Words alone do not bring a play to life; the persons who speak them have to come alive too. Until we observe how Shakespeare achieved this, we have not responded as fully as we might to what he has written. Behind the words on a page lies an imagined reality in which each character is activated distinctively, so that they all appear to be in independent charge of what they say and do.

On stage, a play releases its true nature. Henry Irving used to say that this happened when an actor was ‘moved by the impulse of being’; having studied a part as carefully as possible, with a leap of imagination he made the character his own. Thoughts hidden under words, sensuous activity of all kinds, reactions to time and place, interactions with other characters and with the events of each moment as they occur, every element of lived experience: all this is caught up in the heightened and cunning form of life which is a play in performance. Every actor brings individual qualities and experience to this task, so that a play does not have one realisation on stage but many, each achieved by using the same script but following different routes and using different talents and techniques.

Shakespeare was an actor as well as author, so that he knew the processes of collaboration which would bring his plays before their audiences. As he wrote, he thought as an actor, in part at least, so that embodied in his scripts are millions of clues which performers can search out and use in their work, and they are as useful today as when the plays were first written. It is an almost incredible fact that, even now, actors speak as if Shakespeare were himself present at rehearsals, ready to guide, support and energise. Laurence Olivier put it like this:

The great parts – you’ve no idea how they devour you. You are playing Othello, God! You give it all you’ve got. The author
sage to you: ‘You’ve given it all you’ve got? Good. Now, more . . . Good! You’ve done that? Fine. Now more! More, damn you, more! more! MORE! M–O–R–E!!’ And your heart and your guts and your brain are pulp, and the part feeds on them. Acting great parts devours you. Great parts are cannibals. It is a dangerous game.²

No two actors will present the same Othello on stage, but the common experience of all who take on Shakespeare’s roles, both great and small, is that, if they pay close attention to the text, the author not only seems to direct and support them; he also spurs them on to discover more and more about their characters in performance.

If we wish to understand a play by Shakespeare, we have to consider how words suggest ‘impulse[s] of being’ with which the actors can take over the play and work on it with heightened and inspired energy. Many practical directions are to be found in the smallest linguistic details of the text. John Gielgud explained how:

I try to study the sound, shape and length of words themselves, so as to reproduce them exactly as they are written on the page. In a verse speech (and often in a long prose one too) I am constantly aware of the whole span of the arc – the beginning, middle and end of the passage. I try to phrase correctly for breathing, punctuation and emphasis, and then, conforming to this main line, I experiment within it for modulation, tone, and pace, trying not to drag out the vowels, elongate syllables, or pounce on opening phrases, and being very careful not to drop the ends of words and sentences and to pronounce the final consonants – D, T, P, and so forth.³

Good verse-speaking’, wrote John Gielgud, ‘is rather like swimming. If you surrender to the water it keeps you up, but if you fight you drown.’⁴

Attention to pronunciation and speech can shape a performance without providing an intellectual concept or insisting upon any particular meaning for word or gesture. The actor gains a security of mind in which to trust the less manageable forces of passion and fantasy. ‘The joke is’, said Sir John, ‘that people think of me as an intellectual actor. Yet I have always trusted almost en-