house," and Olivia asks him to read it. Curiously, dramatic characters, especially women, often ask others to read aloud to them, even when, like Olivia, they obviously know how to read. Reading may have been regarded as a slightly menial activity, or perhaps aristocratic women hesitated to risk making mistakes in front of others.

*Olivia.* Open't, and read it.

*Clown.* Looke then to be well edified when the Foole delivers the Madman. *By the Lord Madam.*

*Olivia.* How now, art thou mad?

*Clown.* No, Madam, I do but reade madnesse: and your Ladyship will haue it as it ought to bee, you must allow *Vox*.

*Olivia.* Prethee reade i' thy right wits.

*Clown.* So I do Madona: but to reade his right wits, is to reade thus: therefore, perpend my Princesse, and give eare.

*Olivia.* Read it you, sirrah.

*Fabian.* *Reads.* By the Lord Madam, you wrong me? (Shakespeare 1623, 5.1.288-302)<sup>5</sup>

This passage illustrates at least two ways by which reading aloud can be indicated: through italics and through a stage direction. There may be a third, since it is not clear whether the inflated style of the blank verse line "therefore, perpend my Princesse, and give eare" is meant to indicate yet another tone of voice. The episode can work in several ways. It can give the Clown one more opportunity to show off his gift for impersonation, or it can show how reading aloud can bring rejection for someone who reads too expressively (Feste); depending on how literate Fabian turns

out to be, it can also show either his grasp of the needs of the situation or his embarrassment at not being able to rise adequately to them. In any case, it demonstrates the paradox involved in reading letters on the stage. We are used to thinking of letters as the personal expression of the writer — modern productions sometimes borrow the film technique of voiceover to let us hear, for example, Antonio read his letter to Bassanio — but a letter that is read on stage will be heard in the voice of the reader, not the writer. Many of the letters read aloud in Shakespeare plays could not possibly be given voiceover treatment because they were not in fact written by the person to whom they are attributed. This is the case with the supposed letter from Olivia that Malvolio reads in act 2, a forgery designed specifically for this reader and no other, in which his fantasies about the sender transform his performance as a reader. Sir Andrew Aguecheek's challenge to Cesario is genuine, but Sir Toby has to read it so that Sir Andrew can hear it as the magnificent defiance that he thinks he has written, while the audience hears Toby's own low opinion of it.

Feste is, then, deliberately misunderstanding the letter convention when he reads Malvolio's letter in the voice of a hysterical Malvolio rather than, as Fabian does, simply to bring out the meaning. (Naturally, Feste has a reason for his clowning: to keep the others from taking the letter seriously.) In justifying his behavior, Feste refers to *vox*, apparently expecting everyone to understand what he means. The word occurs nowhere else in Shakespeare, but, thanks to Lynn Enterline's work on rhetorical pedagogy (Enterline 2006), future editors of *Twelfth Night* will be able to amplify their notes on this passage to include the meaning that would have been familiar to students who had been asked to write declamations "in the voice of someone else" (Enterline 2006). *Vox* also refers to elocution and volume, both of which are implied in the word *vociferation*. In this sense, it is used by Comenius in *Coriolanus*, when he begins his eulogy of the hero: "I shall lack voice. The deeds of Coriolanus / Should not be uttered feebly" (2.2.82-83). In other words, there are times when, if you will have it as it ought to be, you have to turn up the volume and change your delivery. Of course, when students were taught to argue a case in someone else's *vox*, they were not meant, as Feste does, to impersonate another person, but to adopt that person's point of view. This is a good distinction for playreaders to bear in mind. Readers are not meant to abandon themselves to raw emotion but to read in their right wits, using the voice to bring out meaning which in performance would be conveyed through action. If they imported their play-reading style into a stage production, they might indeed sound over-emphatic.

I don't know of any contemporary edition that is specifically designed for reading aloud. The editor of *The Boudoir Shakespeare* did not get very far in his pioneering attempt, apart from cutting lines that he considered impossible to read aloud in mixed company. He did put rhyming couplets in brackets, presumably because he thought readers should have advance warning to speak these in

a special way. But he preserves a contemporary practice that most play readers find very annoying: putting the stage direction "Aside" *after* the lines in question. It is clear that the actresses rehearsed by Mr. Puff in *The Critic* are using a text like this:

Enter the TWO NIECES.

*1st Niece.* Ellena here!

She is his scorn as much as I — that is  
Some comfort still.

*Puff.* O dear madam you are not to say that to her face! — *aside*, madam, *aside*. —

The whole scene is to be aside. (Sheridan 1975, 3.1.167-72)

In my one foray into editing, I was minimalist about stage directions, preferring to discuss several possibilities in the footnotes, so as not to pre-empt the reader's response (Potter 1997). From my own experience of play readings, however, I can say categorically that readers prefer editions that save them from the kind of mistake dramatized in *The Critic*: they like, that is, modernized editions with plenty of stage directions, like David Bevington's or the Globe Quartos (produced in conjunction with the staged readings), which warn them if, for instance, a speech is addressed to several people in quick succession, or if it moves between impersonation and apparent naturalness. This assumes that the group's highest priority is to give a fluent and effective reading of the play. A group with a more academic purpose might well get a great deal from being confronted with all the problems of a badly printed early modern text, like that of the anonymous play *Look About You*. I quote from the Malone Society Reprint, which faithfully reproduces all the problems, without so much as a note to indicate what might be going on here:

*Io.* There are caues heereabout good fellow, are there not?

*Ski.* Yes #ir, tread the ground #ir, & you #hal heare their hollownes,  
this way #ir this way.

*Io.* Help Faukenbridge.

*Fau.* O help me good prince Iohn.

*Skin.* Ile helpe you both, deliuer #ir deliuer, Swounds linger not . . . (Meagher 1913, 1030-48)

Any play reading is going to have to grind to a halt at this point while everyone tries to work out what is going on. (The answer seems to be that both Prince John and Faulconbridge have fallen through trapdoors in the stage, lured on by the villainous Skink, who proceeds to rob them. It is interesting to note that, in a similar situation — and possible source — when Aaron lures Martius

and Quintus into a pit in *Titus Andronicus* (2.3.192-98), the author makes things easier for the spectator through lines such as, "What, art thou fallen?" [198].) Anyone who is editing a play like this ought to conduct at least one play reading of the draft edition, taking notes.

Normally I am in favor of readings without an audience. They allow you to stop and discuss textual difficulties or even bewilderment over the plot. You can cast for voice rather than appearance. You can — in fact, you usually have to — give major male roles to women. As soon as you start thinking of an audience, you are likely to become more visual. (The Arthurian Society's readings of a somewhat shortened section of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, directed by Tom Hanks, employed an excellent adaptation of the reading technique at the Kalamazoo Medieval Conference in 2006. The director not only broke the chapter into several short sections, but also recast it for each section, announcing the identity of the actors each time. This method allowed each actor a chance at a major role and avoided any confusion as to who was reading what [Malory 2006].) But I have been to a number of the staged readings at Shakespeare's Globe, and I recognize that a surprising number of people really do like to watch. Indeed, I am one of that devoted following who would rather hear a reading of, say, Davenant's *Albovine King of the Lombards* (1629) than see almost any production of a play we already know. The pleasure is not only that of encountering an old play as if it were a new play. Some of us may feel, like John Russell Brown, that long rehearsal periods kill much of the life in a production; what keeps the theater alive is "improvisation and its attendant risk-taking" (Brown 1999, 102). Even in an amateur reading like our *Faustus*, perhaps what attracted people was the "aura" of unrepeatability. I'm told that some of the actors in the Globe readings, even though they aren't paid, are as addicted to this kind of performance as their audience. I should guess that what they enjoy is at least partly the fact that they are winging it. This does not mean that we should throw professionalism out the window. These actors can give brilliant performances with virtually no rehearsal only because they have had years of training. Elsewhere, I have told anecdotes about unexpectedly comic moments at some of my play readings (Potter 2004). Audiences and participants enjoy this kind of thing — but only as long as it doesn't happen too often.

## Conclusion

Although I have stressed the extent to which play readings can be educational, most people enjoy them for their own sake. Sometimes, however, they have bigger aims and lead to something bigger. I want to end with the history of a group that started in Philadelphia. In 1895, some militant followers of the British economist Henry George went from the city to northern Delaware to campaign for office on the streets of Wilmington and Dover; they were looking for a

power base from which to introduce George's idea of the single tax. At the election, their showing was so dismal that they decided that they needed to become better public speakers. Two of their leaders promptly formed the Philadelphia Shakespeare Club, which met in a living room. They began with *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar* — two plays that contain formal orations and that have thus been popular with teachers of public speaking (Rue 1961, 10). The readers apparently wore costumes and occasionally got professional advice, but they kept their eye on the main purpose: According to the local newspaper, "A delegation is selected each week from the best players and sent to Delaware to make political speeches" ("1896," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, quoted in Rue 1961, 17). It is not clear how much the Shakespearean training helped, but the readers did establish their single-tax utopia. In 1900, they bought a farm in northern Delaware. In 1905, it became a permanent community called Arden. In 1906, it began a tradition of annual performances of Shakespeare on the village green, and this custom, with occasional breaks, has continued up to the present. It still holds play readings, too. It's the last surviving non-religious community in the United States, with both a forest of Arden and a Sherwood Forest. The founders started with play readings and got a town. This certainly proves the unpredictability, not to mention the power, of this still largely unexplored art form.

### Notes

1. As Genevieve Love notes, theaters often move between the two uses of readings, as the Globe appears to have done (Love 2004, 8-9).
2. Cundell, incidentally, had heard of the Folio editor Henry Condell, and thought that he might well be a descendant.
3. This topic is developed more extensively in a still unpublished paper by Marta Straznicky that she kindly sent me after the session in which this paper was read (Straznicky 2006).
4. Quotations from Shakespeare are from David Bevington's edition of the *Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2004).
5. I quote from the text in the 1623 Folio. The act, scene, and line references here are from David Bevington's edition of the *Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2004).

### Online Resources

"Read Not Dead" [cited 22 May, 2007]. Shakespeare's Globe. <http://www.shakespeares-globe.org/globeeducation/publicevents/stagedreadings/>.



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