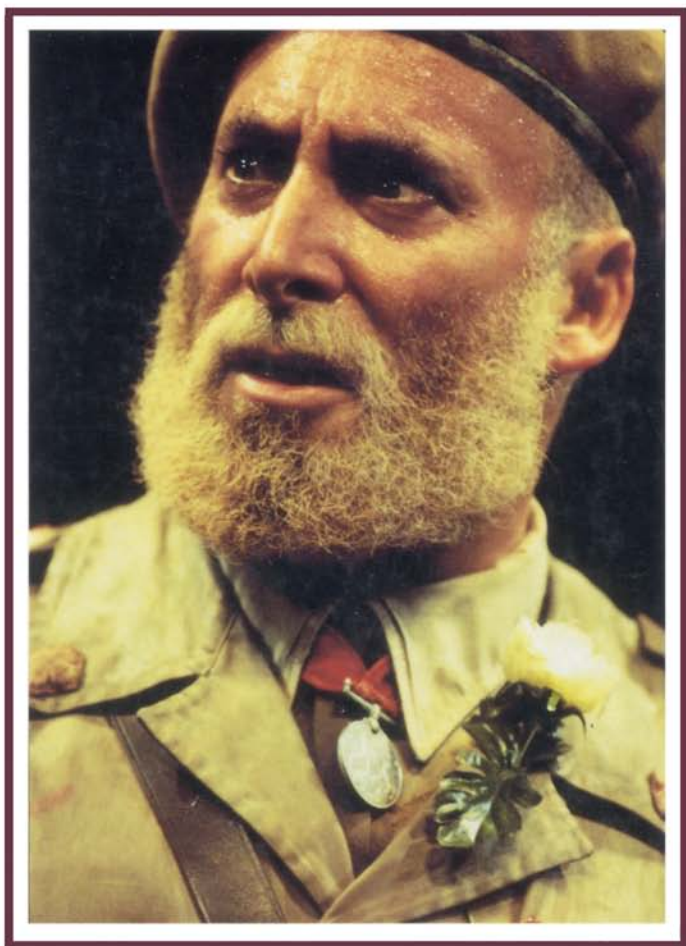


Alternative Shakespeare Auditions for Men



Simon Dunmore

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Shakespeare
Auditions
for Men*

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Introduction

Shakespeare is demanded for audition a lot of the time. Unfortunately for auditioners, auditionees tend to choose from a very limited collection of characters and speeches; unfortunately for auditionees, they have to perform those well-known speeches exceptionally well to succeed amongst the incredible competition. Experienced auditioners will have already seen a brilliant Hamlet, Iago and Cassius, to mention but a few, against which we inevitably compare yours. If you use one of the well-known speeches at audition, unless you manage to hit that magic peak of performance, you are on an inevitable slope to failure.

Why do people stick to these popular speeches? I'm convinced that it's largely because they cannot face the idea of getting their heads round unfamiliar plays and characters written in obscure language. It's easier if you already have some idea of the character and play – from studying it at school, seeing a stage production or a film version. I estimate that nearly fifty per cent of *The Complete Works* are rarely performed. There is, sitting there unregarded, a great wealth of material from which the auditionee can draw. Why are they 'rarely performed'? Often because they aren't as good as the famous plays, but they do contain material which is on a par with the greatest moments in Shakespeare. Sometimes, they are 'rarely performed' because the language is especially difficult (*Love's Labour's Lost*, for instance), or because the historical knowledge required to follow the plot is too much for a modern audience (the *Henry VI* plays, for instance), or because the stories on which the plays are based are no longer part of our common culture (*Troilus and Cressida*, for instance). Shakespeare's audiences would not only have understood the jokes and topical references, but also would have had a working knowledge of their recent kings; Greek and Roman history, classical mythology, religious practices, and the Bible would all be much more familiar to them than they are to us now.

Even the well-known plays have lesser known, but not necessarily less interesting, characters in them. For instance, Petruchio from *The Taming of the Shrew* is very popular audition fare, but in this same play is also the relatively unknown Biondello. He is not involved in much of the action of the play, but he has big enough snippet for the auditionee.

Introduction

The other fundamental problem for the auditionee is length. Most people don't realise that fourteen or fifteen lines of verse is often perfectly sufficient (providing it also conforms to the other parameters mentioned in the 'Auditioning Shakespeare' chapter). Just because the famous speeches go on for twice or three times this length it doesn't mean that they mark an 'industry standard'.

I know that it is difficult for women to find 'original' Shakespeare speeches, but I'm afraid the vast majority of men choose from only about thirty different characters from the hundreds available. There are plenty of less obviously important to the plot, but just as well written, men with sufficiently long speeches. You can also look at suitable dialogue and edit it to make a single speech (there are several such in this book). Some people believe the idea of editing Shakespeare is tantamount to sacrilege. I think that this is ridiculous because there is no such thing as a definitive Shakespeare text (this is true for the vast majority of plays; most playwrights have alternative versions to what arrives in print) and also in doing an audition you are performing a mini-play separated from the whole work and it therefore will lose some of the constraints that tied it in its original context. On the other hand editing dialogue is not necessarily simply cutting out the other person's lines. It requires time, thought and trying out to see whether or not it works.

Another thorny problem is punctuation. I largely worked from five different editions of each play and in my researches to date I have not yet found any sustained section of speech which is punctuated the same way in any two given editions. I have tried to rethink the punctuation to suit the modern actor, and I have a pious hope that Shakespeare might largely have approved of what I've done – after all he was working with actors, not academics. There are a number of instances where some words vary between editions, and where there is an important alternative I have mentioned it in the notes.

Line numbering also varies, so I have chosen to number each speech from one. There are only a few instances where this is true of the speech in the play.

I have written notes on everything that might be obscure, but not following the dictates of any one academic editor. You will find I disagree with them all in a few instances. I also looked up every unfamiliar or obscure word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which was incredibly useful in illuminating the language. Overall I have

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tried to help you understand the details of each speech in order to perform it, rather than to write essays about it.

I have also included a short character description for each speech. These are meant to help kick you off in the task of reading the whole play. They are inevitably sketchy and only give the basics leading up to the moment of the speech. I cannot stress too much the fact that there is no substitute for reading and absorbing the whole play.

This book contains just fifty speeches which are rarely, if ever, used in audition. There are plenty more to find if you look hard enough.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who helped me by workshopping all these speeches before they were committed to print: Fayyaz Ahmed, Phillip Hoffman, Cameron Jack, Matthew Storey and Robert Wilfort; my mother, Alison Dunmore, for supplying me with tit-bits from her decades of watching Shakespeare in performance, and my wife, Maev Alexander, for her detailed and incisive comments on everything.

Male Characters and Speeches Too Often Used for Audition

Hamlet (*Hamlet*)
Hotspur (*Henry IV, part 1*)
Prince Hal, later Henry V (*Henry IV, parts 1 & 2 and Henry V*)
Chorus (*Henry V*) – The opening speech, ‘O for a muse of fire...’
Brutus (*Julius Caesar*)
Cassius (*Julius Caesar*)
Mark Antony (*Julius Caesar*)
Marullus (*Julius Caesar*)
Philip the Bastard (*King John*)
Edgar (*King Lear*)
Edmund (*King Lear*)
Macbeth (*Macbeth*)
Angelo (*Measure for Measure*)
Lancelot Gobbo (*The Merchant of Venice*)
Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*)
Bottom (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)
Egeus (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)
Oberon (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)
Puck (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)
Benedick (*Much Ado About Nothing*)
Iago (*Othello*)
Othello (*Othello*)
Richard II (*Richard II*)
Clarence (*Richard III*)
Richard III (*Richard III*)
Mercutio (*Romeo and Juliet*)
Romeo (*Romeo and Juliet*)
Petruchio (*The Taming of the Shrew*)
Trinculo (*The Tempest*) (Act 2, Scene 2)
Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*)
Malvolio (*Twelfth Night*)
Orsino (*Twelfth Night*)
Launce (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*)

I have cited specific scenes / speeches against a character, where there is material elsewhere for that character which is not too often used.

This list is by no means exhaustive – other auditioners will have other characters and speeches they’ve seen too often.

Shakespeare – The Actors' Writer

Shakespeare, and others, wrote for a theatre that had minimal sets and an audience that did not sit quietly watching – they reacted like a modern football crowd. (Conditions that they are attempting to recreate at *Shakespeare's Globe* theatre on London's South Bank.) He had no lighting beyond available daylight and the occasional flare or candle, no sophisticated special effects and no modern sound systems. There was some live music and the occasional drum, trumpet, cornet, and so on, but all the emphasis was on the power of the excitingly spoken word. And that's what Shakespeare gave actors: a brilliant vehicle, his words, that can really help the auditioning actor – also without sets, lighting, and so on. He also had incredible insights into how people 'tick', in a way that wasn't really generally understood until about a hundred years ago – famously through Freud and in the acting world through Stanislavski. Of course other writers of his period, and after, also 'dug inside how people work', but not so much for the theatre. There is a story about a man after seeing his first Shakespeare production: 'Hey, this guy knew about Freud three-hundred years before Freud.'

Shakespeare the Man

We have a number of tantalising facts about the real person, but not enough to write a definitive biography. One thing we are sure of is that he managed to make a good living out of writing and staging plays – he had a commercial eye for what would attract audiences. He looked for popular subjects and tried to avoid controversy by writing plays set either remote in time and / or set in other countries. (Only *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is set overtly in the Elizabethan here-and-now, and that doesn't contain any kings, princes and so on – people who if offended could be highly dangerous.) He didn't write contemporary satires to attract audiences – unlike Ben Jonson, his friend and nearest rival as a playwright – and he seems to have avoided any trouble with the authorities, unlike Jonson who spent time in prison. I think that because he didn't have any political axe to grind, he concentrated on the people in his plays rather than contemporary politics. Issues relevant to an Elizabethan are largely only of interest to an historian of subsequent generations. I believe Shakespeare's apolitical approach and his concentration on the personalities involved helped to ensure his immortality. I'm not

Shakespeare – The Actors' Writer

saying that he didn't write about politics at all, his plays are full of examples; but he didn't take sides. For example, though there is a lot in *The Merchant of Venice* which is anti-Semitic (shockingly so to a modern audience), Shylock, the money-lender, has some wonderfully sympathetic moments including this (from Act 3, Scene 1): 'I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?'

As a playwright Shakespeare wasn't working in isolation, he was a member of several acting companies, principally the *Chamberlain's Men* (later known as the *King's Men*). I'd like to suggest that *The Complete Works* came not just from one man but through the energy and ideas generated by groups of people working closely together. A man called 'Shakespeare' may have written a lot of the words, but he must have used their experiences to inspire much of the detail. And, knowing actors, I'm sure they had plenty of their own suggestions – good and bad – that were incorporated into the scripts we now have. This is the cradle, the sustenance and encouragement that nurtured the 'genius' we label 'Shakespeare'. Over half a century later another genius, Sir Isaac Newton, the scientist, wrote, 'If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.' I suggest the same could be said of Shakespeare and his plays.

Elizabethan England

Not only was he almost certainly helped by his actors, but also by the comparatively stable political climate of the first Elizabethan age. As often happens in his history plays, the threat of invasion (and vice-versa) was common in the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I's predecessors. This required armies and ships, which were a huge drain on the national exchequer and when she ascended the throne England was not very well off. Her immediate predecessor (and elder sister), Mary, was a Catholic; Elizabeth, a Protestant, was a ripe target for Catholic France and Spain – England's principal rivals. There were also a number of people in England who thought that Protestantism had gone too far and would have welcomed an invasion. However, the two continental countries were at loggerheads and ignored

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England until the Spanish Armada in 1588, thirty years after Elizabeth had ascended the throne. In the interim the English ships had been used for lucrative trade and exploration, thus building a strong economy, strong enough to fund the soldiers and sailors for the defeat of the potential invaders by the time of the Armada; and strong enough to support the social welfare of the nation. 'We were just in a financial position to afford Shakespeare at the moment when he presented himself.' (J. M. Keynes, Economist)

Elizabethan English

Elizabeth was the most extraordinary woman, highly intelligent and literate, and she used her power for the sake of the people, not just for her own ends, as most previous monarchs had done. She created a nation, with the help of some brilliant chief ministers, which had 'a zest and an energy and a love of life that had hardly been known before' (Anthony Burgess). This 'feel-good' factor, that modern politicians yearn for, created a new pride in the English language. Previously, Latin had held sway through the church, over the bulk of printed literature and throughout the limited education provision that existed then. People spoke to each other in various English dialects, but the use of the language in written form was extremely limited. Anything important was written in Latin, with its very strict rules of grammar and spelling – but there were virtually no official rules of spelling and grammar for English. Witness, the varying spellings that we have of Shakespeare's own name: 'Shaxpere', 'Shogspar', 'Choxper', and so on. These arise because each writer of the name (or any word) would write down the sound of what he'd heard as he would like to spell it. The written English of that time was 'not fixed and elegant and controlled by academics' (Anthony Burgess) – it was a language ripe for exploration and development, as the sailors were doing with material goods in the new world.

All this lack of regulation means that it is very common for Shakespeare's characters to commit what we would now consider to be grammatical howlers, for instance plural subjects combined with singular verbs and seemingly non-sensical changes in tense. However, he was writing down (in elevated form) how people speak and these 'howlers' often reflect the characters' state of mind.

The Plots of Shakespeare's Plays

The commercial playwright had to write plays that he could be reasonably sure would attract an audience and took his plots from existing sources that would be generally known and appeal to a paying public. Early works included *The Comedy of Errors*, a free adaptation of a well known Roman comedy of confused identity and *Titus Andronicus*, a sex and sadism horror that would put today's film censors into a complete spin. The three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III* are based on historical accounts of one of England's most troubled times which were finally resolved by the acquisition of the throne by Henry VII, grandfather of the ever-popular Queen Elizabeth I – an event which happens at the end of *Richard III*. A modern equivalent might be dramatically to chart Winston Churchill's life from his 'wilderness years' (forced out of politics) to the triumph of the surrender of Nazi Germany.

Another aspect of this commercialism was the 'megabucks' that could be made by special one-off performances for rich patrons. For example, *Macbeth* was probably written for performance before King James I (Elizabeth I's successor). Banquo, one of Macbeth's victims in the play, was reputedly an ancestor of James; Shakespeare radically altered the available historical record to ensure that the King was not offended and included references to witchcraft, breast-feeding and tobacco – subjects very close to James' heart.

Some Significant Speeches in Shakespeare's Plays

It's not just the plots that Shakespeare adapted from known sources, he even adapted other people's words. For example in the court scene of *Henry VIII* (Act 2, Scene 4), Queen Katherine's wonderful speech beginning 'Sir, I desire you do me right and justice...' is an almost direct copy of what she actually said, according to the historical record. Enobarbus' famous speech 'The barge she sat in...' in *Antony and Cleopatra* (Act 2, Scene 2) is very close to a translation from Plutarch's *Life of Antonius*.

Shakespeare's Texts

Four hundred years on, it is difficult to be sure that every word in a Shakespeare play is exactly as he first wrote it. The problems with his play-texts begin with the fact that then there was no such thing as a law of copyright. That wasn't to arrive for another hundred years. Once a play was in print, anyone could simply copy and sell