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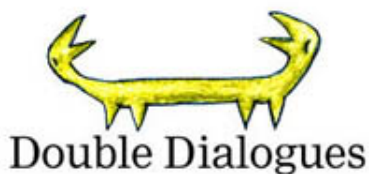
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Jacobs, John 2008, Perverse performances by skilful liars : Shakespeare's Iago and Mamet's Billy and Mike, *Double dialogues*, no. 8, Summer 2007/08 : Art and Lies I, pp. 1-9.

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Issue Eight, Summer 2007/08 Art & Lies I

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Perverse Performances by Skilful Liars: Shakespeare's Iago and Mamet's Billy and Mike

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'Natural Faith'

Imagine there is a knock on the door of your office at the University. You call out 'Come in' and a student enters. She has a problem that she wants you, the lecturer, to help her with. You may not have seen her before, but if so there's nothing strange about that, since over 200 students attend the lectures in this subject. Or perhaps it is a student not yet enrolled in the subject who wants to ask you about entry or timetable requirements. This is a very routine, pretty much everyday event in the life of most academics or tertiary teachers. The young woman is dressed just like most female students; she is polite and pleasant, slightly nervous and inarticulate, as many students are when they are in the lecturer's office. There seems nothing suspicious about her at all. In her hand is a printed sheet that you are familiar with, a sheet about the lecture program that you are in charge of.

Who is this person who has just entered your office? Is there any reason to believe that she is to any great extent not what she seems? Is it possible she is a liar, some kind of actor, not a University student at all, but in fact someone impersonating a student, possible she has been hired by someone with a grudge against you in order to make a fool of you in some way, or hired or engaged by someone who knows you have quite a lot of money at the moment so as in some way to begin a process of stealing that money from you? This is all most unlikely to be sure, but certainly not impossible, a situation recalling the words of P.G.Wodehouse's Psmith, who warns us never to confuse these two things, the unlikely and the impossible.

This is an essay about liars, liars in everyday life and liars in works of art, especially plays and film/television, the art forms with which I am most familiar. In the theatre and in film, we pay frequently to see, enjoy and to be seduced by role play, to 'suspend disbelief'. We expect the performer to portray or pretend to be someone else (the character), to play a character which the performer herself or himself is not; and we, the audience, consent to this seduction. However, in life outside the theatre we tend to believe in the honesty of people; we prefer to think the best of them and, if their façade is honest, to assume that what lies beneath is equally so. Reflecting for a moment on the hypothetical example of the University lecturer described above: how many of us who were at the *2007 Double Dialogues (Lies - a Conference on Art)* conference in Suva would be vulnerable in such everyday situations? I think most of us would be vulnerable; and considering the cases I am about to look at in the next few minutes, the moral of my paper is: keep a part of your mind highly sceptical at all times: trust no-one deeply until you know them very, very well; for, as Shakespeare's Duncan

suggests, there's no art to find the mind's construction in the face.

Philosophers quite frequently use the phrase 'natural faith' (as distinct from 'supernatural faith'). The term comes from Thomas Aquinas (in his commentary on *De Trinitate* by Boethius), and Derrida revived the idea in an essay called "Faith and Knowledge". The idea is a simple one, as proposed by Derrida: I must extend a line of credit, as it were, to everyone and anyone merely in order for social commerce to take place, even if I suspect that I might be lied to. Without this 'natural faith' no relationship is viable; and so, of course, it is this 'natural faith' that makes deception possible. Deception, then, is predicated on natural faith. We simply do not have theoretical knowledge of the other person's ideas, motivations, feelings, and so forth. I believe Othello falls less through anything to do with his own character, less for example through insecurity about his colour or about his sexuality, than through the natural faith which makes deception possible. Iago trades on the natural faith, not only of Othello but of all the other characters, on their inability to secure knowledge of the other person.

House of Games

Let us move now, not back to the office of our hypothetical University lecturer, but to another office. The scene is early in David Mamet's film *House of Games*, and the office is the consulting rooms of a young psychiatrist, Dr. Margaret Ford, who has suddenly become very wealthy through having written a best-selling book (about 'Compulsion and Obsession in Everyday Life'). A young man, Billy, who has been her patient for perhaps several weeks or maybe months, arrives at her rooms and tells her he fears for his life: he has gambling debts that he cannot pay and the man he owes the money to (the Mike of my paper's sub-title) is going to kill him. She agrees to meet Mike and to seek to intercede on the young man's behalf. She has in a trice fallen victim to a lie that will rob her of much of her newfound wealth, for Billy is not at all what he seems. Billy is a liar, an 'actor', a member of a group of criminals who have targeted Dr. Ford and are about to fleece her of her money through the power of deception. Once again the question is: is Dr. Ford seduced largely through this power, or is something akin to hubris on her part also involved?

A kind of pride certainly seems to play a part. Most of us would probably agree that at successful moments in people's lives they tend to be somewhat vulnerable, less clear in their thinking and more prone to bad judgment. In this case we can assume that 'Mike', 'Billy' and the other criminals would be on the lookout for such vulnerability and for any opportunity to exploit it. Ford is indeed depicted by Mamet as herself somewhat obsessive in her own life and attitude, and in the scene directly preceding the scene in the consulting room is spoken to firmly about this by a learned friend.

Your book is a best seller, your income jumps up, people look at you differently, perhaps. This is confusing. Listen to me: Slow Down.

The word hubris is usually translated as 'overweening pride', but is more precisely understood in the Greek context as the urge to escape the bonds that define us; such an urge we might associate with Dr. Ford's obsessiveness. Now the film cuts to Billy's visit to Dr. Ford's consulting rooms, the visit to which I referred a moment ago:

Billy

What? Are you going to tell me I'm 'entitled to my feelings...'? What does it...what the hell. does. it. *matter*? (pause)

Ford

It matters if you're going to cure yourself.

Billy

If I'm going to cure myself. And what do I do now?

Ford

What do you do now? You....

Billy

No, no, what do I do today? What do I do *tomorrow*?

Ford

Today and tomorrow you say this: I am a compulsive gambler. The reasons for this ...

Billy

Oh, maan...oh maan...I don't know....what am I *doing* here...?

Ford

You're here to take control of your life.

Billy

I lost, what do you *care* maan, you're rich, you're comfortable, you got your goddam *book* you wrote, you don't do *dick*, you don't do *nothing*, maan, it's all a con game, you do nothing. You say you want to help? You want to *help*...? Help me with *this*. (*He produces a small, nickelled automatic pistol*) Help me with this, if you can, cause if not I got to use it.

And then, a bit later, Billy says

What do you think this is? Some 'dream'? Maan, *you're* living in the dream, your 'questions,' cause there. is. a. real. World. (*pause*)

And then

Ford

You give me the gun and I will help you.

He hands her the gun.

Billy

I just lost twenty-five thousand dollars. That I do not have. And if I do not pay it by tomorrow they are going to kill me. Now: what kind of help is your damn promise now? (Mamet, 1985:10-11)

Very soon after this the action shifts to a location at which Dr. Ford seeks out Billy's creditor. How unwise of her to do so, we might say. How unprofessional. A good therapist helps her client to help himself: a good therapist doesn't go galloping heroically into the life analysed. To do so is probably a sign of the sort of hubris I described earlier. Dr. Ford undoubtedly acts impulsively here; but, considering the acting and improvisatory skills of this 'Billy', is this impulsiveness the *main* cause of what happens here?

Firstly, Billy doesn't give Dr. Ford time to reflect on the consultation, nor give her the chance to counsel him in an unhurried, conventional way. The alleged threat is both extreme and imminent: Billy faces likely death the very next day.

Secondly, consider Billy's language and his apparent 'character'. The performance of the criminal playing 'Billy' is convincing; there's really no more reason to suspect him of being an actor than there was to suspect the hypothetical University student with whom I started this discussion. In his first speech, quoted above, we find Billy resisting Dr. Ford's advice, and impatiently rebelling against her analysis.

What? Are you going to tell me I'm 'entitled to my feelings ...'? What does it ... what. the. hell does. it. *matter*? (Mamet, 1985:10)

(In the screenplay Mamet has put full stops between the last six of these words, apparently to indicate Billy's extreme agitation.)

It seems from his sarcastic quotation about being 'entitled' to feelings that this is not the first occasion on which 'Billy' has been in analysis. He has been coming to sessions with Dr. Ford for some time. There is nothing in Mamet's script to suggest that this is not the case. The scam has been so thoroughly planned that he has carefully secured his therapist's trust in his *bona fides* long before this particular session even starts. At this moment, then, his 'resistance', a common problem in psychoanalysis, comes to the surface. Dr. Ford would have been very familiar with resistance and would have encountered it frequently in her other, genuine, patients. And so she has the natural faith in Billy without which, as I suggested before, no human relationship is possible.

Billy really has played his part ... lied ... brilliantly. Not only his anti-intellectual resentment of his therapist (resistance), but also his apparent lack of self esteem would also have rung very true to Dr. Ford. In an essay about patient/physician communication, Peter Ostwald suggests regarding patients that

Disease diagnosis has the almost inevitable effect of reducing self-esteem. No matter how carefully formulated or tactfully presented, the doctor's words are heard as judgments, even as dire or ominous predictions (Ostwald, 1971:246).

So we see and hear in *House of Games* how natural faith can quite easily become empathy, sympathy, obligation to help.

Ern Malley

An interesting 'real life' example of such exploitation of natural faith was what became known as the Ern Malley hoax. A fictional creation by Australian poets Harold Stewart and James McAuley in the year 1944, this Malley was hailed as a poet of genius by Max Harris, editor of *Angry Penguins*. After the poems were published, the episode was revealed by Stewart and McCauley as a hoax, and they claimed that the poems had no literary merits whatever. But, leaving aside the question of whether Max Harris deserved to be deceived in this way, and leaving aside too the associated dispute about Modernism and poetry, what might interest us here is the initial letter to the editor, the lying letter, which led to the publication of the poems. In his account of the incident, Max Harris tells us that early in 1944 he received a letter from one Ethel Malley. It was a request to look at the poetry of her deceased brother Ern. Ethel Malley wrote

Dear Sir,

When I was going through my brother's things after his death, I found some poetry that he had written. I am no judge myself, but a friend who I showed it to thinks it is very good and told me it should be published. On his advice I am sending you some of the poems for an opinion.

It would be a kindness if you would let me know whether you think there is anything in them. I am not a literary person myself and I do not feel that I understand what he wrote, but I feel that I ought to do something about them ... I enclose a 2d. stamp.

For reply,

Yours sincerely,

Ethel Malley (Harris, 1961:5)

Note both the tone and content of this 'performance', and the persona, the character played: the vulnerable, honest, grieving, humbly dignified sister. At once Max Harris instinctively exercised natural faith and so took the letter at face value. It really is a letter which would make any editor want to help, would induce him/her to want to be able to give this bereaved woman some good news, give her a positive response; it would have at once induced Harris to hope that he might find merit in the poems sent.

Harris and his partners, including Sidney Nolan, published the complete Ern Malley text in the Autumn 1944 edition of *Angry Penguins*, with a cover painting by Sidney Nolan. Did this involve *hubris* on Nolan's and Harris's parts? Or were they simply naturally trusting, almost unavoidably seduced by a couple of skilful, somewhat perverse, liars?

lago

There are clear similarities between many of the words of Shakespeare's lago and the words of this letter. lago often pretends to be humble, unassuming, honest and dignified in a way that seduces not only Othello, but indeed every other character in the play as well. For example, when asked by Othello who started the terrible riot in act two, lago responds

I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth
 Than it should do offence to Michael Cassio.
 Yet, I persuade myself, to speak the truth
 Shall nothing wrong him. This is it, general:
 Montano and myself being in speech,
 There comes a fellow crying out for help,
 And Cassio following him with determined sword (*Othello*, Act 2, Scene 3)

It sounds so very sincere, so completely honest, as though lago really loves and is touchingly loyal to Cassio. Yet it's all a lie. It is not what happened at all. Everybody believes lago. Roderigo trusts him, so does Cassio himself, so does Desdemona, so does the Duke of Venice. Even lago's wife of many years, Emilia (whose down-to-earth commonsense and understanding of human frailty are juxtaposed in the play's third-last scene against the much younger Desdemona's inexperience and naiveté) is utterly amazed to find out near the end of her husband's devastatingly malicious 'performance.'

Consider the decidedly *in medias res* opening moments of *Othello*. Two men enter the stage, most likely in the earliest performances from one of the doors at the back of the platform. They are arguing heatedly.

Rodrigo

Tush, never tell me, I take it most unkindly
 That thou, lago, who hast had my purse
 As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.

lago

'Sblood, but you will not hear me.
 If ever I did dream of such a matter,
 Abhor me.

Rodrigo

Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.

lago

Despise me if I do not: three great ones of the city... (*Othello*, Act 1, Scene 1)

One can imagine that door being entered through (from the 'Tiring House') and slammed here. Who are we to believe in the immediacy, the suddenness, of this moment? Keep in mind: this is performance, not 'reading', so we have little time to decide, for this 'Iago' is already launching into the story of Cassio's promotion. Both the so far un-named character (Roderigo) and 'Iago' seem very animated, very expressive, very angry: the un-named character is angry with Iago, and Iago is angry with ... 'him' (Othello, we later find), and with being unfairly accused of knowing about 'this' (the sudden elopement of Othello and Desdemona, we later find). I am filling in missing links here, information that an audience attending a performance of the play for the first time simply cannot be aware of at the moment of utterance of these first four speeches. The result is that they almost certainly believe in the sincerity of both Iago and Roderigo here. Most people are not liars, and our natural faith, brilliantly brought into play by the immediacy and vehemence of this whirlwind opening, disposes us to respond accordingly. Two scenes later, in a soliloquy, Iago tells us that he was lying. From that point onward we become something like his accomplices and we watch, uncomfortable but enthralled, as he deceives all the others and brings Othello down. But here, in the play's opening moments, here in this eight line embryo of the action, we are misled, seduced. In this play in which not only Othello but all the other characters will be deceived by Iago: the very first event, the very first verbal/bodily exchange between actors and audience, is the deception of that audience, the exploitation of their natural faith.

Liars on the Screen

In the realms of film, television and live theatre, there are countless liars. Sometimes, as in these opening moments of *Othello*, we have no idea that a lie is being told. Sometimes, as happens later in *Othello*, we have that disconcerting advantage of knowing what the person lied to doesn't know. Sometimes we are not quite sure. In the film *The Godfather* Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) discovers that his brother-in-law Carlo has been disloyal to the family. However, we are uncertain as to just how severe Carlo's punishment is going to be.

Michael (almost kindly)

Don't be frightened. Do you think I'd make my sister a widow? Do you think I'd make your children fatherless? After all, I'm Godfather to your son. No, your punishment is that you're out of the family business. I'm putting you on a plane to Vegas...and I want you to stay there. I'll send Connie an allowance, that's all. But don't keep saying you're innocent; it insults my intelligence and makes me angry. Now who approached you, Tataglia or Barzini?

Carlo

Barzini.

Michael (softly)

Good, good. Leave now; there's a car waiting to take you to the airport.

Before having Carlo murdered Michael needs to find out whether it was Tataglia or Barzini who was plotting against the Corleone family. We now see Carlo get into the car, and he is at once strangled to death with a wire by a man who was hiding in the back seat.

A few of the countless other films featuring massive lies are *The Sting*, *The Crying Game*, *Catch Me If You Can*, *Tootsie*, *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Colour Me Kubrick*.

There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face. In an episode of Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (American television comedy) the protagonist, played by David himself, finds out that his mother has just passed away. A few minutes later another

character, who doesn't know about this bereavement, demands something of 'David' quite brusquely. 'David' flares back, 'Look, my mother just died'. The other character apologises and backs off. A couple of minutes later someone else nags him about another matter. David snaps back again, 'Look, my mother just died'. Again the other character retreats and gives 'David' a little more room to grieve. As the same thing happens again a bit later, and then again, the line 'Look, my mother just died' begins to lose its spontaneity and sincerity, becoming increasingly funny as it does so. 'David' has learned that this line helps him deal effectively with pushy, demanding people, and so he uses it *deliberately* with that goal in mind, carefully feigning an angry, hurt tone of voice, a tone which no longer reflects what lies within. In short, even though his mother has in fact died, he lies: the tone of what he says, the apparent spontaneity, sincerity and woundedness, are clearly misleading. This is quite Iago-esque. Iago may well have been upset initially by, for example, the promotion of Cassio ahead of himself (assuming, that is, that Iago is fully human and not a demi-devil deriving from non-naturalistic figures such as Envy from the earlier allegorical and homiletic drama, and similar to later figures like Ambitioso from *The Revenger's Tragedy*). However, Iago goes on literally to re-enact that resentment in the play's opening scene, to deliberately perform the role of a resentful victim, in order to deflect Roderigo's accusations and to engage Roderigo's sympathy: 'Now sir, be judge yourself / Whether I in any just term am affined / To love the Moor' (*Othello*, act 1, scene 1).

Surely all of us have in our lives done something like that, or like what 'Larry David' does in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Lying can be so useful. Recently I took my niece (aged nine years) to the playground and she was misbehaving, taunting her younger brother, and I became angry with her. She defended herself tearfully, telling me that she didn't have any friends and was unhappy at school, and so on. I stopped my stern talk at once, feeling a bit guilty. It was only later that it occurred to me that she had plenty of friends of her own age, a fact confirmed by her mother, who knew at once on hearing my account of the incident that I had been cleverly deceived.

American journalist Laura Blumenfeld found a useful lie to tell, so useful that it gave rise to the writing of a book. In Jerusalem in 1986, a member of a rebel faction of the PLO shot and critically wounded her father. In her book *Revenge: a story of hope* she describes how she later visited the family of the assassin, without the family knowing that she was the daughter of the victim. As in the cases of Iago and Larry David, her lie was all the more persuasive through being based on a truth: she had told the family that she wished to visit them because she was a journalist. This was partly true: she was a journalist and she wanted to explore the motivations of the assassination, and she went on to travel around the world, exploring the motivation for many acts of violence, interviewing a lot of people on the way, including the assassin of Yitzhak Rabin and members of the Albanian Blood Feud Committee.

We have looked at both some fictional and some real life liars. Consider finally four examples of a curious fusion of art and life: professional performers who have taken their art/artifice/lies out of the realm of film and live theatre and into the world outside: *The Chaser's War On Everything*, Garry McDonald's Norman Gunston, Sacha Baron Cohen's Borat, and Melbourne comedian Campbell McComas.

As I conclude this essay two television performers from ABC television's *The Chaser* have just been released on bail from a Sydney gaol. Yesterday they drove an apparently armoured car to within a few metres of visiting President George W. Bush's hotel. On the last part of their journey police had twice failed to detain them at roadside check-points, assuming that they were what they seemed to be: officials guarding and conveying a high profile visitor to Sydney's A.P.E.C. conference. That is, the police acted on natural faith and confused the unlikely with the impossible. The performers from *The Chaser* exploit the difference between the two in all of their work. In one of their programs they can be seen, dressed as police, issuing motorists with infringement notices for travelling in a car park at six kilometres per hour in a five kilometre per hour zone.

Viewers of *The Chaser* are interested less in the perpetrators of the hoaxes than in the spontaneous responses of the victims, in the looks of amazement, then anger, then sullen compliance, as they are booked for speeding or misled in some other way. Something similar to this occurs in the comedy of Garry McDonald and Sacha Baron Cohen. Many Australians will remember that, in the 1980s, whenever there was a big story breaking in the media, press conferences around the nation would be infiltrated by a moronic journalist named Norman Gunston, who looked as inept as his questions to famous people sounded: he had wet, messy, stringy hair, and bits of tissue paper stuck to his face at points on which he had apparently cut himself while shaving. Looking back now at The Gunston Tapes, the liveliest interviews seem to be those in which the interviewees, unlike the television audience, have no prior knowledge that this is not in fact a genuine, *bona fides* journalist interviewing them, but a fraud, an impostor. In a big press conference for handsome American film star Warren Beatty, Beatty has just got off a plane after a long flight to Australia to promote his latest movie. Beatty had a big reputation as a 'ladies' man.' When 'Gunston' begins probing the film star on this topic, we see the latter begin confidently, unsuspecting about his interviewer, despite the hair and strips of tissue paper: Beatty would have been used to such questions, and here he even seems quite pleased about it and shows perhaps a little hubris. 'Have you made it with any Australian Women?' asks Gunston. 'How could I, I've just got off the plane', smirks Beatty. Gunston persists: 'What about the air hostesses?' We notice Beatty becoming a bit uncomfortable, defensive; we can almost hear him asking himself, 'Who *is* this weird journalist? Is he the fool I just took him to be?', and so he decides to turn defence into attack, answering Gunston's question with a rather unkind question of his own: 'I don't want to be rude, but did you cut yourself shaving?' Seeing a self-satisfied movie star placed in an unusual situation, outside his comfort zone: that is what makes this a fascinating 'interview'.

The same is true of 'Borat': by the time we saw the movie we knew that he was a fictional character played by an actor we had already seen play the same character on television: Sacha Baron Cohen. The striking thing was that most of the other people in the movie did not know this. In this way the film is, as Ian Gaskell says (in an essay in this volume), not so much a 'mockumentary' as a true documentary; for the people trying to educate Borat about etiquette - along with the crowd at the rodeo who applauded tumultuously as Borat in his broken English told them: 'I support your war of terror' - were definitely not actors, but real people.

Coda

Finally, let us return to where our essay began: to a university, not this time to the office of a hypothetical lecturer, but to an actual lecture theatre at Melbourne's Monash University. In legal studies in the 1970s the author of the standard introduction to law first-year textbook was eminent British criminologist Professor Glanville Williams. In May of 1976 Professor Williams visited Australia. He gave a lecture at Monash University to an audience numbering approximately 450. However, the two sentences above are lies: the presenter of this lecture was later revealed to be not Glanville Williams at all, but a final year law student named Campbell McComas. Whilst Professor Williams had *not* in fact visited Australia, McComas, aided and abetted by a Law Professor at Monash and two fellow students, had vigorously publicised such a visit. Thus began a career in which McComas created over 1800 characters and many hoaxes. He made a professional career out of similar stunts, hired by various organisations to perform in character as 'guest speaker.' McComas died in 2005. In a newspaper tribute to him by Larry Schwarz, ABC radio presenter Jon Faine, a law student at Monash at the time of the Glanville Williams visit, recalls that 'one staff member famously went up to him after the lecture and said "Do you remember me? I was in your class". That's how authentic it was.'

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Shakespeare often has his characters speak in soliloquies during the course of his plays. Soliloquies are essential to the presentation of a story through the. In his work, Hamlet, Shakespeare's title character is shown to speak in seven soliloquies. Each soliloquy advances the plot, reveals Hamlet's inner thoughts to the audience and helps to create an atmosphere in the play. Can We Help with Your Assignment? Let us do your homework! Professional writers in all subject areas are available and will meet your assignment deadline. Free proofreading and copy-editing included. Check the Price Hire a Writer Get Help. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE Shakespeare bought a house in Stratford, called New Place in 1597. While, he returned there from time to time to visit his family, he finally retired there in 1613. Close by is the house of his son-in-law Dr. Hall " a and well-known physician, married to Shakespeare's daughter Susanna. In their society, and with the respect and of all those around, his life appears to have come to an end. His will, written about a month before he died, gives in his one of the few scraps of his handwriting of which we can be certain. He browbeat the witnesses and when they did not see what he wished them to called them thieves and liars. He left to the last a group of men who were sitting in the corner of the room. He had deliberately ignored them. The party consisted of an old chief, a tall, dignified man with short, white hair, in a new lava- lava, bearing a huge fly wisp as a badge of office, his son, and half a dozen of the important men of the village. Walker had had a feud with them and had beaten them. As was characteristic of him he meant now to rub in his victory, and because he had them down to profit by their he For this reason, people claim that Shakespeare invented these words. How many of these are true coinages by "the Bard", and how many are simply the earliest written attestations of a word or words already in use, I can't tell you. The ones that seem real are new forms of words already in the language. A few words are first attested in Shakespeare and seem to have caused extra problems for the typesetters. This suggests they are really coined by Shakespeare. One example is "denote". The popular book Coined by Shakespeare acknowledges that it is presenting first attestations rather than certain inventions. Thousands of performances of William Shakespeare's plays have been staged since the end of the 16th century. While Shakespeare was alive, many of his greatest plays were performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men and King's Men acting companies at the Globe and Blackfriars Theatres. Among the actors of these original performances were Richard Burbage (who played the title role in the first performances of Hamlet, Othello, Richard III and King Lear), Richard Cowley, and William Kempe.