

Question 20

Why is it important that actors' names appear in some of the early printed texts of Shakespeare's plays?

Harriet Walter

Shakespeare knew many of the actors he wrote for throughout his career. The names of the principal actors are printed at the front of the 1623 First Folio, and Shakespeare's own name is first among them. He knew how his fellow actors worked.

He wrote some of the greatest of all theatrical parts for his friend Richard Burbage: Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear.

Some of the early play texts are revealing about Shakespeare's thought-processes. Exits are often missed out. He knew the actors would know when to leave. Occasionally characters are named who don't speak, Violenta in *All's Well That Ends Well*. There were probably second thoughts in rehearsal.

In the first edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* the names of the much-loved comic actors Will Kemp and Richard Cowley appear as speech prefixes instead of their characters' names, Dogberry and Verges. He was writing with the actors themselves in mind.

These are texts written by a poet *and* actor, and have the D.N.A. of the playhouse running through them.