Role-playing on Stage[1]

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Abstract

Role-playing on stage, e.g. an actor playing Shakespeare's Richard III, clearly differs from role-playing in real life, e.g. Richard playing his real life role as King. The difference is often said to be that on-stage role-playing, unlike its real-life counterpart, involves 'make-believe', with audiences having to 'suspend their disbelief' (e.g. that they are watching Richard III); or 'pretence' (the actor pretends to be Richard III); or 'imitation' (the actor imitates Richard III).

I argue that none of these will do, and that the clue to the real difference lies in the title of Erving Goffman's 1959 book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. People in real life present themselves; actors on stage present real or fictional characters. So of course do histories, biographies and novels; but whereas they do it by describing characters, actors do it by depicting them, as indeed do portraits, cartoons, puppets and CGI animations.

What makes on-stage role-playing differ from these other ways of depicting people is that, in it, the depiction of people (the characters) is done by other people (the actors). This requires actors to use some of their own attributes (voice, appearance, etc.), adapted as required (by costume, makeup, etc.), to depict those of their characters. That raises the question of what fixes which of their attributes audiences will and won't read into their characters. After discussing this, I turn to what I think actors mean by saying they try to become their characters (since they cannot mean that literally), what that involves, and how it lets interestingly complex characters be played very differently by different actors

1 Role-playing in real life

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts

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Jaques, *As You Like It*, Act 2 Scene 7
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Shakespeare's Jaques is not alone in using role-playing on stage to explain role-playing in real life.

Erving Goffman, in the Preface to his 1959 *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, says

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[1] Early drafts of this paper were discussed on 10 September 2015 at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, and on 16 March 2016 at one of the British Society of Aesthetics Cambridge Lectures, discussions to which this final version owes much. Besides the works referred to in the text, I am also much indebted to Tom Stern's 2013 *Philosophy and Theatre*. But my greatest debt is to those with whom, over many years, I have acted in plays, an experience as satisfying as it has been enlightening about what acting is.

The perspective employed in this report is that of the theatrical performance … I shall consider the way in which the individual in society presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them.

Raymond Williams too, in his 1975 *Drama in a Dramatised Society*, says that

like many actors, people find roles growing on them: they come to fit the part, as he who would play the King. What is new, really, is not in them but in us (p. 14).

Much of what Jaques, Goffman and Williams say about real-life roles is true. When Presidents act or speak in public as Presidents they are indeed playing that role, which in private they are not doing: nothing they do or say then commits their Presidential selves to anything. It is in this sense that Presidents 'have their exits and their entrances', as we all do in our various roles – as friends, partners, parents, neighbours, employees, employers – from Jaques' 'whining schoolboy' to his 'lean and slippered pantaloon'. In real life each of us does, as Jaques says, play many parts.

But this real life role-playing is quite different from role-playing on stage. When Laurence Oliver played Shakespeare's Richard III, his on-stage role was nothing like Richard's off-stage one. Richard's role was that of a real King, when he became one; Olivier's that of an actor playing him, a role that neither exemplifies nor illuminates the real Richard's role as King. The way real monarchs play their role must of course inform the way actors play monarchs on stage, but that tells us nothing about what on-stage role-playing is.

2 Make-believe, pretence, imitation and presentation

How then does role-playing on stage differ from role-playing in real life? First, a caveat. What I say will not apply to all on-stage role-playing: for a start, it will not apply to ballet, mime or other kinds of wordless role-playing. Nor will it apply to wholly improvised performances, or to performers appearing as themselves, as in stand-up comedy. What it will apply to are performances in which actors portray a play's characters on stage or screen, using speeches largely written in advance by playwrights or screenwriters, in productions largely controlled by directors. That covers most productions of plays by Shakespeare and many other playwrights, and is what from now on I shall mean by 'on-stage role-playing'.

Goffman, like many others, takes the difference between role-playing on and off stage to be that the former involves *make-believe* in a way the latter does not. 'The stage', he says in his Preface, 'presents things that are make-believe', whereas 'life presents things that are real and sometimes not well rehearsed'. Not so. Olivier's on-stage performances of Richard III were real enough and, while no doubt well rehearsed in general, were almost certainly not well rehearsed in all the details that varied from one performance to another. The only make-believe involved was that Olivier *was* Richard III, i.e. that Richard himself was on stage, and Olivier's audiences never

believed that.[2] Hence the idea that theatre-going requires what Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria*, called a 'willing suspension of disbelief', in this case the disbelief that Richard III was on stage. But that's wrong too: audiences watching *Richard III* never 'suspended their disbelief' that the person on stage was Richard; because, as Dr Johnson says in his 1765 *Preface to Shakespeare*,

> The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.

Nor is on-stage role-playing *pretence*, as is also said. Olivier never pretended to be Richard III, and the pretence would not have worked if he had, since his audiences knew perfectly well that Richard was long dead. Actors are not trying to fool their audiences into thinking they *are* the characters they play – as is especially obvious when their characters are fictional. Hamlet, for example, being fictional, is not just dead but was never alive, at least not in the world we live in, and so *could* not be on stage. The fact is, as Bertrand Russell said of Hamlet in his 1919 *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, that in our world

> only the thoughts, feelings, etc., in Shakespeare and his readers [and actors and audiences] are real … If no one thought about Hamlet, there would be nothing left of him; if no one had thought about Napoleon, he would soon have seen to it that some one did (pp. 169–70).

Another thing the unreality of fictional characters like Hamlet shows is that actors need not *imitate* the people they play, since no one can imitate someone who does not exist. Actors may of course imitate real people like Winston Churchill, or even perhaps Richard III, if they think that will help to remind audiences who their character is. But imitation, even when possible, is only relevant if a play calls for it: on-stage performances are of people characterised in the play, not in real life. Olivier's Richard III was a hunchback because Shakespeare's play says he is, not because, as we now know, the real Richard had scoliosis; just as the speeches Olivier spoke while playing Richard were those Shakespeare gives him, not those of the real Richard.

Moreover, even when imitation *is* possible, and an important part of an on-stage performance, it is never the point of it. In the 2014 film *The Theory of Everything*, Eddie Redmayne imitates Stephen Hawking in order to show how Hawking's growing paralysis affected and eventually ended his marriage. The imitation was a means to that end, not the name of the game.

Nor is imitation needed to distinguish playing real people like Hawking and Richard III from playing fictional ones like Hamlet. As Derek Matravers argues in his 2014 *Fiction and Narrative*, we understand books and films in the same way whether we think they are fact or fiction, and the same goes for how theatre-goers understand plays. The fact that *Richard III*, unlike *Hamlet*, has a protagonist with a real history does not require us to assess its historical accuracy in order to follow

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[2] Screenings of Olivier's film of *Richard III* involve the further 'make-believe' that *Olivier* is present in the cinema, which again no one watching the film believes. But as the same is true of television news – no one thinks that what is shown, as opposed to the showing of it, is happening in their living room – we can ignore this extra layer of make-believe, which sheds no new light on the on-stage/off-stage distinction.

the play; nor, if we do assess it, need our assessment depend on how accurately we think the actor playing Richard imitates him.

The best way to see how on-stage role-playing differs from its real-life counterpart, if not by requiring imitation, pretence, or the suspension of an audience's disbelief, is to see that and how it differs from Goffman's 'presentation of the *self*'. Goffman means by this the ways people present themselves to others by what they do and say. But actors in a play showing audiences what their characters do and say, are presenting those *characters*, not themselves, not even when they happen to *be* the characters they are playing. For example, when Coral Browne played her younger self in Alan Bennett's 1983 television film *An Englishman Abroad*, while she alone could accept her 1984 BAFTA best-actress award for doing so, other actors could easily have played Coral Browne in the film: that she played that part herself is just a curious coincidence.

The fact that actors on stage are presenting their characters rather than themselves matters here for a more important reason. This is that since audiences need not be the people to whom their characters present themselves, actors can present characters who are *not* role-playing, e.g. when they are thinking or talking to themselves, as Hamlet is doing when he wonders

> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them.

And as in scenes like this, where the actor is role-playing but his character is not, so in general: even when actors present characters playing roles, as Olivier did when presenting Richard III playing his real-life role as a King, what makes their characters' roles differ from theirs is that they, unlike their characters, are not presenting *themselves*.[3]

3 Describing and depicting

If the fact that actors present their characters rather than themselves is what distinguishes on-stage from off-stage role-playing, it it is not what distinguishes acting from other ways of presenting characters, which histories, biographies and novels also do. The difference here is that while books present characters by *describing* them, actors do it by *depicting* them. This is why, whereas stories designed to be read contain far more than dialogue, in order to tell us not only what their characters say but where, when, to whom and how (and often why) they say it, the texts of plays designed to be performed do not. Instead of telling us these things, performances of plays use sets, costumes, lighting, sound, music, choreography and, above all, actors, to show us them. In short, most of what written stories describe, performances of plays depict.

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[3] This two-fold distinction still applies and suffices when actors play actors acting, as in *The Mousetrap* (the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*), which shows us three 'presentations': the real actor presenting the Player King; the Player King presenting the King in *The Mousetrap*; and that King presenting himself to his Queen as her husband. Only the last of these is an off-stage role, since the *Mousetrap* King is presenting himself. The others are on-stage roles, as they will be however many there are. Whenever actors play actors playing actors playing … only the last role is an off-stage one: all the others are on-stage roles.

The distinction between description and depiction must not be overdrawn. For one thing, characters can be presented either way, as our ability to stage and film books shows. For another, neither kind of presentation is ever complete: plays and films can no more show us everything about a character than a book can tell us everything. Nor do they try to: they will tell or show us only what matters to the story. It is because nothing in Shakespeare's *Richard III* turns on the colour of Richard's eyes that it never tells us what colour they were, which is why actors of any eye-colour can play Richard: the fact that in the best-known portraits of him his eyes are painted grey is irrelevant.

And as for real characters, so for fictional ones. It is why Conan Doyle, after telling us in the first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet,* that Holmes's eyes are 'sharp and piercing', never tells us what colour they are: nothing in any Holmes story turns on it. And as for descriptions of Holmes, so for depictions of him: Sydney Paget's illustrations of the original stories lost nothing by being in black and white and, while the eyes of actors playing Holmes should look 'sharp and piercing', their colour is as irrelevant as it is when they play Richard III.

The third and most important reason for not overdrawing the description-depiction distinction is that many presentations of real and fictional characters rely on both, as they do in illustrated books. The presentation of Sherlock Holmes in Conan Doyle's stories, for example, owes much to Sydney Paget's original drawings, just as that of A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* characters does to E. H. Shepard's, and that of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* characters does to John Tenniel's.

The same applies to performances of plays, only more so. For while unillustrated books can present their characters purely by description, few if any characters are presented in plays solely by depiction. Nearly all on-stage role-playing also relies on two kinds of description that we need to distinguish in order to understand how it works.

First, there are descriptions of scenes. What scenes a production of a play can depict will vary with the resources available to it, which were far less in Shakespeare's open-air Globe Theatre, with its exiguous sets and no stage lighting, than in today's indoor theatres. That is why, when his company could not depict scenes, Shakespeare made his characters describe them – as Enobarbus does in Act II Scene 2 of *Antony and Cleopatra*, when he says that Cleopatra's barge,

> … like a burnish'd throne,
> Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
> Purple the sails, and so perfumèd that
> The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,
> Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
> The water which they beat to follow faster.

Similarly, after the Chorus, at the start of *Henry V*, invites the audience to

> Suppose within the girdle of these walls
> Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
> Whose high uprearèd and abutting fronts
> The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder

– he immediately asks them, apologetically, to

> Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts …
> Think when we talk of horses, that you see them
> Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth.

These scene-setting speeches exploit our ability to imagine things we cannot see, just as written stories do. And they do it so well that Shakespeare's plays are readily performed, not only without the scenery their original productions inevitably lacked, but on radio, with no visible scenery at all.

The second kind of descriptions Shakespeare's characters give us are of their own experiences, feelings, thoughts and intentions, which they can describe in far more detail than any wordless mime, dance or music could depict. They may describe them to other characters, as Caesar does in Act I Scene 2 of *Julius Caesar* when he says to the crowd

> I hear a tongue shriller than all the music
> Cry 'Caesar!' Speak. Caesar is turn'd to hear.

Or they may describe them to the audience, as in Act I Scene 2 of *Richard III*, where Richard says of the lady he's just seduced over the coffin of the husband she knows he killed

> I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.

Or they may speak to themselves, as Hamlet does in his soliloquies, as when he says

> How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!

These speeches, unlike scene-setting ones, are *not* meant to replace depictions. On the contrary, what they describe is precisely what the actors who speak them, and the actors whose characters hear them, must then depict: by how and to whom the speeches are said, and by how those who hear them react to hearing them. Some speeches, of course, make this task simpler, if not easier, than others. Soliloquies and asides to the audience, for example, unlike speeches to other characters, tell us simply and directly what they express. When the future Richard III tells us he'll have the lady he's just seduced but won't keep her long, we know he means it; when he tells his fellow nobles

> 'Tis death to me to be at enmity;
> I hate it, and desire all good men's love,

we know he doesn't. So the way actors say those lines must show us Richard's persuasive insincerity, and the other actors' reactions must show us whether their characters are fooled by it.

4 Actors and animations

The fact that actors, like books, rely on descriptions to present their characters does not impugn the distinction between them: for a start, printed books are static, as are their illustrations, which acting is not. Actors depict and describe their characters dynamically, by what audiences see them do and hear them say. But then so do puppets, models and computer-generated images on cinema, television or computer screens: how then do their depictions of people differ from those of actors?

One difference is that most non-human depicters are less easily mistaken for the people they depict. But that is irrelevant, as is shown by the fact that viewers of films which mix the two, like the 1988 *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and the 1992 *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, respond in the same way to both. The reason they do so is of course that, being as able as Dr Johnson's spectators were to distinguish the characters being depicted from who or what is depicting them, they are responding to the former rather than the latter. This is also why film-goers are not fazed by unclarity about where human depiction stops and animation starts, as in the 2001–3 *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, where the motion-capture animation of the actor Andy Serkis that depicts Gollum combines quite naturally with the human depicters of Frodo and Sam.

We might expect this sort of combination of human and animated depiction to work best on screen, where no actors are present and all viewers see are images. In fact it can work equally well in live theatre, as in the National Theatre's 2007 staging of Michael Morpurgo's book *War Horse*. The way that production used actors to depict human characters, and life-sized puppets to depict the horses they interact with, is an instructive case-study in what determines which features of depicters audiences will and will not attribute to what they depict.

In *War Horse* the puppets look and move sufficiently like horses to make audiences respond to the activities, reactions and emotions of the horses they depict, because those matter to the play; while their structure and surfaces differ sufficiently to stop them depicting the horses' coats, musculature, or visual opacity, which are as irrelevant to this play as the colour of Richard III's eyes are to that play. In this respect *War Horse*'s puppets resemble animated cartoons, which can also make clear in advance what they will depict and what they won't, as indeed can certain kinds of film: silent films will not depict their characters' voices; black-and-white ones will not depict the colours of their costumes and surroundings; and so on.

When human actors play human characters, the line between what is and what is not being depicted is less clear. It may be clear enough in the staging: no audience watching Shakespeare's *Henry V* in the Globe Theatre ever took the size and shape of 'this wooden O', as the Chorus calls it, to be a credible depiction of 'the vasty fields of France', which is why the Chorus asks audiences to imagine those fields. But when actors depict people, audiences can read almost anything they see and hear of them into the characters they play: what they look and sound like, what they do and say, and how they do and say it. To see or hear an actor playing Henry V or Hamlet do or say something is by default to see or hear that character doing or saying the same thing in much the same way.

These default readings of actors' traits into their characters can of course be overridden, precisely because, as Dr Johnson said, audiences know 'the players are only players', not the characters they play. But how: how do actors stop audiences reading some of their traits into their characters? Costumes are one way: Maxine Peake's 2014 Hamlet at Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre was a man because Peake dressed and moved like one, just as Mark Rylance's Olivia in the Globe Theatre's 2002 and 2012 productions of *Twelfth Night* was a woman because Rylance dressed and moved like one, which he did because the play describes her as one. And as in these cases, so in general. The reason actors play Richard III with a hump whether they have one or not, Shylock as a

Jew whether they are Jewish or not, and Othello as black whether they are black or not, is that Shakespeare's plays require them to do so. That is why, when Adrian Lester played Othello at the National Theatre in 2013, audiences read his colour into his character. It is also why, when he played Henry V there in 2003, they did *not* read his colour into his character: they ignored it, because Henry's colour is irrelevant to the play.

5 Interpretations

If Adrian Lester's colour was irrelevant to his 2003 portrayal of Henry V, so too, if less obviously, was that production's modern setting. All its modern setting did was require Lester's costumes and weapons to differ from those of Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh in their films of *Henry V*: it did not require his Henry to differ in character from theirs. After all, it is only because resetting plays need not change their characters that we can set Shakespeare's history plays in our own time, as he did in his: their characters, if not their historical settings, can be our contemporaries.

If different settings do not require actors to play their characters differently, different readings of their characters do. Take the 'all the world's a stage' speech from *As You Like It* that I quoted at the start of this paper. It is Jaques' reply to Duke Senior's remark that

> This wide and universal theatre
> Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
> Wherein we play in.

How Jaques replies to this remark depends on how he is interpreted. Interpreted as a misanthropic know-all, his reply may be a piece of showing-off; interpreted as an interested observer, presented with an analogy new to him, he may do what James Garnon made him do in the Globe Theatre's 2015 *As You Like It*. There Garnon's Jaques, after expressing intrigued surprise with his first two lines –

> … All the world's a stage
> And all the men and women merely players [?]

– accepted the analogy and used the rest of the speech –

> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts
> His acts being seven ages …

to develop it in enthusiastic detail. That way of playing his speech both expressed and contributed to Garnon's unusual but entirely credible reading of Jaques' character.

Another example is Clare Higgins's Gertrude in Nicholas Hytner's 2010 National Theatre *Hamlet*. In this production, set in a modern surveillance state, Gertrude's complicity in her first husband's murder[4] makes her deny, in her closet scene with Hamlet, that she can see his father's ghost when the audience can see that she does see him. Later in the production, Ophelia's being

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[4] Nicholas Hytner made this back story explicit in a discussion of his National Theatre Shakespeare productions held in the NT's Lyttelton Theatre on 22 April 2016.

dragged off to be killed by Claudius's thugs (for fear of what she might tell Laertes) lets Gertrude turn her oddly lyrical description of Ophelia's death –

> There is a willow grows aslant a brook, …
>
> There, on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds
>
> Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
>
> When down her weedy trophies and herself
>
> Fell in the weeping brook. … but long it could not be
>
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
>
> Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
>
> To muddy death

– into a sentimental lie designed to conceal from Laertes how his sister really died.

Readings of Shakespeare's characters can also affect and be affected by how his plays are cut. In Olivier's 1944 film of *Henry V*, his Henry speaks only the first two lines of his forty-three line ultimatum demanding the surrender of Harfleur –

> How yet resolves the governor of the town?
>
> This is the latest parle we will admit

– before the Governor capitulates, saying

> Our expectation hath this day an end:
>
> The Dauphin, whom of succors we entreated,
>
> Returns us that his powers are yet not ready
>
> To raise so great a siege. Therefore, great king,
>
> We yield our town and lives to thy soft mercy.

Cutting the rest of Henry's speech, including the threat that unless the Governor surrenders he must

> … in a moment look to see
>
> The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
>
> Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
>
> Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
>
> And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls,
>
> Your naked infants spitted upon pikes …

– allowed Olivier to make his Henry the untainted hero that his patriotic film, made during World War II, required him to be. Keeping those lines, as Kenneth Branagh did in his 1989 film, would have made Olivier's Henry the more morally complex character that Branagh's and Lester's Henrys were.

The ability of many of Shakespeare's major characters to sustain an unusually wide range of readings undoubtedly contributes to their endless appeal to directors, actors and audiences. Hamlet and King Lear, for example, can be interpreted in far more varied ways than can, say, Ben Jonson's Volpone, Ibsen's Hedda Gabler or Chekhov's Uncle Vanya. Not all Shakespeare's major characters are equally protean, of course: the characters of Macbeth, Cleopatra and Falstaff are less easily varied than Hamlet's is, although it can be done. Roger Allam's Falstaff, in the Globe Theatre's

2010 *Henry IV*, for instance, was not just the usual gregarious self-serving self-deluded tippler: he was a gentleman fallen on hard times coping as best he could with age and relative penury. This made his rejection by Prince Hal at the end of Part II, when Hal becomes King –

> I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers;
> How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!

– which destroyed his dreams of renewed wealth and status, even more moving than it normally is.

6 Characters and their actors

That different interpretations require actors to play their characters differently is obvious. But different actors can play characters differently even when they interpret them in much the same way and in the same setting. Take Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller alternating Frankenstein and his Creature in the National Theatre's 2011 staging of Mary Shelley's novel. Despite using the same speeches, costume, make-up and moves, and in the same setting, to give the same basic reading of the two characters, their performances were remarkably different. So it cannot be just different settings or interpretations that make different actors depict characters differently. Other actors could interpret Jaques as Garnon did, or Gertrude as Higgins did, or use Olivier's or Branagh's screenplays to interpret Henry V as they did: their portrayals of Jaques, Gertrude and Henry would still differ from Garnon's, Higgins's, Olivier's and Branagh's; and the better their portrayals, the more interestingly different they would probably be. How so?

The answer lies in four features of on-stage presentations of human characters by human actors which together, I have argued, distinguish them from all other kinds of presentation:

> (1) actors, unlike writers, depict their characters;
> (2) actors, unlike animations, are as human as the characters they depict; and
> (3) real people are depicted in the same way as fictional ones, because
> (4) it is the play, not real life, that determines what its characters do and say.

This is why, as I noted in §2, actors playing real characters need only resemble them in ways called for by the play. It is also why Russell's contrast, quoted in §2, between Hamlet and Napoleon –

> If no one thought about Hamlet, there would be nothing left of him; if no one had thought
> about Napoleon, he would soon have seen to it that some one did

– does not apply to plays about them. There Napoleon and Hamlet are on a par: in the script of a play there is no more to any of its characters, real or fictional, than the lines and stage directions the playwright gives them. Only when a play is staged is there anything more to its characters than that: namely, the performances of the actors playing them. And then the fact that these actors are the people whom an audience sees and hears doing and saying what the play says its characters do and say, makes them, for that audience, the *embodiments* of those characters.

This I think is what actors mean when they say they try to 'become' their characters. They cannot mean this literally, since it implies both that Richard III (say) is actually on stage wherever and whenever he is being played, and therefore that he could only ever be played by one person,

namely himself, which is absurd. What is not absurd, but true, is that audiences who take actors to embody their characters will (subject to the conventions of the production) take whatever the actors do and say, and however they do and say it, to be what their characters do and say, and how they do and say it. That is why actors try to make everything their audience might see and hear of them (within their production's conventions) credible attributes of their characters, and why I think this is what actors mean by 'becoming their characters'.

It is also what enables different actors to play the same characters, similarly interpreted, quite differently. The reason is that just as no two people will do or say the same thing in quite the same way in real life,[5] so no two actors will play the same part in quite the same way. And it is our ability to use these differences in appearance and behaviour to distinguish people in real life that we also use to distinguish embodiments of the same character. For however well actors adapt their appearance and behaviour to fit a playwright's description, and a director's interpretation, of a complex character, these will still differ in ways that audiences can use to differentiate them, as they did with Cumberbatch's and Miller's Frankensteins. This is what, settings and interpretations aside, made Olivier's Henry V differ from Branagh's and Lester's: they were very different embodiments of that character, as Helen Mirren (in a 1982 RSC production) and Eve Best (in a 2015 Globe Theatre production) were of Cleopatra. It is also what makes us want to see our best and most versatile actors play a wide range of major roles: we expect their embodiments of them to be not only good but enlighteningly distinctive.

Cumberbatch's and Miller's Frankensteins illustrate another way in which their embodiments of their characters differed: the way their Frankensteins and Creatures interacted. For just as our real-life reactions to other people depend on them as well as us, so too do those of characters in plays. Cumberbatch's Frankenstein differed from Miller's partly because, since Miller's Creature differed from his, he did not react to it as he would have done to his own Creature.

And as with Frankenstein and his Creature, so in Shakespeare with Antony and Cleopatra. Those characters interact so much that how each is played inevitably affects how the other is played. Helen Mirren's 1982 Cleopatra, for example, differed from her 1998 National Theatre Cleopatra partly because her 1982 Antony, Michael Gambon, differed greatly from her 1998 Antony, Alan Rickman. Similarly, to a greater or lesser extent, with all interacting characters: how each is played almost always affects how the others are played. And these effects are cumulative: Gambon's and Mirren's portrayals of Antony and Cleopatra emerged from their exchanges in successive scenes, with each scene building on its predecessors, rather like a painted portrait emerging from a succession of brush strokes.

This incidentally is why actors can know a part without being able to recite it all off-stage, just as you can know how to drive somewhere without being able to describe the whole route in advance. For just as drivers need only recognise the right way to go at each junction, so actors need only recognise and produce the right response to each cue when they get it. The analogy is not

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[5] except perhaps similarly reared identical twins …

perfect, of course, since the right way to go at each junction is the same for all drivers on the same route, which is not true of the cues, verbal and visual, given by actors to other actors: both they and the responses to them can vary widely with different actors, and with how those actors gave and responded to earlier cues.

Hence the amount of rehearsal time devoted to working on a play's major characters and their interactions, first to develop them into a coherent whole, and then, in run-throughs, to get them into the actors' mental and physical 'muscle memories', so they can rely on each other in performance. Not that this process is meant to make all performances of a production indistinguishable. On the contrary, the better a play's actors are, the more they can develop and vary their characters in detail during a run, in response to each other and, especially perhaps in preview performances, to audiences, whose reactions can show whether and how characters' depictions may need to be changed to get them across.

That only human actors can do all this is obvious, and I think is what gives live performances of plays like Shakespeare's their appeal: an appeal we can only understand if we recognise what actors on stage are and are not doing. What they are *not* doing, I have argued, is imitating their characters, or pretending to be them: since imitation is at most an incidental aid to portrayals of real people, and impossible in portrayals of fictional ones; while pretending to be a character would, even if it worked (which with sane adults it wouldn't), be identity theft and the work not of actors but of conmen.

What actors on stage *are* doing, while not literally becoming their characters, is embodying them for their audiences in the sense outlined above, a sense that explains how different actors can present a character equally well but very differently. With characters as amenable to diverse embodiment as many of Shakespeare's are, that is a large part of his plays' enduring appeal. More generally, it is what makes theatre at its best the most vivid way of portraying real and fictional people.

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