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Introduction

> *Fowler* you know was appointed for the conquering parts, and it being given out that he was to play the Part of a great Captain and mighty Warriour, drew much Company; the Play began, and ended with his Valour; but at the end of the Fourth Act he laid so heavily about him, that some Mutes who stood for Souldiers, fell down as they were dead e're he had toucht their trembling Targets; so he brandisht his Sword & made his *Exit* ne're minding to bring off his dead men; which they perceiving, crauld into the Tyreing house, at which, *Fowler* grew angry, and told 'em, Dogs you should have laine there till you had been fetcht off; and so they crauled out again, which gave the People such an occasion of Laughter, they cry'd that again that again, that again.[1]

It is commonplace to extol the virtues of the relatively bare stage and non-naturalistic mode of the early modern theatre. Robert Weimann sees in the popular stage a "flexible platform dramaturgy" which was able to subsume a variety of theatrical modes in order to create "an astonishing variety and richness of language."[2] Andrew Gurr notes that the "conventions of continuous staging and unlocalized settings" in both public and private theatres allowed for an easy "interplay between illusion and reality."[3] Defining Jacobean private theatre as "mannerist," Keith Sturgess does not argue for any significant difference in indoor and outdoor acting styles, but finds that the combination of indoor venue and

[1] This is from the 1664 *Knavery in all Trades* (ascribed to John Tatham), quoted in Bentley's *Jacobean and Caroline Stage* VI (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), pp. 172–3. It is from a passage where several gentlemen reminisce about the plays of Prince Charles's men at the Fortune Theatre and about actors such as, here, Richard Fowler. The plays of Prince Charles's men are outside the scope of this study, and the status of this reminiscence is of course somewhat doubtful, but the passage is vividly suggestive in terms of the questions of convention, theatrical efficacy, and theatrical failure that I will be taking up and which I think are pertinent to all Renaissance drama.

[2] *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 216.

[3] *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 164. See also Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Jacobean Drama* (London: Methuen, 1936), pp. 273–7.

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stylized acting produced, in plays such as *The Duchess of Malfi*, "a species of melodrama which mixes farce and sentiment in a challenging way."[4] The transparent dramaturgy typical of adult companies was given another layer in the private, indoor theatres of the boy companies, where adult roles were acted by young boys. Michael Shapiro's analysis of this is fairly typical: boy companies played on the audience's "dual consciousness" of reality and illusion. "In tragedies . . . the use of child actors afforded the spectator a detachment from material that threatened his own precarious social identity. The comedies . . . are studded with various devices intended to remind the audiences of the actors behind the characters."[5]

This book will not take issue with these estimations of the flexibility of the early modern stage and the dual consciousness of early modern audiences; indeed, it may at times seem to take them too much to heart, insisting as it does not only that Elizabethan and Jacobean drama was extremely self-conscious, but that it demanded an equal self-consciousness from its audience as well. Where my discussion will differ from others of its kind is in its insistence that the potential for failure of many of the theatrical devices indigenous to or inherent in early modern drama is an essential part of understanding their potential success. That is, to say that Elizabethan and Jacobean playgoers knew only a non-naturalistic mode of drama and were thus content with fragile illusions is not enough. Ideas about realism or naturalism would certainly have been significantly different from our own, but my goal is to demonstrate that the drama and its audience were very much aware of the limitations of the early modern stage, and that the potential for dramatic representation to be ridiculous or inefficient or incompetent was a constant and vital part of audiences' experience of the plays. External evidence of the potential problems (and pleasures) with a practical and ubiquitous convention such as taking dead characters off-stage, which we see in the epigraph above, is unfortunately quite rare, but the evidence of such problems throughout the drama is I think visible in the plays themselves.[6] The project of

[4] *Jacobean Private Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 7.

[5] *Children of the Revels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 104–5.

[6] Sidney's famous objection to the violation of the unities is perhaps another piece of external evidence of the potential strain on probability present in the drama throughout the period (see Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966]), pp. 65–6. In *The Jacobean Drama*, Ellis-Fermor notes that the "raggedness . . . to which repertory playing is liable" must have "beset the Elizabethans" (p. 279), but suggests that there was nevertheless a "flow of sympathy from auditorium to the stage and back again [which raised] the standard of acting" (p. 279). One of the best explorations of difficult, potentially awkward habits of staging and stage effects within the plays themselves is George Fullmer Reynolds's *The Staging of Elizabethan Plays at the Red Bull Theater* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1940).

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this book will be to examine this evidence, to consider the relationship between theatrical performance and failure, and to reconsider modern scholarship's relationship to the wealth of popular, now-obscure drama that constitutes the vast majority of extant Elizabethan and Jacobean play-texts. In undertaking this project I endeavor to consider Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as broadly as possible and in doing so to provide an essential larger theatrical context within which to think about the works of Shakespeare.

Early modern tragedy, Jonathan Dollimore says in *Radical Tragedy*,[7] "violates the cherished *aesthetic* principles which legislate that the ultimate aim of art is to order discordant elements; to explore conflict in order ultimately to resolve it; to explore suffering in order ultimately to transcend it" (p. 8, emphasis original). This is a view to which this book will vehemently subscribe, with respect to comedy as well as tragedy. In my discussions of failure and potential failure, however, I will also assume that early modern drama's most vital effects come from the fact that it attempts to cling to these "cherished aesthetic principles" even as it flagrantly violates them. The value and *effectiveness* of the violation can be measured only in relation to the drive for coherence. A brief example will serve to illustrate this point. Beaumont and Fletcher's early comedy *The Woman Hater* is a play that concerns a misogynist (Gondarino), the woman he hates (Oriana), the Duke who loves her, two spies, two prostitutes, two officious advisors to the Duke, a pander, a mercer, and a "hungry courtier" character desperate to partake of an exotic fish's head that is to be served at the Duke's table. By the end of the play, which acts simultaneously like a humors comedy and a city comedy, Gondarino has been punished by being tied to a chair and teased by women; the Duke has "tested" Oriana's chastity (Gondarino accuses her of being a whore) by asking one of his advisors to pretend to try to rape her; and the hungry courtier, after being arrested for and then exonerated of treason (the play is partially a satire of post-Gunpowder Plot London), has given up his desire for the fish-head after being married to a prostitute. The way in which the play's multiple plots and its various pairings jostle against one another and complexly resonate with the play's title, with its overarching themes, and with its theatrical and political context creates a kind of potential interpretive cacophony that is exemplary of everything literary criticism has tended to find incoherent, silly, or obscene about early modern drama. At the same time, the extent to

[7] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

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which each part of the play resonates with every other part creates a surfeit of coherence, or potential coherence. Playwrights construct plays that contain and interconnect a dizzying number of levels, to the point that the fundamental components of those levels – plot and character – are in danger of collapsing under the sheer weight of potential significance.

After an introductory chapter on audiences and audience response, I undertake a discussion of three well-noted conventions of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama whose functionality has generally been but cannot be, I think, entirely accounted for simply by pointing out that they are conventions. These are: obvious, often superfluous, largely sexual puns and wordplay; asides; and expository speeches. Like Alan Dessen in *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Early Modern Interpreters*,[8] I believe that "the key to understanding what is distinctive about [early modern] drama . . . lies in the anomalies, the surprises, the moments that make us aware of the full stretch of the dramaturgy," and that the "consideration of obscure plays of questionable merit" on a serious and minute level will help us better understand "the terms upon which an Elizabethan audience at a performance of *Hamlet* or *King Lear* agreed to meet" (p. 18). Where this study will differ from and, I hope, add to Dessen's, is in its large-scale consideration not only of anomalous or surprising moments, but also of moments, habits, and conventions in the drama that are so pervasive that they all but demand to be taken for granted. My concern with such moments is with the way that, deliberately or not, they call attention to the artificial relationships between dramatist and performer, performer and role, stage and audience. The interpretations I offer of these moments, and of their potential effects and effectiveness, will be based on the assumption that repetition in the commercial theatre is a good index of theatrical success: for a device to become conventional it must be functional and give pleasure. But while the three pervasive conventions I focus on are functional in fairly obvious ways, they are frequently deployed or exploited in ways that would seem to fly in the face of functionality and pleasure. Form gets in the way of content. It is in such inefficient moments that the value and function of convention are most tested, and it is moments like these that most clearly reveal how audiences and playwrights think about dramatic action and their own relationship to it. The final chapter of Part I is a broader discussion of some other, less

[8] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

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frequently noted conventions and what they reveal about the relationship between convention and genre in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

In Part II I undertake a more extensive discussion of genre, and shift my focus from an audience's experience of specific kinds of moments in the drama in general to its experience of plot and character in comedy and tragedy. In order to make an argument that is usefully specific as well as usefully general, I structure each chapter around close readings of three plays that span the period with which this study is concerned. In chapter 6, on tragedy, I discuss *Soliman and Perseda*, Marston's *Sophonisba*, and Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*; in chapter 7, on comedy, I discuss Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Captain*, (anon.), *How a Man May Choose a Good Wife from a Bad*, and Lyly's *Gallathea*. Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, I argue, are self-conscious about genre in the same way they are self-conscious about conventional verbal and theatrical devices: virtually every play in Renaissance drama announces its genre quite explicitly, and operates under the assumption that an audience is clear about what is expected of its response to any particular genre. But the phenomenon of experiencing an Elizabethan or Jacobean play as generically coherent involves another kind of self-consciousness as well: the audience is constantly put in the position of having to react to events that do not fit with the generic demands it expects to govern the play. We see this in Renaissance tragedy's tendency to employ a variety of tragic modes simultaneously or in rapid succession, each of which demands both a visceral and a distanced response to events that are meant to horrify and move; and in Renaissance comedy's thematization of laughter by means of ostentatiously introducing into its movement episodes that are not funny but are structurally presented as though they are. The incoherent response which these processes provoke results in a disjuncture between the audience's experience of character and its experience of plot. This disjuncture is significantly different in tragedy and in comedy and is of crucial importance to defining the nature of each: in tragedy, the play's presentation and an audience's experience of character must change from one moment to the next in the face of the action's absurdly logical movement toward catastrophe; in comedy, the movement toward resolution occurs improbably rather than logically, but the play's presentation and an audience's experience of character are almost always consistent, no matter how ridiculous the turn of events.

In defining and describing audiences' experience of plays, I repeatedly return in this book to notions of *space*, a term whose usage I should clarify from the outset. When I use the term "physical space," I refer to the

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actual stage, its physical features, and the physical and spatial relationships between characters and other characters, characters and props or set, and characters and the audience. When I use the term "theatrical space," I refer to the metaphorical "space" which the physical space of the theatre allows to be created: a space collectively shared by the audience, wherein the physical space of the stage is transformed by representation and illusion; where words, characters, and events are understood metaphorically or figuratively even while the literal, physical features and limitations of the stage continue to make themselves known. Extending the spatial metaphor, I frequently refer to audiences or characters being inside or outside of the events happening on stage. The term "inside" refers to moments when audiences are aware, or when characters show an awareness of the physical space only insofar as it allows them to become more or less wholly invested in the significance of the theatrical space – referring repeatedly to a stage-column as a tree, for example. "Outside" refers to those moments when the artificiality of both kinds of spaces is self-consciously evident, to audience or characters or both – moments such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 3.1, the mechanicals' rehearsal, where Quince refers to a "hawthorn brake" as the "tiring house," and then sends Bottom into that "brake," only to see him return a few moments later newly attired with the head of an ass. The difficult process of making a connection between extremely limiting physical space and extremely liberating theatrical space, and the energy that results when the process is successful, is I think the distinguishing characteristic of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

The period this book covers is 1585–1616, and it has been important to my project to take into account as many as possible of the extant plays produced in that period. Occasionally I may seem to pursue the discussion of obscure plays simply for the sake of doing so, and at the expense of more familiar examples from Shakespeare or other major playwrights. It is my hope that the nuisance of such moments is outweighed by the advantages of looking more broadly than we yet have at the minutiae of the lesser-known Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; to this end, we might begin to better contextualize, even reunderstand, the minutiae – such as that of Shakespeare – we have come to know so well.

The prevailing orthodoxy at least since Alfred Harbage's *Shakespeare's Audience*[9] has been that one can better understand the plays of the English

[9] New York: Columbia University Press, 1941.

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Renaissance if one better understands their audiences. In this book I want to suggest something different: that one can better understand the audiences of the English Renaissance if one better understands the plays they watched. That is, the plays contain within themselves most of the evidence needed to understand what audiences expected and enjoyed and experienced. In order to make a convincing case for this, one must look at a great many plays, and look at them quite closely. Thus in this book I will assume that plays that have been labeled as "minor," and have been condemned to relative obscurity, have the same kind of linguistic and dramatic complexity as the works of Shakespeare, and are worth looking at as closely. One important goal of working from these assumptions will be to draw some conclusions both about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century audiences, and audiences in general, and to do so without the bias betrayed in audience studies with titles like *Shakespeare's Audience*, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions*, *The Privileged Playgoer in Shakespeare's London*, *The Shakespearean Stage*, and *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*. I do not claim to be discovering new masterpieces or building a new canon, nor even to be establishing a new tradition of audience study, but rather to be developing an approach to Renaissance drama that will give students of the drama a more accurate picture of the nature, variety, and scope of the drama than the massive Shakespeare text and criticism industry otherwise might.

We know from their textual histories, their revivals, and the number of allusions to them that *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Doctor Faustus* and *Hamlet* were particularly popular; we know from the extraordinary number of editions it went through (sixteen between 1598 and 1668) that *Mucedorus* was probably very popular; we know of the success of *A Game at Chess*; and we know that *Sejanus* was so unpopular as to be driven from the stage. The vivid idea we have of these plays' reception is quite unusual; more commonly we have to rely on the sifting effects of time to decide what plays are worth considering as representative of the period's drama. But given the massively disproportionate number of modern editions of Shakespeare to editions of virtually all other playwrights of the period, it is obviously not the case that only those plays that have stood the test of time are representative of the drama, or even the plays that Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences would have preferred. When one considers that, as we see in Henslowe's *Diary* entries for 1594, many new plays such as "the marchant of eamdon" or "Deoclesyan" were performed once and apparently never again; or that the five performances in July 1594 of "bellendon" were extraordinary even for a new play ("bellendon" first

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appears in June of that year), it is clear that the enduring popularity of, say, *Tamburlaine* was the exception rather than the rule,[10] and that the greater part of a company's commercial success came from its ability to constantly present audiences with something "never before seen." The plays, and the conditions under which they were performed and seen have about them a sense of deliberate, exuberant haste – a sense of expendability simultaneously suggested by the nature of the repertory system and belied by the way in which playwrights constantly returned to, built on, parodied, or even simply stole one another's plots, characters, and devices.

Chapter 1 examines the nature of Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences and the responses they expected and were expected to have in the theatre. Here, I am not much interested in analyzing audience response by dividing audiences into ever smaller and more specific groups. Instead, I argue that the differences between different kinds of audience and different kinds of playgoers, as laid out in the audience study-tradition of Harbage, Cook, and Gurr, were very much differences of degree rather than kind: Elizabethan and Jacobean drama seems to be very sure of the response it wants from its audience as a whole at any given moment. The arguments formulated in chapter 1 inform all subsequent analysis, and are present in the term "audience" as it is used throughout: the audience I imagine in chapter 1 is the audience I imagine Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists to have imagined, and the audience for which the effects I describe would have been most effective. At the same time, however, one major project of this book is to demonstrate that non-Shakespearean drama can be taken more seriously than it has been on the modern stage as well as in the modern classroom, and to this end I often use terms like "the audience," "an audience," and "we" interchangeably and ahistorically. I rarely use the term "reader," but this does not imply an absolute privileging of theatrical over readerly audiences – nor that my extremely minute close readings of theatrical language and action are valuable only when manifested as actual theatrical choices. As the work of critics such as Gary Taylor[11] and Harry Berger, Jr.[12] has shown, any good

[10] *The Diary of Philip Henslowe*, ed. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961). Even *Tamburlaine*'s power as a box office draw was limited in the long run. The novelty of an apparent revival on 28 August 1594 produced very high box office receipts (£3 11 s, compared to 40s for "Mahomet" the day before and 20s 6d for "bellendon" the day after), but the receipts and rate of performance after this become gradually more ordinary until May 1595, after which the play only appears twice more (August and November) that year.

[11] *Moment by Moment in Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

[12] *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

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interpretation or performance of a play must contain strong elements of readerly as well as theatrical analysis, and I try throughout to maintain a balance between them. My willingness to use the ahistorical "we" derives from what I hope my analysis shows to be an accurate estimation of the plays' potential as theatrical and not simply historical objects. This "we" has given me rhetorical as well as analytical freedom, and will I hope do the same for others, to discuss the continuing theatrical viability and vitality of many long-forgotten texts.

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PART I

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