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A Collaborative Debate
Anthony B. Dawson , Paul Yachnin
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Introduction

Paul Yachnin and Anthony B. Dawson

This book sets Elizabethan theatregoing in a variety of contexts. Our aim is not to develop a single thesis about what going to plays might have meant, or might mean today to critics and historians. We remain unconvinced by totalizing accounts of the cultural position of Shakespeare's theatre. Rather, we seek to locate the theatre within a number of different cultural domains in an effort to understand theatrical experience in historical terms. This comes down to an account of the cultural conditions of theatrical pleasure. Pleasure is a tricky subject for analysis because of its heterogeneity, its unpredictability, and its disruptiveness. We find this congenial, since pleasure as a category resists the tendency to totalize. Indeed, we have built our distrust of totalized accounts into the structure of the book, which itself derives from the evolution of our engagements with both the material and each other.

Our approach, that is, has a history of its own, one founded in innumerable discussions between the two of us, expressions of support and dismay, a sense we shared that there was something missing in the various narratives, especially those of a materialist bent, concerning the relation between playgoing and culture. Anthony Dawson wrote an article or two, Paul Yachnin was moved to both applaud and demur; a dynamic began to develop which involved what we have come to see as creative disagreement, each of us using the other to sharpen the sense of where he stands on the questions we raise. The result has been for us a dynamic process, and it is one that we want to communicate as best we can to the reader. We have thus developed what we believe is a unique format for the book: rather than submerging our disagreements under the surface of a single argument, we have foregrounded them, in order (among other purposes) to highlight the diversity of response and the value of approaching a

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heterogeneous and complicated culture in an appropriately heterogeneous way.

In the broadest terms, Dawson approaches the problem of playgoing as a theatre historian and practitioner, someone who seeks to read the theatre as it were from the inside; he also brings to the project a conviction about the crucial importance for the theatre of sixteenth-century religious practices and controversies. Yachnin's inclination, as a critic at home with neo-Marxist theory, is to interpret the theatre as part of an entertainment market centered on the social cachet of the court; from his perspective the theatre can be seen to retail popular versions of deluxe cultural goods and participate in a larger historical project of individuation and democratization. In general, we tend to do historical criticism in different ways. Dawson focuses on the more or less local situation of Elizabethan playing and playgoing, finding a new understanding of theatrical pleasure in a study of the early modern idea of ''the person,'' the practice and theory of acting, the humoral model of the body, and the sacrament of the Eucharist. Yachnin distrusts Dawson's emphasis on collective enterprise and the theatre's links to religious ''participation,'' and he believes that historical knowledge can be discovered only in conversation with the past. He thus attempts to come to terms with the Elizabethan stage by locating it in the *longue durée* of western cultural history, looking especially at the long-term consequences of the stage's project of self-definition within the early modern luxury market.

Our dialogue of voices and themes has helped to determine the form of the book as it now stands. The various essays are loosely paired, arranged in an a/b/b/a fashion, so that in the first half of the book Yachnin has the opportunity to develop his argument over two successive chapters, while Dawson has the first and the last word. In the second half the pattern is reversed, giving Yachnin the last word in the book as a whole, but Dawson the chance to extend his argument in consecutive chapters that deal with stage objects and images. While most co-authored books seek to develop a united point of view, ours offers instead a debate in which we lay open our disputes and explore alternative ways of reading similar material. We have sought throughout to make our conversation reflect our sense of the differing perspectives available from various cultural vantage points and the shifting valences of theatrical meaning.

We begin the debate in the two opening chapters, which lay the

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groundwork for what follows; in them, we take up the question of how theatrical personhood is constituted, but approach it from different overall positions. In the first, Dawson considers the composite nature of persons on the Shakespearean stage, how they combine the bodies of the actors and the fictional reality of the characters and thereby affect the bodies of the spectators. The Elizabethans understood "person" to mean an embodied character, a real fiction, a body always and completely interwoven with mind in the performing of a role. Person, properly historicized, is both a representation, a constructed selfhood, and an irreducible center – a cross-point of cultural mediations and pleasurable immediacy. It is also, always, something seen, like Cleopatra, whose "person . . . beggar'd all description." Linking the kind of presence associated with represented persons to contemporary theological conceptions of mediated Eucharistic presence, Dawson seeks to develop a new way of thinking about theatrical reception, suggesting that the audience realized the dramatic truth of the performance by virtue of its communal response.

Yachnin counters this argument by developing a different genealogy of theatrical personhood and pleasure, one centered in what he calls the "populuxe theatre," a form of entertainment uniquely able to offer its customers ersatz versions of aristocratic cultural goods. The drama, he suggests, sponsored a playful contest for prestige among playgoers and provided them with innovative models of personhood and new forms of self-expression. Since, in this view, games of social masquerade and a limited mastery of the system of rank itself were chief among the pleasures of playgoing, Yachnin is inclined to contest Dawson's account of the religious affiliations of theatre, especially by insisting that theatrical pleasure in Shakespeare's time was founded in the commerce in elite cultural goods and social capital rather than in religious habits of thought.

In the chapters that follow, we carry out strategic raids on each other's territory, seeking breaches in each other's arguments that provide an opportunity for a counter-offensive. Our skirmishes take place within three broad arenas – the nature of theatrical looking, the affective power of stage properties and images, and the relationship between the theatre and the nation.

In the third chapter, Yachnin suggests that the prevailing visual regimes which jockeyed for dominance in the Elizabethan theatre tended to contribute to the development of internalized,

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non-material ways of seeing and hence to a view of character as invisible and internal; this worked, concomitantly, to reconfigure the audience as private individuals. Dawson follows this by disputing the relevance of emphasizing particular visual regimes, arguing that the kinds of distraction endemic in the theatre encouraged players and playwrights to develop a kind of "scopic management" as a way of ensuring unified visual engagement; for him, theatrical reception needs to be understood in terms of the requirements of playing and the collective response of the audience.

In chapter 5, Yachnin seizes on the description of wonder in *The Winter's Tale* at the end of Dawson's previous chapter, to claim that what the latter reads as an effect of theatrical engagement is in fact a product of the history of reading – i.e., such wonder could only come to be perceived after the playhouse effects of Shakespeare's time were re-conceived in the literary terms of subsequent generations. He maintains that stage objects such as Desdemona's handkerchief become "magical properties" only under special circumstances, which develop out of the material conditions of staging and the involvement of the theatre in the marketplace. In chapter 6, Dawson counters by locating the charisma of stage objects within the context of the debates surrounding idolatry and iconoclasm in the sixteenth century. He suggests that Yachnin's focus on a long-term historical trajectory blinds him both to Elizabethan theatrical aesthetics and to a crucial historical context. For him, neither the market nor the *longue durée* can provide an adequate model for explaining the charged presence of a multitude of stage objects; working with a number of examples, including books, which had a particular resonance for sixteenth-century Protestants, he shows how the iconoclastic controversy affected the representation and valuation of images on the Elizabethan stage.

Dawson continues his argument in chapter 7, linking the struggles about icons to both theatrical performance and social memory, and showing how the theatre becomes self-consciously a kind of repository and purveyor of cultural memory and hence of an emerging sense of nationhood. In response, Yachnin places the theatre in relation to the future rather than the past or present of the nation. The London playhouses, he argues, were at the center of the burgeoning trade in news; rather than going to the theatre to embrace a collective sense of nation or celebrate social memory, playgoers went to eavesdrop, as it were, on the latest court gossip

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from the king's or queen's players. This trade in theatrical news contributed in the long run to the development of a national public only nascent in 1610.

As this outline suggests, we see the theatre as a kind of way-station, a place where different cultural avenues cross. Social life on these streets, as in any city, involves continuing negotiations between individual and collective, and this interplay provides us with one crucial frame of reference: the mix in theatrical experience between, on the one side, the pleasure of the physical body and a sense of individual meaningfulness and, on the other, a shared feeling of well-being and a sense of cultural significance. Our notion of the mixed affiliations of theatrical pleasure, its location at the intersections of various elements of culture – visuality, the market, the production of material goods and theatrical props, memory, news – puts us at a certain distance from the view that the Elizabethan theatre was located at the margins of Elizabethan society.

This view, arising out of new historicist theory and its appropriation of cultural anthropology, as well as out of various readings of Bakhtinian "carnival," has become the most influential account of the cultural position of the theatre, though it has been challenged because it obscures the relation of the theatre to a central social institution – the market.[1] The proponents of the theatre's marginal position stress its role as "anti-structure" and frequently celebrate its potential disruption of "official" or "ceremonial" culture. Such a polarized model seems to us too simple. Even the many anti-theatrical voices that new historicists have tended to use to back up their claims might be heard as a protest not from the center toward the margin, but quite the other way round. After all, the Puritan faction, especially in the sixteenth century, was not yet near the cultural center. And an institution such as the theatre, favored by the court and patronized by the leading aristocrats of the land, can

[1] For the view of theatre as marginal or carnivalesque, see, for example, Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Louis Montrose, "The Purpose of Playing: Reflections on a Shakespearean Anthropology," *Helios* 7 (1980), 51–74; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986); and Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985). Douglas Bruster provides a critique of this line of thinking, aligning the theatre with a dominant cultural form, the market, in his *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 9–11. See also Michael D. Bristol, *Big-time Shakespeare* (London and New York, 1996).

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hardly be deemed entirely marginal. This of course does not mean that the theatre could not speak to or from liminal positions, nor that it was limited to a single ‘‘line’’ in what it could convey to its heterogeneous audiences. Rather, it suggests a ready flexibility and adaptiveness whereby the theatre could exploit its ambiguous centrality, stage the interplay between margin and center, or even undo the very binarism on which the polarity is based. In fact, the leveling tendency of theatrical pleasure, adapted neither to margin nor to center, runs counter to both terms, collapsing or at least complicating the distinction.

In other words, the theatre’s cultural position can best be understood not in terms of a relatively static margin–center model, but rather in terms of a process that encourages the participation of actor and spectator for diverse and contradictory purposes. There is no single ‘‘place’’ of the stage, either in the ‘‘suburbs’’ or as part of the market; rather it occupies multiple places. Theatre, like any other complex cultural practice, can best be construed as nodal, connected to a number of intersecting circuits. Our task, as we conceive it, is to try to connect up some of the wires, to trace the filiations of various discourses and practices as they flow to and from the theatre. This is the point we wish to emphasize with the phrase in our title, *The Culture of Playgoing.*

Playgoing of course means audiences and their reception of what the theatre offered. However, we are not immediately interested in the debates around the demography of audiences. Rather, we focus on affective engagement and on playgoing as a cultural practice, and hence as inseparable from playing itself. Throughout the book, we will be shifting back and forth between these two crucial terms of our discussion – playing and playgoing. Not surprisingly, we have competing ideas about the structure of relations between the theatre and the culture, and the kinds of exchanges that structure supported. Broadly speaking, Yachnin places the theatre between the court and the entertainment marketplace, stressing its propensity for trading in elite and exotic goods, whereas Dawson sites it between religious culture and everyday life and emphasizes the dynamics of performance itself. As complex as the relations between theatre and society are, there is also a quasi-unified institutional culture emerging for both playmakers and playgoers. We agree about the importance of this institutional culture but disagree about its most salient characteristics. Nevertheless, our whole procedure, we hope, provides us

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with a way of thinking about *how* the theatre means in relation to different cultural nodes, rather that *what* the theatre means in terms of some over-arching view of the culture as a whole.

While we write from different perspectives, we agree that theatrical effects, especially as generated by theatrical "persons," had power over audiences and were able to provoke multiple kinds of pleasure, and we agree also that the particular cluster of pleasures induced by the theatre sets it apart from other cultural realms. Theatrical pleasure starts with sight and sound, but is of course continually caught up in the construction of meanings, provisional and fleeting as these may be. It enlists what the Elizabethans called passions, conceived of in the physical, humoral terms that were a familiar feature of ancient physiological thinking; but it also demands that we make something of those passions. Even as the theatre impresses its audiences with the power of physical presence, it can deliberately put them "in the know." In other words, there is an interplay between the pleasures to be derived from the actors' presence and an awareness of the actors as representations. Meta-theatre, in particular, not only tends to produce a conscious awareness in audience members of their position as spectators, and hence, we argue, a heightened pleasure, but allows too for a sounding of cultural dissonances. For this reason, its potential for producing a kind of "surplus value" of reflection, its ability to raise audience consciousness and simultaneously to disturb and augment a sense of wonder, looms large in our explanations of the meanings of theatrical pleasure. In addition, meta-theatre plays a crucial role in the construction of playgoing as a self-conscious activity, and hence contributes substantially to the formation of the culture of playgoing as we understand it.

For both of us, the person (as opposed to the social formation) is the key category in theatrical performance and the pleasures it provides. The person acts as the switch-point for theatre and culture, the figure who is traversing the cultural rails but is also himself or herself a place where discourses cross, a node. Playgoer, actor, fictional being with a real presence, it is this "person" who experiences or embodies the kinds of complex exchanges that went on across the boundaries of institutions such as the theatre, the market, and the church. The single most important thing about persons is that they are present and palpable, and hence offer a challenge to those who want to read dramatic character purely in terms of the

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social formation. While it is clear that characters occupy positions that can be described in terms of systems of domination, we seek to undermine the authority of such systems, both as explanatory tools deployed by critics and as thorough-going determinants of the behavior of persons, whether fictional or real. Elizabethan drama is played out amid innumerable fictional spaces – law-courts, London streets, aristocratic chambers, taverns, battlefields, green forests – but pacing through them all are people construed as real for the audiences who laughed, wept, and applauded.

What we are after in the book as a whole is a kind of mapping of the routes taken by this array of persons, and an understanding of the baggage they carried with them. Their cultural assumptions, habits of thought, heterogeneous affiliations, and personal aspirations all contributed to the making of the theatre as we know it now, just as our own institutional and personal affiliations affect the way we read it. Within the limited possibilities of getting to know another time and place, we seek a situated understanding of Elizabethan person-making, as it was effected by players and playwrights and comprehended by playgoers.

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PART ONE

Participation vs. populuxe: two theories of early modern theatre

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CHAPTER 1

Performance and participation

Anthony Dawson

At the climactic moment of *Twelfth Night*, with the separated twins gazing intently at each other, Viola challenges her brother to prove himself more than a spirit. He responds, adopting the now unfamiliar theological language of participation: "A spirit I am indeed, / But am in that dimension grossly clad / Which from the womb I did participate" (5.1.236–38).[1] At the end of a very different play, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, with the hero's spirit about to part from its own bodily "dimension," his son Amyras evokes the complex unity that is effected through the animating spirit of Tamburlaine's "essence"; Tamburlaine's soul is incorporated in his sons' "subjects" (i.e. their bodies), says Amyras, and thus gives value and meaning to their flesh:

> Your soul gives essence to our wretched subjects,
> Whose matter is incorporate in your flesh.

Tamburlaine's response continues and broadens the motif:

> But sons, this subject [i.e. his own body], not of force enough
> To hold the fiery spirit it contains,
> Must part, imparting his impressions
> By equal portions into both your breasts;
> My flesh divided in your precious shapes
> Shall still retain my spirit, though I die,
> And live in all your seeds immortally. (II.5.3.164–74)[2]

These two moments, in most respects utterly different, provide a starting point for my exploration of the cultural affiliations of Elizabethan theatrical pleasure. What links them is the curious reliance on the language of Eucharistic "participation" as a way of

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all Shakespeare quotations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. B. Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
[2] Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*, ed. Anthony Dawson, New Mermaids series (London: A&C Black; New York: Norton, 1997).

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conveying the intensity of bodily–spiritual connection. In the *Tamburlaine* passage, the word-play on ‘‘part’’ recalls the theological debates throughout the sixteenth century surrounding the question of the ‘‘real presence’’ of Christ in the Eucharist and the participation of the faithful. In a daring move that seems both reverent and blasphemous, Marlowe transfers the participatory power of Christ's body to Tamburlaine, whose flesh is ‘‘divided’’ among his devotees, will retain his essential ‘‘spirit,’’ and thus ‘‘live in all your seeds immortally.’’ His spirit-and-flesh will invest them and their descendants with the possibility of immortal life. At the same time, by a peculiarly theatrical magic, the body of the actor, in the person of the character, participates in the process, imparting his flesh to the raucous spectators at the Rose in a temporary and secular re-enactment of Eucharistic communality.[3]

Sebastian's lines in *Twelfth Night* also implicate the separate and yet identical bodies of the actor and the character; his image twins the traditional hierarchy of soul over body (‘‘grossly clad’’) with the Eucharistic language of participation. In so doing, it suggests a kind of double position relative to the Catholic past, which, I will argue in what follows, typifies the theatre's appropriation of participation, undermining the bodily claim but also enhancing it. Theatrically, what makes Sebastian recognizable, able to participate in the scene, is not his spirit, but his body and, given the difficulty of representing identical twins on stage, his clothes. He has, he says, since his conception, participated the bodily dimension. His muddy vesture of decay becomes the focal point for a kind of sharing, a move that undoes the very hierarchies he alludes to in his talk of spirit being ‘‘grossly clad’’ in flesh.

Sebastian's presence, and that of the other actors, is double; he is both absolutely there, and there merely as representation. Although this is always in some sense true in the theatre, such a recognition scene, and there are several other similar ones in Shakespeare, highlights the ambiguities – the identical twins are not after all identical. (At the same time, for all the deconstructive unraveling, the moment can be extraordinarily affecting.[4]) The clothing motif

[3] I have discussed this moment at more length in the introduction to Dawson, ed., *Tamburlaine*, xxvii–xxviii.

[4] When Peggy Ashcroft, in an important modern production, came to answer Sebastian's wondering questions, ‘‘What countryman? What name? What parentage?’’ she took a long pause before answering, ‘‘in almost a whisper (but one of infinite rapture and astonishment),

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keeps the playful uncertainty before us, by reminding us of both the tangles of gender[5] and the delusiveness of theatrical costume. Viola will only be confirmed as Sebastian's twin when, paradoxically, she removes the very trappings (i.e. his clothes) that have caused her to be identified with him in the first place; and in promising that change, the boy actor shifts ambiguously from the male role to the woman's part (a metamorphosis that is deferred beyond the end of the play). The distinction between clothing and the body it covers, traditional figures for the demarcation between appearance and reality, outer and inner, here fails to hold. The evidence that both Viola and Sebastian adduce is rifted; like Richard Hooker's notion of real presence, to which I will return, it depends on reception, on the audience's inner conviction, which is itself suspended disbelief, dependent on representations. Before exploring this participatory dimension in more detail, however, it will be necessary to consider the status and force of the physical body itself within the Elizabethan theatre. Only after we understand more about bodily presence in the theatre will we be in a position to appreciate the force of impersonated participation.

This book is about the cultural affiliations of theatrical pleasure and I have begun at what I take to be the nub of theatrical experience – the effect of actors on audiences. Like pleasure generally, theatrical pleasure has a strong physical component. Actors use their bodies both to represent and to affect. Audiences respond with their bodies as well as their minds. But of course bodies are connected to discourse in complicated ways. Recent cultural analysis has tended to read the body in the Elizabethan theatre primarily as a site of "differentiation,"[6] functioning as a cipher, a sign of subjection; but as a real historical object its meanings are both less fixed and more ambiguous than such approaches tend to suggest.

If we could gain access to the body of the Shakespearean actor,

'Of Messaline.' " J. C. Trewin comments that for almost the first time "a Viola has forced me to believe in her past"; quoted in John R. Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966) 210.

5 See Stephen Orgel's discussion in his *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 53–57.

6 This chapter began as a contribution to a seminar at the 1991 World Shakespeare Congress in Tokyo on "The Body as Site of Gender and Class Hierarchy and Differentiation," chaired by Peter Stallybrass and Steven Mullaney, and was designed to pose a number of questions. The seminar clearly assumed that the body *was* such a site, but I approached the topic interrogatively, refusing the implicit assumptions.

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