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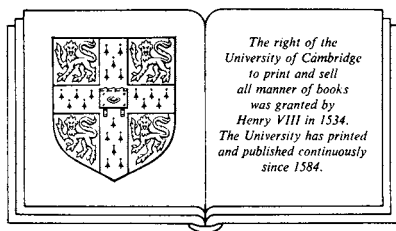
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SHAKESPEARE'S CLOWN

*Actor and text in
the Elizabethan playhouse*

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Preface

IN THE CONTEMPORARY THEATRE, the dominant figure is of course the director. Before the twentieth century, artistic decision-making lay in other hands. What sort of play should be staged? How should it be staged? These were not decisions for a 'director' but (chiefly) for the actor and for the writer. The historical relationship between the actor and the writer is inevitably elusive. The writer's work survives, the actor's work can only be inferred. It is all too easy to assume, in retrospect, that the actor was the servant or interpreter of the writer: to forget that the writer was, in no less real a sense, the servant or interpreter of the actor. This is the paradox that I shall explore in this book, in relation to the Elizabethan theatre. My subject is the role of the clown, and my particular focus is the relationship between two particular artists – the clown William Kemp and the writer William Shakespeare.

The actor's view of the writer is, as usual, lost. The writer's view of the actor is, or seems, easier to excavate. Shakespeare's commentary upon the clown's art in *Hamlet* is an obvious point at which to begin:

And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered; that's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. (*Hamlet* III.ii)

It is impossible to resist the conclusion that the passage is topical. The Elizabethan audience knew that a company of adult actors from the city (unlike an 'aery of children' such as the Paul's or Chapel boys) would include a specialist player of the clown's part. Since *Hamlet* is arranging for the presentation of a tragedy in which no part whatsoever is set down for the clown, his strictures must seem otiose, until we allow that Shakespeare was deliberately reminding his audience of their own situation as theatre-goers. In 1600, the Chamberlain's Men, the performers of Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*, had recently lost the services of the most famous clown of his

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generation, William Kemp, and the audience are being invited to notice the loss.

In the 'bad' First Quarto of 1603, Hamlet's speech is extended in order to give Hamlet the opportunity of mimicking the mannerisms and intonations of a clown. The punctuation is mine:

And then you have some again that keeps one suit of jests, as a man is known by one suit of apparel, and gentlemen quotes his jests down in their tables, before they come to the play, as thus:

'Cannot you stay till I eat my porridge?'

and:

'You owe me a quarter's wages!'

and:

'Your beer is sour!'

and blabbering with his lips:

'...'

and thus:

'...'

– keeping in his *cinque-pace* of jests, when, God knows, the warm clown cannot make a jest unless by chance, as the blind man catcheth a hare. Masters, tell him of it. (III.ii)

Hamlet touches on many conventional aspects of the clown's role. The clown-actor plays a character of servant status. The character is not historicized, but earns the standard pay and wears the standard uniform of an Elizabethan serving-man. His needs and aspirations are material, not spiritual. To draw laughter, the clown relies both on verbal gags and on non-verbal techniques. The image of hare-chasing evokes the clown's speed of delivery. The *cinque-pace* metaphor is a reminder that dancing was also part of the clown's repertoire.

The 1603 Quarto is specific in its reference to a single clown: 'let not your clown . . .' Although Hamlet in the 1603 text draws the audience's attention to Kemp's departure, he does not offer them a simple caricature of Kemp. It is the idea of the clown that is at stake. The style of clowning which Hamlet conjures up left its imprint upon the theatre of the 1590s, but belongs properly to an earlier generation. The players at Elsinore perform in an outmoded Marlovian style. The charge of improvisation and anarchic up-staging could fairly be levelled at Tarlton, the famous clown of the 70s and 80s, but there is no evidence that Kemp wreaked havoc with writers' scripts in this way.¹

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Hamlet's discussion of the clown in the 'bad' Quarto may be an actor's interpolation. There is no firm evidence, and the question is not of great importance. Far more important is the widely held assumption that Hamlet in the canonical text of III.ii serves as his author's mouthpiece. He is, of course, no such thing. Hamlet is a prince, a scholar from the university, a man who dismisses most of the groundlings as 'capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise'. Shakespeare himself catered not only for Hamlet's 'judicious' spectators, but also for 'a whole theatre of others'. The men who stood in the yard of the Globe would not have tolerated Shakespeare's play had they not been able to make the obvious distinction between 'Hamlet' and Shakespeare. Once obvious, this distinction is less easy for a modern audience to perceive – partly because the topicality has vanished, and partly because modern performances of Shakespeare observe an aesthetic code not dissimilar to that which Hamlet propounds.

Hamlet wants to cast his audience as passive voyeurs, peeping in at a mimesis of the sordid reality of Gertrude and Claudius's crime. Shakespeare's pointed reference to Kemp makes it clear that he has no intention of isolating his own audience from the world of the play. Shakespeare never shows much inclination to copy the attempts of Jonson and Chapman to reproduce social reality. He was a commercially minded actor-manager rather than a classically trained man of letters, and his art always retained its roots in the popular tradition. The clown was a major link with this tradition.

The neo-classical aesthetic necessarily involved a new realist approach to acting. Hamlet applauds the player's rendering of a role that had proved a disaster in public performance. He approves this player on the grounds that he 'in a dream of passion / Could force his soul so to his own conceit'. The traditional actor in the role of Herod is scorned because his acting is conscious artifice, because the actor's *soul* is not transformed. We must not forget that Shakespeare's dramatic theorist is on the brink of lunacy. When given 'the motive and the cue for passion', he tries to become the role, and fails. The discussion of acting is introduced because of its bearing upon Hamlet's state of mind. There is no evidence that Shakespeare shared Hamlet's scorn for volume, projection and large gestures – or Hamlet's implicit preference for theatre performed in intimate spaces, spaces where the psychological self-transformation of the actor

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could be accurately gauged by the spectator – one who was of necessity an elite spectator.

The clown is an important figure to study because he stands at the heart of the Elizabethan debate about acting. Sir Philip Sidney represents the neo-classicist point of view. He criticizes those who 'thrust in clowns by head and shoulder to play a part in majestic matters, with neither decency nor discretion'. He wishes spectators to see their own world mirrored in the play, and he approves of theatre when 'we get, as it were, an experience of what is to be looked for of a niggardly Demea, of a crafty Davus, of a flattering Gnatho, of a vain-glorious Thraso'.² By such means, the spectator learns to recognize and to reject evil. Hamlet espouses the same theory. His theatre will 'show Virtue her own feature, Scorn her own image'. It follows that the clown must be banished from such a theatre. For the clown's brief is not to 'imitate humanity' but, in the first instance, to 'make those laugh whose lungs are tickle a th' sear'.

When we consider the matter from the opposite viewpoint, it is clear that the clown needs to appear the product of 'nature's journeymen', for only thus can he be grotesque, eccentric, unique. His task is to make his audience love him, not to reject him as an exemplar of sin. The servant-clown whom Hamlet mimics is not trying to assume the inner reality of a real-life serving-man. His mannerisms exploit the fact that he is a known theatrical performer dressed up in a servant's livery. The audience are actively involved, egging on the clown to repeat conventional formulae, and to disrupt the orderly progress of the narrative. The neo-classical argument proposed that the theatre audience look passively into a mirror containing an image of their society – but the Elizabethan clown's performance rested on the assumption, or illusion, that the audience are active participants, necessary helpers in the creation of theatre.

Shakespeare's position was of course more complex than I have so far implied. The Elizabethan theatre was always in flux, but its underlying history was one of a drift towards characterization/acting based on notions of mimesis, and away from acting based on iconography or non-representational signalling. The replacement of Kemp by Robert Armin was part of a broad drift towards a new type of theatre. The play had to depict a coherent social milieu. Characterization had to be based on careful observation. The actor had to be responsible to the author, and to realize a character possessing an anterior existence in the author's imagination. The rift which took

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place in 1599 between Kemp and the Chamberlain's company is a moment which I view in this book as a significant jolt on the graph of theatrical change.

My project in the chapters that follow is to trace the history of the role of the Elizabethan clown with a particular focus upon the writing career of Shakespeare. There is a factual core to the book: I argue that specific lines were written to be spoken by a specific individual. But any presentation of factual data becomes at once an interpretation of the facts. A value-neutral positivist historiography must be seen as an impossibility. Positivist theatre historians like E. K. Chambers and C. R. Baskervill did much valuable work on the clown, but they always refrained from moral and aesthetic judgements on texts, seeing such work as the province of a different type of scholar. My own view is that any historical study, like any literary study, is necessarily interpretative. I see it as desirable, therefore, to marry an interpretative historiography to a historically based mode of textual criticism. I shall make it clear in the final chapter of this book why any assessment we made of the clown's significance is an interpretation shaped by premises about the art and theatre available to us in the present.

I begin the book by looking at the clown or 'Vice' in medieval tradition. We can begin to shed modern naturalistic assumptions only when we have grasped the complexity and power of medieval dramaturgy. The centrality of the clown or Vice in medieval theatre warns us against underestimating the Elizabethan clown.

Actors, like most visual and literary artists, learn by imitating predecessors, and only slowly develop an innovative style. In Chapter 2, therefore, I examine the work of Richard Tarlton, the great comic actor of the 1570s and 1580s, and a seminal influence upon later clowns.

Chapter 3 is an exercise in biography. I piece together all that is known about Kemp's career in order to show that writers had an obligation to cater for his distinctive talents. Chapter 4 deals with a single aspect of Kemp's art, the jig. This was probably the acme of his accomplishment in terms of skill, originality and impact. I place the jig within the structure of the play-goer's experience.

In Chapter 5 I analyse playhouse conventions and terminology in order to establish what Elizabethan writers mean when they script a role for 'the clown'. I show that this refers always to a known individual. On this basis, I analyse in Chapter 6 the roles which

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Kemp played as a company 'clown'. In Chapter 7 I consider the process by which the Elizabethan text (and thence the modern text) is generated.

In Chapter 8 I try to disentangle the idiosyncrasies of one actor, Kemp, from the broader workings of a theatrical convention. I argue that Kemp's particular background and abilities helped to shape theatrical convention.

I postpone discussion of Falstaff until Chapter 9 because the character is the focus of so much critical controversy. I argue that Kemp played the part of Falstaff, and that the part could not have been written without him. The role developed logically from Kemp's previous roles, yet at the same time threatened to undermine the very idea of a 'clown'.

In Chapter 10 I analyse Armin's clowning, using the same methodology that I applied to Kemp. When the Chamberlain's company acquired a new clown in Armin, they discovered a new possibility of blending popular and intellectual modes of clowning. I examine the marked readjustment which writers had to make.

The Elizabethan theatre stood at a point of transition between the modern concept of theatre as part of a leisure industry and the medieval or pre-urban concept of drama as part of an inversionary or carnivalesque mode of living life. Kemp's clowning was intimately related to this older understanding of drama. That is why I have chosen to focus this book upon Kemp, even though Armin's career offers significantly better documentation. In my final chapter I develop a theoretical line of argument. I argue for a social/anthropological approach towards theatre, an approach which sees a performance as a historical process. I look at some modern analyses of carnivalesque enactments in order to suggest the kind of intellectual perspectives that are necessary if we wish to further our understanding of a phenomenon like William Kemp.

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For line references to Shakespeare's plays, I have used the New Arden edition. For old books without numerical pagination, I have given the printer's signature (abbreviated to 'Sig.', with 'v.' for verso). Thus for example 'Sig. c2v.' would be the reverse side of the second leaf of the third quire of the book as originally bound.