We now come to the sensitive issue of Shakespeare on radio. And I’m afraid the less said about this topic the better in my opinion. In other words, although many have tried to make Shakespeare work on radio, it doesn’t... In short, audiences throughout the world hate Shakespeare on the radio. And – to be honest – who’s to blame them?

Audio Shakespeare in its broadest sense includes all of the ways in which versions of Shakespeare’s works are transmitted and disseminated in sound-only formats, whether these take the form of radio dramatizations, recordings for LPs, audio cassettes, CDs, or digital downloads for DAB radio, computers, or MP3 players. As such it is the mode of performance which is most ubiquitous and the most fully integrated into the cultures of everyday life, potentially capable of being heard anywhere, anytime. In this essay I have chosen to concentrate solely on broadcast Shakespeare; primarily the derivatives, parodies, and citations which have been part of radio from the beginning. As a radio reviewer once complained, “there are times when Shakespeare seems to get everywhere, like ants, or mice; it would be nice to be able to call in some kind of pest control service, Bardokil or Swannicide, to eliminate unwanted Shakespeareean references from your life.” It may well be the case, though accurate statistics would be impossible to gather, that radio has originated and disseminated more allusions and references to Shakespeare than any other form of mass media. And yet historically it has also been one of the most unacknowledged and often ephemeral forms of Shakespearean remediation, and, partly for this reason, the one which has received least critical attention. In this sense Shakespeare has more frequently been “under” than “over” heard.

However, both the technologies and theories of radio have progressed significantly in the last twenty years. In Tim Crook’s view, “Radio drama’s ephemeral status as an art form is at an end... Some forms of sound storytelling are equal to film videos in their availability and the permanence of access for future consumption.” The ability to record and more recently to download radio transmissions has increased opportunity to create audio archives outside those of the broadcaster or public bodies charged with this
task, such as the National Sound Archive in Britain. The last few years have seen a huge growth in the popularity of audio for personal purchase, loan, or hire, in a variety of formats. Technologies such as TiVo, which can be set to scan for and record specific types of sound broadcasts, are also coming into more frequent use. As Douglas Lanier notes “once committed to recording a performance takes on the qualities of a stable ‘textual’ object, allowing for much closer, analytic modes of listening made possible by repetition.” All these technical resources have the potential to enable and encourage criticism and theoretical consideration both of the Shakespeare broadcasts that have long been preserved and those that are only just beginning to be noticed through the opportunity for repeat listening. Nonetheless, it is only very recently that John Drakakis’s fine essays on British radio drama in general and Shakespeare in particular, first published in 1981, have been augmented by valuable discussions of American radio Shakespeare and recordings of the plays, as well as by studies of the early modern “acoustic world” and soundscapes that continue to echo in his playtexts. Attention to audio Shakespeare has undoubtedly suffered from what Coleridge termed the “despotism of the eye” in Western culture, which has resulted in sound-only media being regarded as “blind” and “incomplete” modes of representation and expression compared with the audio-visual media of film and television.

The rest of this essay deals with the presence of Shakespeare on British radio, which is still, as Graham Holderness noted in 1988, “a history the tradition of which remains to be written.” As Drakakis has stressed, Shakespeare was a key reference in British radio’s own self-exploration.

The terms in which the debate about Shakespearean performance was conducted in the early 1920s bear a striking resemblance to those in which the early broadcasters themselves defended the new medium... intimacy of the relationship between actor and audience, the swiftness of the transition from one scene to another made possible by the removal of naturalistic backgrounds, the primacy of poetry and spoken dialogue, all appeared as part of the justification for radio drama itself.

Much Shakespearean reference and production also acknowledges the radio medium’s ability not only to reflect upon itself, but to incorporate and critique the other mass media of publishing and cinema, and eventually television and the internet, as well as the technologies of recorded sound themselves. Among the hundreds of broadcasts of or about Shakespeare’s works are examples of what Peter Donaldson terms “media allegory”: not simply ways of embodying the metatheatricality latent in the playtext, or invoking “the special properties of the [radio] medium” but explorations of media history and transitions registered as “cross-media self-consciousness.”
To all intents and purposes, and certainly for the purposes of this essay, British radio Shakespeare means BBC radio Shakespeare. It is not just that more of its Shakespearean output has been noted, reviewed, and archived. It is simply that there has been more of it than on any other broadcasting network. For most of its history Shakespeare has haunted BBC radio like a ghost from one of his own plays; sometimes a reproach, sometimes a cue for action. Three of the Corporation’s most popular and long-running programmes can serve as examples. The format of Desert Island Discs (1942–present) was devised as an escape from wartime hardship and fears of Nazi victory. Celebrities, from politicians to actors and artists, are “marooned” on an imaginary island, and invited to choose their favorite eight records, along with one luxury, to add to the Bible and Complete Works of Shakespeare already there. Although, as Drakakis notes, the programme is a “relic of English bourgeois capitalism” \(^9\) indebted to Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, the very creation of an island “full of noises, / Sounds, and sweet airs” also invokes The Tempest. In 1942 the Complete Works and the Bible represented the values for which Britain believed it was fighting the war, not simply a conflation of Shakespeare with divine authority, as Drakakis suggests. \(^10\) Shakespeare, like the record selection and the luxury, is there as much for personal pleasure and comfort as for the bolstering of national identity. My second example is BBC’s soap opera, The Archers (1951–present). This everyday story of country folk is located in “Borsetshire”, a cross between Worcestershire and Warwickshire, within easy reach of Stratford-upon-Avon and its theatre, to which the more affluent and “cultured” inhabitants occasionally go. However, in 1993 Shakespeare came to “Ambridge,” where a whole summer was spent rehearsing and performing a production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream with a cast made up of the soap’s favorite characters, including the matriarch Jill Archer as Hippolyta and Joe Grundy as Bottom, and storylines that tangled up the love lives of the younger villagers with those portrayed in the play. Shakespeare’s geographical and emotional place in what the Tourist Board calls the “heart of England” is endorsed, class difference is naturalized, but the “real life” conventions of soap opera narrative are also placed in a metatheatrical frame that underlines their intrinsic artificiality.

My final example is the Today programme, (1957–present), Radio 4’s breakfast time flagship news and current affairs program, which is compulsory listening for the nation’s opinion-formers and regularly features items on Shakespeare as newsworthy in themselves or as part of the “cultural” strand of the programme (the lead presenters John Humphreys and James Naughtie have each developed parallel careers as media commentators on the English language and literature respectively). In a poem written for the programme’s end-of-2005 poll the “radio laureate” Ian McMillan
outlined the case for Shakespeare’s eligibility as one of those who “ran” Britain.

A playwright long since dead
Who speaks to us from behind the veil,
Whose lines invade our head
And, more than that, dictate the way
We see and hear the world

... 

We open our mouths
And out comes William Shakespeare’s breath.

... 

And on any bus, on any train
The language of the street
Is bolted to Shakespearean Rhythms:
He’s the man who keeps the beat.
I celebrate the English
That permeate the air
From Europe, Asia, Africa,
But Shakespeare’s still there

Radio, Paddy Scannell argues, brings us above all “languageness ... embodied utterance.” This poem, broadcast in McMillan’s own Yorkshire accent, gave literal voice to a concept of Shakespeare which BBC speech radio has continually disseminated and arguably helped create; as a form of ghostly linguistic possession which comes to embody the English language itself, in all its diversities. In doing so the BBC of course continues to shore up its own national and international status as banker for a global, linguistic currency still in high demand. It is no surprise therefore that the first series of The Routes of English (Radio 4, 3 August 2000) discussed Shakespeare in an episode called “The Power of English.” However, McMillan’s poem, though it evokes the power of “Shakespeare’s breath” to invade and colonize, also links it with the intimacies of ordinary speech and the “selving” that comes from that speaking. Scannell proposes that when daily broadcasting began, it asserted above all “the everyday and its concerns ... retrieved and proclaimed the social, sociable character of human life” and in so doing brought the wider world and public life close; made them “accessible and available.”

What then is perhaps most significant about the way radio embodies Shakespearean utterance is not how it lets Shakespeare “rule” the airwaves, but how it absorbs Shakespeare into the fabric of everyday life and speech.

In the twenty-first century radio can be regarded as an “old” medium, which, though it once seemed destined for obsolescence and replacement by newer visual technologies, has proved surprisingly resilient, flexible, and
mobile, at any rate in Britain. Here radio has reinvented itself over the years as warm center of the home, public voice of the nation, traveling-companion in the outside world, at work and on the move, and as a private, intimate voice to accompany mundane everyday activities, and create alternative worlds of the imagination. Within this protean medium Shakespeare has also been constantly reinvented, primarily as drama but also in all its other genres. The very processes by which different “Shakespeares” have been brought into being have themselves been the subject of scrutiny, and sometimes derision, in countless radio features, talks, and comedy shows. This vast “hinterland”, requiring extensive further documentation and investigation, should be kept continually in mind as the context in which Shakespeare, in many different accents and registers, has been heard.¹⁵

Shakespeare and BBC sound broadcasting

English-language sound broadcasting dates from the 1920s, with the advent of commercial radio in America (1922), Britain (1922), Canada (1923), and Australia (1923). Broadcasting institutions in each national context developed distinctive ways in which Shakespeare came to occupy significantly different air space and time, and status.

Radio is not merely a medium but a culture industry, shaped by its modes of finance, production and distribution, its systems of programming and scheduling, its matrix of genres, its rivalries and affiliations with cultural alternatives like theatre, film, popular fiction, and TV, and its star system and fan culture. And insofar as Shakespearean theatre appears on the radio, it must accommodate, or at the very least address, these institutional protocols.¹⁶

The distinctive cultural positioning of British radio Shakespeare comes into sharper relief when compared with the situation in America. Here commercial radio dominated from the start, producing a quantity of different stations across the nation, many, especially the larger networks, in direct competition with each other. By contrast, the private British Broadcasting Company set up in 1922 was quickly turned into a public Corporation (conveniently keeping the same initials). Its Royal Charter of 1927 granted it a monopoly and the government guaranteed funding through license fees paid by all who purchased wirelesses. In return the BBC undertook to provide a service tailored to the public good, through a judicious combination of information, education, and entertainment. The “public service” element in American radio, on the other hand, was confined to what were known as “sustaining programs,” supported by the networks, rather than by commercial sponsorship, in order to meet government licensing regulations.
requiring a degree of “public service” content. Shakespeare adaptations most often appeared in anthology programs or series of plays, usually with set lengths. However, as Lanier has argued, in the USA the intrinsic “popularism” of a medium “characteristically inhospitable to cultural elitism” posed “a serious challenge for ‘proper’ Shakespeare, associated as it was with classical theatre and high culture.”17 In contrast, at the BBC, under the leadership of the first Director General, John Reith, a vision of broadcasting as a kind of public utility for the good of the nation’s cultural and social health helped shape the attitudes and values that would dominate the new organization for years to come. The “popularization” of Shakespeare and other exemplars of “high art” to a wider audience was at the core of its vision; but the aim was to “raise up” the audience rather than dumb down to it, as part of what has been called a “third type of democracy” which sought to blur any boundaries that might exist between cultural and class divides.18

Until the postwar period this meant “mixed” programming in its national and regional services, designed so that a listener might at any point be “surprised” by a listening experience more challenging (and it was assumed therefore more rewarding) than she had consciously chosen. Shakespeare provided suitable material both in the form of play adaptations and as “a reservoir of familiar plot lines, characters, scenes and lines”19 Moreover, Shakespeare also became a vital part of the way in which the BBC, along with other emergent components of social life, such as sport, royal ceremonial, a national education system, and even the founding of the National Trust, was synthesized into a “national culture”; experienced as a sense of collective belonging and mirrored in “real and tangible” events relayed live to audiences by the new medium.20 Radio in Britain took on a calendrical role, creating a broadcast year based on the cyclical reproduction of “festivities, rituals and celebrations – major and minor, civil and sacred,”21 in which commemoration of Shakespeare’s supposed birth and death day on 23 April (which is also the feast day of St. George, the patron saint of England), became a regular anniversary, marked for a number of years by live broadcasts of the speeches and toasts to his memory proposed at the annual celebratory luncheon in Stratford-upon-Avon. It is possible to identify a “Shakespeare week” in the third week of April for which programmes were commissioned and to which schedulers frequently gravitated when Shakespeare-related material was on offer.

The anniversary was not only significant for Shakespeare’s sake. The BBC inaugurated its radio drama programming in 1923 with scenes from Shakespeare, not just at the London station but at several of the regional ones too, and followed this up with a longer programme of extracts on the 23rd of April. A month later, one of his plays was chosen as the first full-length

180
play to be broadcast. In the years to come the BBC would frequently choose
the third week in April for other important institutional developments, such as
the launch of BBC2 in 1964, also the 400th anniversary year of his birth. Even
when the date itself was not selected, Shakespeare references might still be
invoked, as when the Third Programme marked its transformation into Radio
3 on 3 April 1970 by transmitting a production of All’s Well That Ends Well.
The first BBC publication was a book on Shakespeare’s Heroines, issued in
association with performances by Ellen Terry, and sold in aid of funds to
establish a National Theatre. When Eric Gill was commissioned to provide
sculptures for the new Broadcasting House completed in 1932 a Shakespearean
theme was inevitable, resulting in portrayals of Prospero and Ariel standing
on a globe over the main entrance and side panels of Ariel dancing with
children, Wisdom, and Gaiety. As well as Shakespeare providing a frequent
reference point in writing or speaking about the radio medium – the in-house
magazine took the airy spirit’s name as its title – his commemoration often
became an opportunity to celebrate or reflect on the progress of the BBC and its
public service ideals, which its staff, many of them highly educated and with
literary aspirations, saw prefigured in what they took to be the nature and
achievement of Shakespeare’s “national” (and popular) theatre. “When
Shakespeare wrote plays, he wrote them as if he were writing for radio”
summed up a prevailing attitude that Shakespeare was in some sense the
BBC’s “house dramatist.”

The role of the BBC in creating what Cardiff and Scannell call “We-feeling,”
built on the idea of a national culture, is vital for understanding the place and
nature of Shakespeare in its output, a continuation of the processes which
turned him into a “national poet” from the seventeenth century on. Equally
significant, however, is the way the radio medium, so frequently a domestic
experience, helped consolidate a sense of Shakespeare as a “family” event,
enjoyed at the “wireless hearth” in the comfort of the home, though with
awareness of the larger “national family” supposedly listening at the same
time. Although it took several years for children to be given their own versions
of Shakespeare separate from educational broadcasts, the scheduling of some
play productions in greatly shortened and adapted forms in the early evening,
just after the end of Children’s Hour, meant that they too were included in the
intended audience, as part of a “growing up” process whereby they were
encouraged to become “active” critical listeners on their way to taking their
places as informed and cultured participants in a democracy. The choice of the
first Shakespeare scene to be broadcast on 16 February 1923 was highly
appropriate as a way of inaugurating these broader processes of “domestica-
tion.” The quarrel scene between Brutus and Cassius from Julius Caesar
(4.2) itself creates a domestic space on the field of war as the two leaders
retreat inside a tent for an intimate exchange in which their feelings for each other and those close to them rather than the political decisions in which they are involved become the real subject matter. This mood of personal revelation is further enhanced by the everyday activities of drinking, getting ready for bed, reading, and listening to music which punctuate the scene when played in full. Consciously or not, early BBC Shakespeare implicitly privileged a “privatized” Shakespeare, received and responded to in ways that were as much personal and intimate as a poor imitation of communal theatregoing. This tendency continued in the choice of *Twelfth Night* as its first “full-length” (actually cut and adapted) play production on 28 May 1923, despite its dependence on visual comedy. The play’s action, divided between the “upstairs and downstairs” worlds of two households, highlights personal dilemmas of love, loss, and self-deception. Radio’s association of Shakespeare with intimacy was noted by critics, not always with approval. “Shakespeare himself falls considerably short of his stage self through the microphone. If you switch on in the middle of a speech in a Shakespeare play, you may find yourself feeling embarrassed; radio dramatic art has to be intensely intimate.”14 Here the misgivings seem less to do with inappropriate overacting as with the way radio production of Shakespeare abolished the “safe” distance between stage and auditorium and intensified the emotional impact to the point that it felt like eavesdropping.

In America “the overriding issue for Shakespeare on the radio . . . was the mismatch between lowbrow medium and highbrow Bard.”25 In its early years the BBC saw no such “mismatch” in its ambition to ensure that the best should be popular and the popular should be the best. The view of the long-time Head of Radio Drama, Val Gielgud, reflected this: “It is the business of the BBC to make sure that broadcasting can not only do something for Shakespeare but the very best that is possible for Shakespeare.”26 The emergence of the term “middle-brow” in relation to the BBC radio audience suggests a more complex social and cultural dynamic than that encompassed in the “highbrow”/“lowbrow” binary commonly associated with Shakespeare in America, where intellectuals tended to equate radio with the threat of centralization and homogenization of culture.

Traditionally the British middlebrow public would have read accredited literature, Shakespeare and Dickens, would have been familiar with the more popular end of the repertoire of classical music and would have learned the outlines of both classical and British history . . . Through “knowingness,” the middlebrow boasted the capacity to appreciate high culture and intellectual ideas and also the critical acumen to see through them, dismiss them as of marginal value in the workaday world in which sensible people lived.27
Although British radio Shakespeare, as in America, was associated by many with “learned, antiquated high culture,” it was economically ring-fenced from commercially driven populism, and could be justified as guaranteeing the “quality” of an organization dependent ultimately on the continuing value placed on its services by its license-payers. As long as these were predominantly middle-class there was something of a consensus about the “best,” but as equipment costs fell and a more socially mixed audience tuned in, demands for more “popular” material, such as music and comedy, became more insistent, especially during and after the war when “lighter” content had been a staple of both the British and American services for the armed forces. The postwar creation of the Home, Light, and Third programmes effectively reshaped radio content into a “cultural pyramid,” with a mass of “popular” material accessed by the majority of listeners at the “bottom” (Light; Radios 1 and 2); survival of an element of “mixed” programming in the middle (Home; Radio 4; BBC 7); and the minority artistic and intellectual interests being served at the “top” (Third; Radio 3). The nature and genres of BBC radio’s Shakespeare content would in future inevitably be shaped by these class-informed structures.

Shakespeare’s breath: adapting Shakespeare for radio

Lanier has shown how, in an American radio culture dedicated to defining itself as populist, reference to Shakespeare, and especially to its theatrical performance, could be a form of “pathology,” manifesting itself in depictions of Shakespearean actors as criminals and murderers, as radio drama itself fell into terminal decline. In Britain the situation has been very different. Although there have been periods, for instance the mid 1960s and the 1990s, when the health of the genre of the Shakespearean appeared to falter, adaptations of the plays and new drama which quote, borrow from, parody, or otherwise appropriate Shakespeare have kept a tenacious hold on life within the BBC into the twenty-first century, the dawn of which Radio 4 Today program listeners marked by voting Shakespeare “Man of the Millennium.” The introduction of scenes from and adaptations of the plays at the start of the BBC’s existence was almost immediately accompanied by other forms of drama which dealt with various aspects of the Shakespeare myth, characters, and industry, especially the theatre. It was these kinds of plays, along with the regular Shakespeare productions, with their accompanying features, Shakespeare-related interval music, and frequent academic or more popular talks on his life, work, and significance, underwritten by Shakespeare’s continuing presence in the educational and theatrical life of British society, which cemented the sense of a constant supply of “sound
Shakespeareana,” which might catch a listener’s attention at any point in the day.

The radio medium was thus in many ways a more hospitable and fertile environment for Shakespeare-related drama than that of film and television. One obvious reason is production costs. Radio drama requires no set or costumes, and roles can be easily doubled, often by actors from the Radio Drama Company, who specialize in such versatility. Since scripts are read rather than learned, much shorter times are required for rehearsal and production; these in turn allow a much faster turnaround than audio-visual productions, and, though far less well-paid, often fit comfortably around actors’ other commitments to theatre runs or film shoots. Radio is in fact attractive to many actors, especially those who are classically trained, who enjoy the challenge to their vocal skills and its more intimate style of performance, and appreciate the opportunities it provides of playing roles that might never come their way in the theatre, film, or television, because of physical appearance, age, race, or gender. If recordings are made for sale, these offer the prospect of preserving a performance that would otherwise leave only memory traces or written reports. Since radio directors are frequently producers as well as directors, in charge of the costs and casting as well as artistic interpretation, radio Shakespeare has also been far less constrained than television and film by considerations of length and format. Historically, the BBC had a relatively flexible attitude towards running times, and later regular weekly slots for drama were created; producers were also not afraid either to cut drastically or to make use of intervals halfway through broadcast plays. All these aspects of radio production have helped encourage a regular flow of Shakespeare’s plays throughout the BBC’s eighty-five-year history, unlike the much more sporadic and expensive output of film and television. Moreover, this Shakespeare-friendly climate has in turn encouraged the regular commissioning of plays that cite or derive from Shakespeare and his work, since these could be easily fitted into an established schedule and attract a sufficient if not sizable audience. Such plays are far less frequent on television, where the Shakespearean “heritage,” though significant, is less extensive. Furthermore, since radio drama has developed its own genres and styles, from everyday naturalism to extremes of fantasy and surrealism, and has no need to restrict its settings of time and place, much of the commissioned writing about Shakespeare or his works has been more quirky and original than its film or television equivalents. In short, while the Shakespeare trademark and the BBC brand have had a long partnership this has been particularly successful in the case of radio.

Nonetheless, despite the BBC’s self-association with Shakespeare, criticism of radio drama has always been haunted by the idea that it can give only
an “impoverished,” “incomplete” representation, especially of artworks originally designed for audio-visual perception in the theatre. Pioneer analysts, who were often themselves producers, adapters, or writers of radio drama, frequently envisaged it as a mode of performance analogous to the Shakespearean ideal stage evoked by the opening Chorus speech of *Henry V*, in which the “imaginary forces” of the listener called up an “inner vision,” variously likened to the workings of the mind in dreams, reading, “stream of consciousness,” or the processes of memory. Absence of visual stimuli was compensated for by an experience in which “the pictures were better,” more real than the “dusty grandeur of the stage.” More recent theoretical discussions, however, have stressed how this “lack” of visual dimension is in fact at the core of the aesthetic of radio drama, the outcome of an intrinsically “invitational” medium that mobilizes the phenomenological, not merely mental or cerebral, experience of the listener in response to speech.

Speech... is the occasion when conditions which locate a person in the world, that is, their physical and cultural situation and all that they are bodily capable of in that situation, are revealed as the very same conditions that enable subjectivity to exist and act autonomously within the world. To speak, we draw on our body, our language, our social situation, but in doing so we create an utterance that is a projection of our own position in or viewpoint on the world.

Far from radio listening being a state of sensory deprivation, “a series of inadequate clues from an unlit world,” sound can be regarded as “a medium that opens onto and generates a world, and, as part of this world-generation, enjoys interaction and conjunction with the other senses.” It creates what William Stanton calls a “transitory theatre,” which takes the listener “on a journey through another unconscious – not the writer’s, nor the actor’s, but a complex, allusive acoustic *bricolage*.” Radio drama thus emerges from the interaction of the personal and the social, and both de-centres and unites the author and the listening subject.

The radio play writes us, its auditors, just as it is written – not by the invisible author, but by the interaction of the voices of actors who have already disappeared and sounds that play across and within our memories. This remains its radical power... a collaborative dramaturgy that, at its best, generates an extraordinarily rich intellectual, affective, sensual experience.

While dramatic poetry such as Shakespeare’s may be particularly powerful in this medium, requiring as it does the combination of concentrated attention to language and active imaginative construction of the *mise-en-scène*, this “aural scenography” has the effect of overlaying a play with many more
potential meanings and simultaneously making those meaning unstable; since place “may be real or imaginary, present or past” and atmosphere “may stimulate a different kind of affective response from what is being said.”38 The “present-tenseness” of the radio medium, the sense it gives of an experience still moving towards the future, even when its auditory codes remind us of its historicity, as in the “dated” delivery of a Shakespeare speech recorded in the 1930s, paradoxically convinces us that its utterances are living and dynamic.

Since 1923 BBC radio has mounted more than three hundred adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, and repeated many of these several times, as well as selling the broadcasting rights to other radio stations worldwide and issuing a number of them as recordings for purchase by the general public. Less frequently there have also been broadcasts of the poems, with one or more full-length dramatic readings of Venus and Adonis, The Phoenix and the Turtle, and The Rape of Lucrece, and countless versions of individual Sonnets broadcast over the years. If nothing else the statistics are a measure of the plays’ popularity with the producers, if not the listeners. The two works which have received the most productions are The Tempest (twenty-one) and Macbeth (twenty), with eighteen productions of Romeo and Juliet, sixteen of Twelfth Night, King Lear, and Antony and Cleopatra, fifteen of Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. In the second division are Julius Caesar and Othello (twelve), Richard II, The Taming Of The Shrew, and Henry V, all with eleven, followed by ten each for As You Like It and The Winter’s Tale, and nine for Henry IV and Much Ado About Nothing. Two of the “problem plays” each score eight productions (Measure For Measure and Troilus And Cressida) together with a Roman and an English history, Coriolanus and Richard III. King John leads a group of “last plays,” Cymbeline, Pericles, and Henry VIII by seven to their six, as does All’s Well That Ends Well (five) in relation to Timon Of Athens and The Merry Wives Of Windsor (four). Bringing up the rear are Henry VI, Love’s Labour’s Lost, and Two Gentlemen Of Verona, all with three; and in last place the two productions each of Titus Andronicus and The Comedy Of Errors. There have also been two productions each of apocryphal Shakespeare plays, The Book of Sir Thomas More and The Reign of Edward III.39

A historical and analytical account of these adaptations is long overdue, but cannot be undertaken here. They appeared on the regional and national services, were maintained in truncated form during the Second World War, including broadcasts on the Armed Forces service, continued regularly on both the Light and Home service as well as in the “cultural ghetto” of the Third, with which, as Radio 3, Shakespeare is now most associated. In addition to testing out academic theories, such as an adaptation of the
histories into a Tillyard-influenced “national epic” in the 1940s,40 they experimented with the use of narrators, radical cutting, and the role of music, close miking, and “radiophonic” sound effects in clarifying, reinterpreting, and intensifying the aural experience of the plays. The current program of seventeen plays broadcast and sold by BBC World Wide as the BBC Radio Shakespeare Collection is a balance between the tradition of “all-programs,” the creation of “complete edition” radio by doing all the works in a specific canon or genres,41 however obscure, while also reflecting the view that “Radio 3 ought to be doing the major canon all the time,” even if this meant repeats of old recordings.42 Interpretations have also reflected contemporary fashions in theatre staging, progressing from relay-type evocations of large-stage, big-star performances to the intimacies of the “studio Shakespeare” that developed in the 1960s. Radio versions of modern-dress productions have been created by placing the action in a mediatized world, conveyed by the presence of radio, mobile phones, and the noise of cameras flashing. The Branagh-led wave of Shakespeare films in the 1990s influenced the development of “audio movie” versions, as when the 2001 Much Ado About Nothing borrowed his 1993 film’s opening by having Beatrice sing “Sigh No More Ladies” to accompanying female laughter. Although mixed broadcasting has now largely been replaced by “streamed” or “strip” schedules that encourage listeners to locate their own regularly available niche products, increasingly in the form of individualized “listen again” downloads to a computer from new digital channels such as BBC7 (most of whose output is made up of “classic” stories, drama, and comedy),43 the BBC continues to promote its Shakespearean content as an important way in which it fulfils its Charter obligations by contributing to the cultural life of Britain. Multiracial casting has become a feature, employed in both “color aware” and “color blind” ways. Where once black actors were confined to minor “voice-ons” they are now regularly found in leading roles: for instance, the casting of David Harewood as the Roman lover with Frances Barber as Cleopatra (Antony and Cleopatra, Radio 3, 27 October 2002) reverses conventional expectations that it is the Queen of Egypt who may appropriately be played by a black performer. Productions may also introduce “raced” voices thematically. In Troilus and Cressida (Radio 3, 30 October 2005) the difference between the two camps was portrayed by casting the Trojans with black actors, the Greeks by white ones; setting Twelfth Night on a Caribbean island created a whole musical and social environment (World Service, 31 March 1993), whilst the travels of Pericles took place in a “world” culture of different accents designed to chime with the production’s “world music” score (Pericles, Radio 3, 27 November 2005). And in 2005 the BBC tried to safeguard its future audience by giving
children the opportunity and support to make “6o Second” versions of Shakespeare in audio as well as video.

Shakespeare’s lives and afterlives on radio

Right from its earliest days, under the leadership of Gielgud and others, those responsible for radio drama saw the BBC as an auteur’s medium, encouraging new and experimental writing for an evolving art form in an environment graced by frequent productions of the world’s classic drama. Writers who were being “nursed” into their new profession sometimes took Shakespeare as their subject matter in order to reflect on the processes of authorship itself. It was also the “private” and “intimate” aspects of the radio experience, as well as the hallowed rite of celebrating Shakespeare’s “birthday,” that has turned biographical drama about him into a key sub-genre within radio drama – one lampooned as “an imperishable genre known as Important Historical Figures In Their Dotage, in which the voice of The Old Master can be intercut with scenes from his early life, strong on recalled mistresses and prospective biographers.”

Such plays often reflected the popular biographical traditions and narratives prevalent in other media and identified by Lanier in his chapter in this volume under the following headings: the “Shakespeare country” or “Stratford” motif, in which Shakespeare and his writing are shown to be shaped by a nostalgically conceived rural England of the past; the “literary legacy,” in which his characters come to life; the “erotic muse” narrative, in which poetic power springs from sexual passion; and portrayals of his “life in theatre,” a more varied and often less “personalized” genre, with the potential to be used for interrogation and critique of other performative modes.

It is significant, therefore, that it is this last biographical narrative that has been most frequently commissioned by the BBC.

Often these commissions were directed – and sometimes acted in – by those who were themselves also adapting and producing Shakespeare’s plays for production, so they became both an additional form of background or applied research and a mode of self-reflection on the director’s, as well as writer’s, craft. In addition this stress on the Bard’s personal history helped to shape the sense of the BBC radio drama world as one peopled by Shakespeare himself as well as his characters. The actors cast as Shakespeare also tended either to be already identified with Shakespearean performance on radio, or in the theatre, from where most of the early plays were borrowed. Clemence Dane’s wordy blank-verse stage play Will Shakespeare – in which Mary Fitton, identified as the “Dark Lady” of the Sonnets, two-times Shakespeare with Marlowe, whom the Bard accidentally kills – was given a production in which Val Gielgud himself played Shakespeare (Home, 23 August 1947). Bernard Shaw’s The
Dark Lady of the Sonnets was scheduled as a “birthday week” production on 22 April 1939, and featured the film star Robert Donat as Shakespeare and a new Prologue written and spoken by Shaw himself. Donat’s casting at this time might have been especially welcomed as conveying a sense of his commitment to Britain as well as the significance of Shakespeare on the eve of war. Specially commissioned radio biographies were in evidence even earlier, most of them celebrating Shakespeare as a national hero and manifestation of “Englishness,” but some were also significant contributions to the developing forms of radio drama. As early as 1928 L. du Garde Peach wrote a “ballad opera,” Up the River, which narrated a “merrie England” version of the life and times of Shakespeare, but his later plays for children, such as Will Shakespeare of Stratford (Home, 23 April 1939) and St. George’s Day (Home, 23 April 1948) also about Shakespeare (and followed by a talk on the Order of the Garter), despite their conventional patriotic agendas, are credited with helping to shift speech styles in historical drama away from a “pageant style of diction … closer to everyday contemporary speech.” Shakespeare’s Country (Home Service, 27 June 1948) was another play for the Children’s Hour, which linked Shakespeare and the English landscape by tracing a journey by Shakespeare’s company through the shires, complete with a specially drawn map in the Radio Times to use while listening. The regions also laid claim to their own versions of the Bard by emphasizing the importance of accent on radio, as in P.H. Burton’s Master Shakespeare and Glendower (Wales, 27 May 1938), described in the Radio Times as “part fact – part fancy,” which purported to explain the strong Welsh elements in Henry IV, Part 1, by telling the story of the first production and introducing the Welsh mayor of Stratford.

Shakespeare was also likely to pop up as a character in plays about his rivals, such as Mary Hope Allen’s production, O Rare Ben Jonson (12 August 1945) by L. A. Strong, himself an adaptor of the plays, which also features several of Jonson’s (and Shakespeare’s) fellow-playwrights. Once the Third Programme began in 1946, it tended to encourage drama or features exploring more esoteric or overtly intellectual aspects of the plays and their possible interpretations rather than “straight” (and popular) biographical drama. One exception, which, however, significantly uprooted Shakespeare from his native shore, was The Great Desire I Had: Shakespeare and Italy (Third Programme, 15 October 1952). The poet, critic, and translator of European drama Henry Reed presented a semi-autobiographical portrait of the artist “Guglielmo Shakespeare” as a young man journeying through Italy, who is fired by the ambition to write a great poem about the siege of Troy, but after encounters with a commedia dell’arte company and a local ruler, realizes that his future, as well as that of his treatment of the Troy story, lies in the theatre.
By contrast, thirty years later I, William Shakespeare (Radio 4, 22 April 1982), by the Oxford don, John Wilders, took the form of “imagined scenes from a documentary life” which kept the Bard safely domesticated in his local habitats of Stratford and London. Shakespeare was played by Martin Jarvis, an actor who would later come to personify a mellifluous and ubiquitous “radio voice” much satirized in radio comedy impressions shows such as Dead Ringers. Reviewing John Powell’s production, Martin Dodsworth found it an old-fashioned “Elizabethan spectacular,” which avoided any kind of “materialist” reading of Shakespeare’s role in the political economy of his times.

For radio folk it is a fine radio occasion – plenty of gusts of wind, bells ringing, lads singing, men quarrelling, quills scratching – and it all rattles along at a good pace… This is the sentimentalist’s Shakespeare. The programme can’t be taken seriously but, in its way, it is fun. All those quotations to place! It is a kind of game after all, a pageant in celebration. It wouldn’t do to question the naïve apparent premise of this use of quotations; that there was no work, no application to his art on Shakespeare’s part, but that he just took his lines from life… It is all native woodnotes wild…

It might be assumed that the quantity of plays dramatizing various aspects of Shakespeare’s personal, theatrical, or artistic life represent radio’s nostalgia for the “force” of theatrical performance (especially after radio drama ceased to be a “live” production). A gentle adaptation of Susan Cooper’s time-travel children’s novel King of Shadows (Radio 4, 20 March 2003), which moves between contemporary rehearsals at the replica Globe on the South Bank and preparations for the first performance of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, appears to fit this categorization. However, this meta-dramatic genre has also given rise to much darker and more challenging work. Don Taylor wrote and directed his own play Merely Players (Radio 4, 29 April 1996), which dealt with the special performance of Richard II, commissioned by supporters of the Earl of Essex on the eve of his rebellion, and portrayed a sexually passionate but politically cautious Shakespeare (Michael Pennington). Another theatrically focused play, concerned with sexual politics rather than conspiracies of state, was Peter Straughan’s When We Were Queens (Radio 4, 28 April 1999), adapted by the BBC as a result of his winning the Alfred Bradley Bursary Award for radio drama. Although Shakespeare’s words threaded through this harrowing portrayal of the physically and sexually abused boy players in his company who competed for the roles of Ophelia and Cordelia, this was far from a “sentimentalist’s” portrayal of his theatre but a “brave and moving enterprise” which did not shirk from portraying the brutality out of which performance emerged. Gary Bleasdale, the actor son of the celebrated television writer
Alan Bleasdale, also reflected bleakly on success and in-family rivalry in a play about Shakespeare’s unsuccessful younger brother, also an actor, down and out on the eve of his death, in *A Song for Edmond Shakespeare* (Radio 4, 7 January 2005).

Several plays about famous forgeries and competing theories of authorship portray the Shakespearean oeuvre as unstable rather than monumentally secure. A. Gill’s *The Man Who Wrote Shakespeare* (20 April 1978; rebroadcast 23 April 1981), like a number of other novels and plays set questions of authorship within the framework of police investigation, and alternated between the twentieth and sixteenth centuries. The psychoanalytic tendency evident as early as the 1930s in talks about Shakespeare and later productions of the plays has also inevitably fed into the biographical drama, which extends its interest to Shakespeare’s family, especially, post feminism, to the women. His “unsatisfactory” youngest daughter was the subject of Nan Woodhouse’s play *Judith Shakespeare* (Radio 4, 25 April 1996), and Robert Nye’s novel *Mrs. Shakespeare* was adapted as a sex-romping Afternoon Play (Radio 4, 23 April 1998) starring Maggie Steed. Still psychologically focused but more ambitious in its portrayal of Shakespeare’s relation to the ideas and politics of his time was David Pownall’s *Dreams and Censorship* (Radio 3, 7 February 1993). A “think-piece about the ways that literature can answer to common dreams and fantasies, and dreams can respond to life” it imagined Shakespeare (Edward Petherbridge), a year before the staging of *The Tempest*, invading the deliberations of the Oxford committee finalizing the King James Bible for publication in 1610 in order to voice on behalf of James I anxieties concerning parts of the translated Book of Revelation which depict the destruction of kings, and whose apocalyptic imagery might encourage the people to think the unthinkable and dream of revolution. The debate about censorship, and a royal performance of the play which the clerics have written about St. John on the island of Patmos composing his visionary work, move James, perhaps unwisely, to allow the apocalyptic passages to stay, whilst Shakespeare finds inspiration for *The Tempest*.

Pownall was also responsible for perhaps the most interesting example of BBC biographical drama-cum-media allegory, which also returns to the subject of censorship. *An Epiphanous Use of the Microphone* (Radio 4, 15 May 1998) was commissioned to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the 1923 broadcast of *Twelfth Night*. Pownall’s play moves between the *Twelfth Night* rehearsals at the BBC’s new Savoy Hill studio, under the steely command of John Reith (Crawford Logan), and the first recorded performance of the play by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men at the Middle Temple in 1602. Shakespeare (Michael Maloney) is on edge at the prospect of Queen Elizabeth (Anna Massey) joining the audience, since the play’s portrayal of
Malvolio’s impertinent courtship of Olivia may be taken as reference to her favorite, the Earl of Essex, who has just been executed. Whilst the BBC cast and crew struggle with the challenges of inventing appropriate acting and production styles for what Reith calls “the most difficult play of Shakespeare to make work on radio,” Pownall engineers a situation which requires Shakespeare’s company to perform in total darkness, a state that matches the Queen’s personal mood of desolation and betrayal. Their performance in effect becomes the equivalent of the dramatic experiment in unseen Shakespeare being embarked on at the BBC in the 1920s. The play’s main subject is the Reithian founding myth, which proposed the BBC not only as the inheritor and guardian of the values embodied in the Shakespearean drama, but as a kind of new media messiah, whose transforming vision will create a new kind of society. Taking a lead from the title of Shakespeare’s play, Pownall plays with allusions to “epiphany,” most obviously in his own title, but also in Reith’s speech on the “gifts” that broadcasting represents and the “star” in the world firmament that the new BBC will become. Although it celebrates Reith’s vision that “this is theatre for all the people, not a few,” it also shows him ruthlessly cutting the playwright’s text to the needs of the medium and seeking consensus and accommodation with his political masters, in order to stage an interpretation of Twelfth Night as “Shakespeare’s attack on the visual.”

Less attuned to media politics but also linked with the biographically based plays are those that deal with Shakespeare’s afterlife, myth, and industry, often also used as a pretext for the exploration of characters’ personal memories or self-discoveries. Helen Cross’s Afternoon Play One Day (Radio 4, 19 April 2000; repeated 22 April 2004) explored the significance of Elizabeth Scott’s architectural achievement in designing the Stratford Memorial Theatre in the lives of three women visitors, while in Sweet William (Radio 4, 29 November 1993) Peter Thomson made Stratford the site for a son and father to come together through their enthusiasm for the Bard. One of the scenes of seduction in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s play of the same name rewrote the wooing scene between Henry and Katherine as a coup du foudre between a young Frenchwoman (Harriet Walter) and an English actor (Michael Maloney again) playing the lead role in Henry V in Paris (Afternoon Play: Scenes of Seduction, Radio 4, 7 March 2005). In Georgia Finch’s Romeo And Juliet in Southwark (Radio 3, 12 September 2004) a cross-racial love affair took place against the backdrop of a performance of Shakespeare’s tragedy at the new Globe.

These last two plays could also be categorized as “derivatives,” plays which take up a character or aspect of a Shakespearean work and create a new play around it. Although some do little more than keep alive the nineteenth-century
theatre’s tradition of Shakespearean burlesques aimed at a middle-class audience, others, especially those which were broadcast on the Third Programme and Radio 3, took their fun more seriously. Here Hamlet emerged as something of a Coleridge-type fixation. The novelist Erik Linklater introduced the series Imaginary Conversations, a “fluid” and indeed novelistic radio genre with “no fixed convention,” designed to “convey the thinking and emotions of their chosen subjects and to present them through their living voice.” In the first year of the Third’s existence G. W. Stonier explored the reasons for Ophelia’s madness in a special commission which was part of a “birthday week” season and towards the end of the 1940s there were several Hamlet-related programs, including The Hawk and the Handsaw (19 November 1948) by the academic and crime-writer, Michael Innes. The following year saw a version of James Joyce’s The Second-Best Bed: A Usyless Discussion on Hamlet or Hamnet (2 January 1949), another Hamlet “conversation” by the experimental novelist, Rayner Heppenstall, and a collaboration with Innes, The Mysterious Affair at Elsinore: A New Investigation, (26 June 1949). The Fool’s Stage – Hamlet in Scandinavia, also by Heppenstall, was broadcast a day later (27 June 1949). This introspective “literary” fashion appears to have run its course by the mid-fifties with a translation of Jules Laforgue’s Hamlet; or, The Consequences of Filial Piety, by Henry Reed (20 June 1954).

By the 1960s BBC radio was feeling the effects of television’s rising popularity and theft of listeners, and a consequent perception that radio was becoming the preserve of the highbrows, the traditionalists, or the older generation. Although the Drama Department continued to promote itself as the playwrights’ patron it wasn’t until towards the end of the next decade that Shakespeare re-emerged strongly as subject matter and citation in plays, apparently revitalized by writers aiming at, or having already achieved, careers in the theatre. The potential that Shakespearean metadramatic reference can have as a vehicle for authorizing political comment and self-reflection on the radio medium is most vividly illustrated by one of the BBC’s most acclaimed radio plays. Pearl (Radio 4, 3 July 1978) by John Arden, was written and broadcast as a Monday Play for radio, following his abandonment of theatre in the wake of an unhappy experience working with the Royal Shakespeare Company. It portrays the writing and performance of a play intended to inspire the overthrow of Charles I by Parliamentarians and the end of English rule in Ireland, and opens with a performance of Julius Caesar. However, the radical goals of the play’s authors, a playwright in the tradition of Shakespeare and a young woman of half-Irish, half-Native American descent (both roles clearly standing for Arden and his wife and collaborator Margareta D’Arcy) are sabotaged by royalists, who introduce distracting spectacle and pornography into the production.
play suggests, is now the only medium where political theatre can be authentically performed.

In the same year that *Pearl* was first put on Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was given a Christmas Eve performance on Radio 3, and another Pownall play, *Richard III Part Two* (Radio 4, 2 July 1978) was broadcast. This had already been staged by the Paines Plough theatre company, established to encourage new writing, the previous year. Like Pownall’s subsequent Shakespeare plays it made the most of radio drama’s ability to move fluidly between past, present, and future, and implicitly explored the nature of the radio medium, by juxtaposing George Orwell’s work in 1948 at the BBC (the model for his “Ministry of Truth” in 1984), with the dystopian future ruled by Big Brother that the novel portrays, and Richard III in 1484, a year before his death at Bosworth would leave him to be demonized in future historical accounts – including of course Shakespeare’s own play – by Tudor propaganda. More recently Snoo Wilson’s *Hippomania* mixed a surreal brew featuring the poet John Benjamin as a spy in wartime Dublin encountering Laurence Olivier at work on his film of *Henry V* and Irish fairies who speak in blank verse (Radio 3, 26 September 2004).

Also in a lighter vein are several plays by the American Perry Pontac which have taken comic angles on Shakespeare’s best-known plays in pastiche blank verse. Amusing though these modern burlesques undoubtedly are they require familiarity with the plays for the jokes fully to work. *Hamlet, Part II* (Radio 3, 27 April 1992) was a sequel to the play scheduled the day after Kenneth Branagh’s much hyped performance in the Renaissance Theatre production of the play. It portrays a returning ambassador (Peter Jeffrey) arriving to discover that everyone, even those who survive in Shakespeare’s play, is dead. With the help of the palace librarian (Harriet Walter) and the Fool (Simon Russell Beale) he mounts his own claim to the throne – having ruled out that of a remote Scottish cousin, Macbeth – but is murdered by the Ghost. *Prince Lear* (Radio 4, 18 November 1994) as the title suggests, tells the story of Lear when young, and answers the question of what happened to the mother of Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia by portraying him falling in love with everyone, until she commits suicide out of jealousy, whereupon he proposes to Kent, who turns out to be a girl in disguise. It was aired later in the same year as the production of *King Lear* starring John Gielgud, enabling John Moffat to mimic his fluting tones. *Fatal Loins: Romeo and Juliet Reconsidered* (Radio 4, 29 October 2001) is also a sequel, telling the story of what might have happened if the friar’s letter had been delivered, and the lovers lived. Predictably – since this is a comedy – the great romance has dwindled into bickering family life, destroyed by children, Juliet’s weight gain, and Romeo’s infidelity. The Friar (John Moffatt, who also played Lear in 1994) and Nurse (Pam Ferris) meddle
again to try and reignite the spark of passion. Other productions extracted characters from the original plays with different effects. Shakespeare’s Fools (Radio 3, 31 December 2000) highlighted the complex nature of comic performance in a relay from Wilton’s Music Hall, whilst John Morrison’s Afternoon Play, Macmorris (Radio 4, 4 October, 2004) imagined the Irish captain who plays a minor role in Henry V leading an anarchic uprising of other characters demanding to be made more central to their plays.

Conclusion

This brief overview of the British radio drama “Shakespeare experience” confirms some of Lanier’s findings about the mediating effects of recorded Shakespeare. Here, too, “interiorization” and “privatization” are key aspects, although a medium that is still currently free at the point of use does not blatantly advertise its “commodification,” other than in the sale of recordings of its productions and the occasional special publication. Whether the ability to create one’s own digital archive of Shakespearean greatest hits (blank verse to jog by, perhaps) will in time generate a greater sense of radio Shakespeare as a personal possession, equivalent to a set of books or prized record collection, still remains to be seen. “Textualization” is also less in evidence, despite reviewers quite frequently judging the success or failure of a radio adaptation by whether they have had to follow it in the printed version. What is also evident is that the self-identification of BBC broadcasting with Shakespeare throughout its history has in turn generated a number of “metaradio” plays which interrogate its nature, role, and relation with other media, whether through the figure of Shakespeare himself or his works. Parallel patterns are almost certainly to be found in radio comedy and features. What I hope also emerges is the extent to which Shakespeare has indeed been heard, if not always listened to. As soon as technology allowed, radio turned itself into a mobile medium, a ready companion whenever required. Perhaps surprisingly, and in surprising ways, it has often made a regular personal companion of Shakespeare too.

NOTES


10. Ibid., p. 25.


13. Ibid., p. 164.


17. Ibid., p. 199.


21. Ibid.


29. Ibid., p. 208.


33. Ibid., p. 169.

34. Ibid., p. 173.


36. Ibid., p. 105.

37. Ibid., p. 104.

38. Ibid., p. 99.

39. This estimate was completed at the end of 2005.


42. John Drummond, cited in ibid., p. 329.

43. BBC 7 repeated Much Ado About Nothing and Macbeth as part of the “Shakespeare-R-Told” radio and television season, November 2005.


45. See Lanier in this volume, pp. 93–113.

46. Donat’s star status and success in American-financed films would have made it easy for him to spend the war in the USA, but he chose to stay in Britain.


53. Pownall, An Epiphanous Use, pp. 52, 42, 51.

