THE PLACES OF WIT IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH COMEDY

What is wit made out of in the comedies of Shakespeare, Jonson, Shirley, and their contemporaries? What does it hide? What does it reveal? This book addresses these questions by turning to the relationship between comic form and local history. Explorations of familiar sites – Windsor Forest, Smithfield, Covent Garden, and Hyde Park among them – are matched with close readings of drama that focus on overlays between theatrical, spatial, narrative, and social conventions. Dramatic comedy's definitive interest in cultural competency and incompetence, wit and witlessness, is revealed through discussions of commerce, gambling, royal forests, and new or newly public spaces in and around early modern London. Along with Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Ben Jonson's *Epicene* and *Bartholomew Fair*, special emphasis is placed on the neglected Town comedies of the 1630s – the forerunners of the Restoration comedy of manners and the satirical realism of our own day.

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For Heather, Susannah, and Rose

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Preface

> "Scholars are not always interested in the drama, nor critics in the facts."[1]

In 2004, I helped organize a seminar entitled "Localizing Caroline Drama" at the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America. The papers presented there ran the gamut of contemporary critical interests. Some focused on the history of playing companies, theaters, and publication patterns in the 1620s and 1630s, some on plays with foreign settings or religious conflict on display, some on economic, political, and erotic relations in plays of all stripes. The playwrights we dealt with were only just beginning to receive the more concerted critical attention they have begun to see since (major new editions of the works of Richard Brome and James Shirley are underway as I write), and, for that reason alone, the seminar might have been viewed with some suspicion by those who weren't participating in it. Why expend so much energy on drama that hadn't been performed in over 300 years? Why bother even to ask after the management of the Salisbury Court theater or the ramifications of James Shirley's sojourn in Ireland in the mid 1630s? We didn't receive those kinds of questions, exactly, at the end of the seminar, when the audience members who had watched our discussions were given the opportunity to chime in. But one observer did ask a question that has stuck with me ever since. Now that I have completed this book, it seems more relevant than it ever did before. The question, asked with a bit of a smirk, was: "Are you all empiricists, or what?"

There were a number of people sitting around the table who would have answered, "Yes." Several scholars had presented work based on straightforward bits of historical evidence bound to the objective foundations associated with the category of the "empirical," though without the thoughtlessness presupposed by the question asked of us. There were also a number of people in the seminar who would have quickly answered,

"No." Their essays on the narrative, language, and/or formal contexts of Caroline drama were never meant to be incontrovertible or mathematically accurate. But there were also several people around the table, and I would put myself in this category, who couldn't really have answered one way or another. I had presented part of my research on Hyde Park and the Shirley play of the same name in an early foray into the material that would become the fourth chapter of this book. I had spent time in various archives and libraries attempting to piece together a new history of Hyde Park that would shed light on *Hyde Park*, a history that would in turn be made richer by the inclusion of Shirley's play within it. On the one hand, I had hoped to find something resembling empirical evidence about the park and its visitors in the 1630s that would explain one thing or another about what Shirley had written. On the other, I wanted quite seriously to preserve and illuminate everything I loved about Shirley's comedy – its hectic scenes of leisurely play; its old-fashioned pastoral emplacement of urbane sophistication; its sly jokes about the politics of dancing, gambling, and fashionable wit. None of these things could be explained by the fact that in 1641 several people were apprehended stealing the pales of Hyde Park in order to build a maypole. I was fascinated by that story nonetheless, and I worked for some time (unsuccessfully, as it turns out) to find a place for it in my study of the play. Was I an empiricist, or what?

It took some time before I realized that the importance of the observer's question – and the reason it resonated so deeply with me – had nothing to do with my answer. The observer no doubt meant it quite literally, but we would do well to recognize the symbolic quotient of the question and, as I put it in this book, to attend to the broader social logic that organizes its effect. The question stakes out a certain amount of epistemological territory – the abstract, aesthetic, decidedly unempirical realm of drama, literature, and narrative, even self-consciously contingent historical narrative – and partitions that privileged field off from the putatively mundane naïveté of fact-based scientific inquiry and essentialist argumentation more generally. I used to care very, very deeply about this divide. As an undergraduate in the early 1990s I did everything I could to place myself on the right side of the line between sophisticated, knowing literary criticism and the innocent kind of scholarship that took fact at face value. By the time I had completed my thesis on travel narratives and the figure of the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, I believed that it was appropriate and even necessary to put words such as 'truth' and 'real' in quotation marks nearly every time I used them. My recognition of the semiological,

playful openness of narrative and language was so important to me, so intellectually definitive, that I let the political stakes of my writing drown in a sea of rhetorical mediation. This was not the fault of my advisers, who rightly pointed out that my readings of the plays were much more convincing than my theoretical overviews. It was not the fault of anything in particular I had read. Rather, I was seduced by the social logic that privileged anti-empirical literary study itself: the desired disposition it marked off in the context of my community; the comforting pretense of omniscient distance it presupposed. The sociological architecture of literary study presented a comfortable space for me. I slipped into it, happily.

Of course, even then, I did believe in something real. I believed in early modern plays. I believed in them as stunning aesthetic objects and as tools for political debate and historical discovery. I believed that these two aspects of literature – the aesthetic and the historical – were indivisible, and, in fact, that they constituted one another. I believed that good criticism could reveal this, and I knew for a fact that my own perspective on the categories of identity that were central to literary study in the early 1990s had been altered in lasting ways as I studied my favorite plays. I began to think and act differently because of Renaissance drama and the critics and teachers who read it along with me. As a result, I believed whole-heartedly, and I do to this day, in the political force of aesthetic form, literary study, and criticism more generally. To cordon off from criticism the kinds of analysis that fall under the heading of "empiricism" is to misrecognize this potential of literature and its subjects by limiting the extent of the cultural field defined by imagined narrative and art.

This will no doubt strike some of my readers as a naïve, general, and under-theorized philosophy of literature. But this is precisely how I'd like to begin this book. Before I begin to mark off my own ideas alongside those of Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu, I want to pledge my allegiance to naïve pleasure and interpretive confidence. These quantities do not strike me as being incompatible with intellectual rigor and critical acumen, especially when it comes to early modern dramatic comedy. The plays I explore here are devoted to making simple pleasure and sophisticated revelation simultaneous. The places they stage are entirely ordinary – a forest, a fairground, a city square, a newly public park – but comedy makes them fantastic and nearly magical. Lighthearted, cutting, satirical, angry wit binds these oppositional qualities together. There are wits and there are oafs in the chapters that follow, competent and incompetent characters whose differences, I argue, sit at the heart of early modern comic form and its political, historical engagements. There are

characters who roll their eyes at the innocents (though rarely over the question of empiricism) and characters who have no idea that eyes are meant to be rolled at all. Many of us like to identify with the eye-rolling wits. I hope the book that follows presents some sense for the theatrical and social history of this identification, for the local contexts of wit and witlessness, and, most importantly, for the pleasures that are both the subject and the intended effect of early modern comedy.

This book began as a paper I wrote in 1999 in a seminar led by Jean Howard at Columbia University. It grew into a dissertation project under her direction. It became a book over the years as she and I discussed the relationship between place, cultural competency, and comedy. She has been a mentor and a friend for many years now, and I am a better scholar and a better teacher for it. I feel lucky to add my name to the list of people who get to say this to Jean in print and mean it: thank you.

I am grateful, too, for the inspiring intellectual community at Columbia in whose midst I found myself at the turn into the twenty-first century. David Kastan's enthusiastic support helped me realize at a very early moment in my career that I wasn't just a graduate student, I was a scholar. He, Julie Crawford, Anne Prescott, Peter Platt, Jim Shapiro, and Ted Tayler showed me a thousand different ways to take serious pleasure in texts, histories, politics, and teaching. And I feel extremely lucky to have studied alongside a brilliant and generous cohort that is now teaching all over the world. Douglas Pfeiffer, Henry Turner, Patricia Cahill, Ronda Arab, Paul West, Thomas Festa, Doug Brooks, Andras Kisery, Tiffany Werth, Allison Deutermann, Ellen Mackay, and especially Michelle Dowd have all in different ways shaped my ideas here. I owe a special debt of thanks to four friends and collaborators: Alan Farmer, Zachary Lesser, Ben Robinson, and Kent Puckett. Without thinking twice, they have helped me with ideas, critiques, riffs, harmonies, jokes, and encouragement, all of which I've needed over the years. This book would not exist without them.

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Finally, I owe more than can be lightly expressed to my family. My father, mother, and brother have always been very funny, very generous, and very loving. Their support has been a foundational comfort to me for as long as I can remember, and I look forward to carrying that feeling with me for the remainder of my life. And I dedicate this book to the three people who will always laugh when I'm being funny and always roll their eyes at me when I deserve it: my wife Heather and our two daughters Susannah and Rose. I hope they are able to feel some small fraction of the love I've poured into this sentence every time they read it.