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978-0-521-82416-3 - The Actor as Playwright in Early Modern Drama

Nora Johnson

Excerpt

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Introduction: playing author

When Robert Armin, the comic actor for the Chamberlain's Men after Will Kemp, wrote *Quips upon Questions* in 1600, he turned collaborative theatrical work into a printed commodity. In what appears to be a kind of transcript of the improvised jesting he did on stage, Armin advertised both his individual wit and his dependence upon audiences. His stage routines, the text suggests, typically began with questions that were posed by others, likely including members of the audience. The poems he invented in response to those questions contain dialogue, what the title page calls "changes upon interrogatories," either multiple parts spoken by Armin himself or exchanges with people in the crowd.¹ Publishing all of these under a stage name, "Clonnico de Curtanio Snuffe," or "Snuff the Clown at the Curtain Theater," Armin thus makes himself up as a writer out of the voices of others, positioning himself not as the origin of the text – the questions come from other people – but as its last word, the one who delivers the witty quip as the closing line of the exchange. Even if the impression of dialogue given by the text is misleading, if Armin managed to perform all of the voices in question, he engages a mode of authorship in *Quips* that renders the notion of a sovereign, individual voice problematic.² In fact, though Armin is considered a less collaborative performer than earlier clowns had been, his performances on stage and in print remain striking for their dispersal of agency. Armin's play *Two Maids of More-clacke*, for instance, borrows from one of his other books, *Foole upon foole*. In that text, Armin writes about the life of John in the Hospital, a fool who was well known in London. In *More-clacke*, Armin played both John and Tutch, the play's witty fool. At one point Tutch himself dresses up as and imitates John. In other words, the historical John, Armin's written representation of John, Armin's performances, and Tutch's imitation all blur together in the performed play, rendering the notion of individual agency extremely complex.

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It is, as a result, no simple task to classify Armin's relationship to *Quips upon Questions*. Recent scholarship has suggested that the term "author" would be inappropriate, tied as it is to historical innovations such as copyright, Jacobean absolutism, and Romantic subjectivity.³ Nor is Armin an author in the manner of the classical authority or the Folio persona. In many ways scholarship that restricts authorship to these forms is elucidating the premises set down by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, taking up Beckett's question: What does it matter who is speaking?⁴ The accepted answer at this point is that it does not matter until notions of private property and subjectivity have made the connection between "the author and the work" appear inevitable. In England before the Statute of Anne, or at very least before the energetic self-promotions of Ben Jonson, such a connection would appear unimaginable. For all the power of Beckett's question, however, this book poses a different one, only partially facetious: What is Snuff? The presence of the stage name on a book suggests that Armin's theatrical celebrity matters. Though Snuff cannot be a figure for individual creation or for access to the mind of a literary genius, he clearly does represent theatrical pleasure for a reading public.⁵

The difficulty of categorizing Armin's relationship to his printed texts is a problem paralleled in the careers of the other performers considered in this book. In a range of ways, Nathan Field, Anthony Munday, and Thomas Heywood register the power of playing to construct forms of authorship that cannot be explained by later notions of literary property or essentialist self-expression. Their roles as authors are perceptible, it seems, only through the lens of these later developments, only as "not the author yet." But to explain them thus, retroactively, is a curiously unsatisfying approach. Armin's fascinating use of the voices of others represents a powerful moment of indeterminacy, a moment in which it is possible for him to speak simultaneously as an individual and a group. As long as we discern in such a moment only the coming of private property, or think of it as a conflict between older and newer modes of describing textual genesis, we lose the ability to imagine Armin as an author who simply exceeds our definitions.⁶ If it does not matter to us who is speaking until the speaker becomes an owner, a sovereign, or a subject, we concede the institution of authorship to the regime of private property and interiority.

The nature of that loss becomes clearer in a more detailed analysis of Foucault's author-function. To recapitulate his argument briefly: rather than considering the author as a source of meaning, Foucault describes the author-function as a way of controlling excess meaning. We form a notion of an author on the basis of textual interpretations and biography, which

we then use to determine which textual interpretations – sometimes even which texts – are authentic. In identifying the author as a limiting subjectivity, “a principle of thrift” that enables textual meanings to be fixed, Foucault undoes the idea of the essentialist subject, a principle of autonomy that transcends the constraints of the economic and the social. He counters the practice of identifying authorial subjectivity with what appear to be infinite meanings, all of them constituted by but seemingly never exhausting the possibilities of the author’s interiority. Without the quasi-mystical principle of coherence we have been taught to attribute to the author, it seems, we are free to recognize the polysemia of the text.

This is of course a powerful intervention in the study of early modern writing. Unquestionably the modern habit of reading essential subjectivity back into Shakespeare and his peers has given us a poet and a canon that are artificially made coherent, even while they are trumpeted for their power to yield endless variety. The coda of this book will take up the problem of Shakespeare’s influence upon our constructions of dramatic authorship. In adopting Foucault’s insights, however, we have been too quick to equate our own post-Romantic deployments of the author-function with the possible range of deployments in the period we are studying. Everything we have learned about subjectivity or its related forms in the Renaissance suggests that to imagine an author behind a text in early modern England is a very different process than the one that has produced the Bard.⁷ If for us subjectivity is a privileged realm of interior nature that precedes the social and the material, for early modern England that interiority is firmly subordinated to the material and the social. Far from inscribing a perfect circle of human nature that seals the text off from the world, that is, the figure of the early modern author would much more plausibly signal the contingency of textual meaning. If “I am Duchess of Malfi still” can connote a social position rather than an unchanging essence, we should learn to read an author’s name as a similarly rich form of engagement with the forces that essentialist subjectivity excludes.⁸ In Heywood’s view, for instance, the writer who violates decorum, mingling kings with clowns, is simply aligning himself with what pleases his audiences, making himself a name in tandem with their wishes.⁹ In a sense Heywood, no less than Armin and the other writers in this book, allows his own name to be constituted by his audiences. In doing so, he suggests possibilities for authorial self-inscription that are not accounted for by our critiques of essentialism. The loss, then, in accepting the subject, the owner, the sovereign, or the elite folio-writer as the constitutive tropes of authorship consists in abandoning the possibility that the proper name or the persona attached to the text

might be a gateway into the exigencies of the social and the material rather than a bulwark against them.

The authors studied in this book are precisely such figures. Their relations to the texts they write defy our tropes of authorship. But to subsume that defiance under “what does it matter” is to miss the rich potential of authorial practice. It is also, of course, to miss the rich potential of theatrical performance.¹⁰ To varying degrees, each of the figures considered in this book was known as an actor as well as a writer. Though this study does not seek to identify a fundamental quality of actorliness that can be traced in the works of these writers, it does trace at length the forms of celebrity and notoriety they cultivated, the forms of reputation that crossed over from performance into print and vice versa. The point of such a study is twofold: it establishes actors as innovators in the construction of authorship, and it highlights the theatricality of authorship itself. On the early modern stage, where the economics, the collaboration, the physicality of theatrical production speak more forcefully than they do in the printed book – where an audience applauds or hisses – authorship takes its proper place: as a relational form, a contest, a negotiation.

Even in the process of exploiting individual fame, an actor almost necessarily wears individuality in a way that complicates our models. Here the work of Robert Weimann, ever the sensitive reader of theatrical practice, is immensely suggestive. In “Laughing with the Audience,” an appendix to *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*, Weimann considers the subjectivity of the comic actor who addresses his spectators while playing. Contrasting this familiar presence with that of the more purely naturalistic actor who stays in character, Weimann finds in the former a fascinating image of connection between the individual and the culture for which he performs. The famous leave-taking speech of Shakespeare’s clown Launce is for Weimann a paradigmatic moment of union in division; actor slips out of character to laugh with his audiences about the stupidity of Launce, but the effect transcends any mere lapse of decorum:

That Launce becomes the clowning object and the laughing subject of his own mirth and that of the audience reveals an astonishing stability in his relations to the social whole. These relations connect the character and the actor, illusion and reality, so that the imaginative flexibility of his relation to the play world has much to do with the security of his relation to real society.¹¹

In connecting directly with his audience at the expense of the character he is playing, the actor who performs the role of Launce performs a kind of subjectivity that is both individual and collective. Launce and the actor

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who plays him both become permeable entities; the composite figure is linked to the audience by the actor's self-consciousness even while he is kept distinct from the audience by the character's imbecility and fictional status. As a figure whose theatrical roots stretch back centuries, the comic actor evokes precisely the sense of social identity that the author as subject, sovereign, and owner would defend against. He also evokes a responsiveness to audiences that is antithetical to Jonsonian forms of elite self-publication.

Weimann, quoting Hegel, identifies this paradoxical form as the "blessed ease of a subjectivity which, as it is sure of itself, can bear the dissolution of its own ends" (257). But this study makes an additional argument, emphasizing not only the actor's ancient forms of connection with his audience but also the emerging forms of professionalization that blend so richly with Weimann's popular traditions. As aggressive self-promoters, actors in this period cultivated their own individual connection to their audiences almost as a kind of capital. David Wiles, building on the arguments of Clifford Leech, suggests that the role of Launce was created for William Kemp, "an actor whose art is rooted in minstrelsy, and who therefore knows how to dominate a stage without support from plot mechanics."¹² It is as an almost-autonomous professional that Kemp laughs with his audience at his own performance of the character Launce. He thus enacts the old rituals of communal subjectivity at the same time that he enacts new forms of self-possession and self-marketing.¹³ In this sense he is surely even further outside the realm of the humanist subject than he would be if we considered him merely to be a complex embodiment of tradition. Kemp as Launce embodies not only the pre-capitalist "stability in his relations to the social whole" but also the profound instability of his relation to the theatrical market; as a semi-autonomous performer, he died, Wiles points out, penniless.¹⁴

In his lifetime, however, Kemp literally went to great lengths to establish himself as a commodity. His *Nine Daies Wonder* (1600) records the jig he danced from London to Norwich, and the printed book is clearly an effort to make more money from that venture, to capitalize upon his own reputation. Moving from minstrelsy to the professional stage to a commercialized version of carnival and then into print, Kemp enacts a whole range of relations to the social whole, some of which invoke older forms of communal production and selfhood and some of which suggest more individualistic modes of self-presentation. Though it is important to identify the emergent and residual constructs in which a figure like Kemp is bound up, however, it is equally crucial to remember that he embodies the old and the new all at once. When Kemp's name signifies in print, it signifies richly. Like

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the figure Kemp-Launce, he has more than one way of being positioned in relation to his culture. It is an effect intensified when the actor is also, like Armin in *Two Maids of More-clacke*, the author of the play in which he appears and the author of the non-dramatic text upon which his role is based.

In such efforts to carry over the complex forms of theatrical subjectivity – the substance of their fame – into print, actors challenge the currently accepted narrative of the emergence of the author. Their enactments of celebrity respond to the economic and social dispensations of early modern England in ways that sometimes encompass but also frequently exceed the boundaries of ownership, sovereignty, or post-Romantic subjectivity. They thus make possible versions of authorship we have largely failed to consider. Nor is this effect limited to the careers of comic actors. Indeed, given the reputations that actors had in the period we are studying it would be remarkable if they could reliably signify anything so respectable as the textual version of bourgeois ownership. If the social positioning of Shakespeare or Allyn is familiar to us, so too is the mass of writing that describes actors as pariahs. More to the point, of course, is the persistent identification of actors with protean changeability. A “shifting companion” in J. Cocke’s formulation, the actor “lives effectually by putting on, and putting off.”¹⁵ As wearers of women’s apparel, actors trouble the distinctions between men and women. The charges are too well known to be documented another time here.¹⁶ What the antitheatrical literature reinforces, however, is the sense that an actor as an author must at least some of the time appear to be a sign of instability. Foucault’s limiting subject is difficult to square with the figure of the professional shape-shifter.

And yet, stage and print alike created new forms of celebrity, and actors were poised to exploit those forms.¹⁷ Focusing upon the actor’s self-promotions, then, this book reverses a fundamental assumption of studies of authorship thus far. Scholars have repeatedly turned to the early modern theater companies to look for models of authorship that gain currency more or less explicitly in spite of the presence of actors, in spite of their work as performers, as improvisers, and as owners of theatrical texts. Instead of looking for a kind of authorship that can overcome the participation of actors, however, we should be looking at the notions of authorship that actors themselves developed. If, as Alexandra Halasz argues, printers and booksellers had an interest in commodifying authorship as a way of selling texts, the playing companies who sold them those texts would surely also have had reason at times to promote the writers who produced texts for them, or to make room for a given writer’s self-promotions. Having made

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such progress in recognizing the power of the playing companies over the writers who worked for them, that is, it would be a mistake to turn over our entire understanding of dramatic authorship to those few writers who presented the illusion of having escaped that power.

Moreover, since this unstable identity is directly connected to the actor's professionalism, since his profit motive is in part what renders him protean, the forms of ownership he practices are themselves unsettling to notions of social place and self. By performing multiple roles on stage while becoming rich, a successful actor wages a two-part war upon traditional values. In earning his status as a gentleman, Shakespeare the upstart would ironically have undermined the very notion of gentility.¹⁸ If textual property is what secures the interiority of the modern author, the early modern actor's commercialism earns him a very different place in his culture. To the extent that ownership is a viable notion for an actor-playwright, that ownership has more to do with the fluidity of the marketplace as Jean-Cristophe Agnew has described it than with the imagined solidity of private property.¹⁹ Moreover, as Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass have recently reminded us, even material objects have a tendency to become insubstantial when they become commodities: "Commodification is . . . not only the vanishing point of the subject into the commodified object but also of the object into pure exchangeability."²⁰ If we are to study actors who write, turning their own power to perform into a name that sells texts, we will need to focus on exchange rather than ownership, on circulation rather than possession. We will need to account for the powerful sense of personal presence in a pen name like "Snuff" without imagining that that presence implies ownership, control, or modern subjectivity.

The chapters that follow will accordingly trace models of theatrical authorship that owe their power to theatrical practice itself. Without denying the importance of the folio-author model, and most emphatically without denying the importance of print culture, this study will consider theatrical performance as a factor in the development of theatrical authorship. Even a cursory review of the moments in which authorship is featured in early modern drama serves to underscore the energetic participation of players in the making of that social construct. The First Folio of Shakespeare's works, for all that it has been described as a move away from theatrical realities, is in another sense the production of an actor, Shakespeare, assembled and promoted by fellow actors, Heminges and Condell. The volume, like Jonson's, does clearly instantiate a new text-oriented authority, but it seems worth remembering that that textual authority was created through the

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entrepreneurial efforts of actors themselves. Rather than reading these creations of authorship as alien to the playing companies, we should consider them as extending some forms of work already being done on stage and in dramatic quartos.

Thomas Heywood, for example, who performed as a player until about 1619, replied contentiously to the publication of these folios in the preface to *The English Traveller*:

True it is, that my Playes are not exposed vnto the world in Volumes, to beare the title of Workes, (as others) one reason is, That many of them by shifting and change of Companies, haue beene negligently lost, Others of them are still retained in the hands of some Actors, who thinke it against their peculiar profit to haue them come in Print, and a third, That it neuer was any great ambition in me, to bee in this kind Volumniously read.²¹

In doing so he signals that the folio model of authorship was a less radical innovation than we have previously imagined. His comments suggest not so much that Jonson has created the dramatic author as that he has costumed that author in the trappings of high culture.

Heywood's own textual authority is clearly of strong concern – note that in the lines quoted above he implies that he himself is being read in quarto rather than his texts – but he constructs that authority with different tools. His allegedly casual lack of ambition, for instance, would seem to link quarto publication with manuscript culture, positioning Heywood as a gentlemanly figure who resists the supposed stigma of print like so many humanist writers of the period.²² At the same time, his references to the actors who alternately hoard and lose his plays establishes Heywood as an author in a more complicated way. On the one hand, he does indeed seem to present theatrical writing as an exercise in writerly anonymity. The players are the authorities here. On the other hand, though, this very anonymity functions as an authorial boast for Heywood. In this same preface, famously, he claims that the *English Traveller* is “one [play] reserued amongst two hundred and twenty, in which I haue had either an entire hand, or at the least a maine finger” (A3). Though the claim may be true, what matters most about it is that we will never know. The missing two hundred plays about which Heywood cannot resist telling his readers constitute a kind of authority more powerful than any number of publications. As all writers know, actual words in print are a form of vulnerability.²³ Imaginary words in the possession of imaginary actors are, on the other hand, proof positive of authorial greatness. Without owning the texts and without being able to claim sole authorship, Heywood nevertheless constructs himself in relation to them.

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If this is merely a back formation, a moment of anxious self-invention in response to Jonson's bid for preeminence, it is nevertheless a highly suggestive one.²⁴ Even if prompted by Jonson to do so, the fact that Heywood can retroactively label his own productions as equivalent to Jonson's implies that Jonson is actually building upon recognizable features of the profession of dramatist as it exists before 1616. Indeed, Heywood's career challenges Jonson in other ways as well, for Heywood managed to claim forms of humanist authority and classical erudition that do not replicate the exclusion of the "low" so basic to Jonson's self-presentation. Heywood happily markets himself as a writer for the ignorant, and while such tactics fail to establish him as a "rare" writer in the manner of Jonson, they nevertheless betoken a solid interest in self-promotion. As this survey of the careers of Armin, Field, Munday, and Heywood will make clear, Jonson's break with his peers comes not because of his interest in promoting himself as an author so much as because he attempts to place himself at the right hand of James I. That position is neither an inevitable one for authorship nor the exclusive expression of a writer's investment in a text.

Indeed, one powerful motive for taking up the question of dramatic authorship from the perspective of performers is the desire to query the automatic equation of authorship with political absolutism. In part because Jonson's efforts to establish his own authorial position are so powerfully connected to the self-representations of James I, the absolutist potential of authorship, the premise that an author is a kind of monarch over his own words, has dominated scholarly discussion.²⁵ The writers studied here, however, offer a striking range of responses to the notion that authorship is sovereignty. Nathan Field, who came to theatrical work when he was kidnapped as a child and made to be an actor, writes in his prefaces and even in his plays in a manner that emphasizes the distance between his position as a theatrical laborer and the kinds of absolutist prerogative to which a figure like Jonson was carefully laying claim. Field stakes out a very different territory for himself professionally. Indeed, a very different territory is staked out for him by the circumstances of his life, including his eventual fame as a romantic lead. To fail to recognize Field's self-constructions as authorial is *a priori* to mark authorship as elite and court-centered, Jonsonian. Association with classical learning and court culture was one way of promoting authorship in what may have been an anti-authorial milieu, but Field's work makes it clear that there were other modes of self-presentation available to – or even forced upon – theatrical writers. It is possible to imagine Field, and even Heywood, as representatives of the aspects of theatrical work that Jonson worked to overcome in his bid for authorial preeminence. From this perspective, the revelation in Field's work is that those

same aspects of his dramatic labor are the material for Field's own authorial self-inscriptions. Field's writing thus highlights the need for an understanding of authorship that might potentially exceed the political meanings of absolutism.

In many ways, such an assertion borrows from arguments that challenge the early New Historicist reading of the theaters as extensions of state power. Like the performances of kingship enacted on the early modern stage, the performances of authorship undertaken by players need to be imagined as more than straightforward reproductions of official ideology. Especially in a medium as saturated with competing forms of authority as the theater, we ought to expect a transformation of absolutism even when it does appear on stage. As Jean Howard has argued, when we are talking about the stage's ideological impact, we must "attend to more than just theatrical representations *qua* representations, but also to the material practices and conventions of the stage and of theatergoing."²⁶ Rather than excluding authorship from our theatrical vocabulary, we ought to be looking for ways to explain how the representational density of the stage, its traditions, its actors, and its audiences along with its material aspects, inflect the notions of textual control that might make their way to the theaters from the court.²⁷ Nor should we look for printed texts to represent authorship as an unproblematic extension of sovereignty into the realm of the literary.²⁸ Though Jonson took the occasion of print for an opportunity to write out the participation of actors and others, it is of course much more typical for a printed play to borrow the authority of the stage, to advertise the script "as it was played" by the theater companies. Rather than waiting for notions of intellectual property to catch up with Jonson and render the text an authorial possession, we might more profitably consider the rich intersections of print authorship and stage that position the author as something other than a sovereign.

In Louis Montrose's recent formulation, in fact, the author-function has come to signify the dispersal of authority rather than its consolidation:

Within the delimited discursive space of their own printed texts, writing subjects of the Early Modern state might contest, appropriate, or merely evade its semi-otic prerogatives. In such circumstances, the author-function may have helped to *disseminate* discursive authority more than it worked to contain it.²⁹

Nor, Montrose argues, does such an appropriation simply turn the author into the "absolute ruler of the signifying process" (93). On the contrary, the authority of the sovereign and the writer alike are available in various forms to the printers, booksellers, and even the readers of the texts as they