Introduction

Cultivating Uncertainty in the Early Modern Theater

What are thou that usurp’st this time of night
Together with that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march? (1.1.45–48)\(^1\)

Hamlet’s Ghost, “stalk[ing]” onstage in its heavy armor (1.1.49), raises more questions than it answers. Its sudden appearance, just as Barnardo begins to relate having seen the “guilty thing” or “apparition” or “dreaded sight” or “questionable shape” the night before (1.1.147, 27, 24; 1.4.43), would seem to affirm the very power of theatrical representation itself: on the stage, a ghost can invade its own story.\(^2\) Yet from the perspective of the play’s original spectators, it is not clear that Hamlet’s Ghost would have looked much like one at all. The commercial theater had not settled on a conventional representation for its ghosts by 1600, nor would it in the subsequent decades of its operation. Ghosts continued to appear onstage in an array of attire into the seventeenth century: wearing a “leather cassock and breeches, boots [and] a cowl” (5.4.127sd), “crown’d, with Scepters in their hands” (505), clad “all in white, stuck with jewels, and a great crucifix” (4.4.42sd).\(^3\) They do not seem to have regularly, or even frequently, appeared in armor.\(^4\) Encased in a bulky metal shell, the spectacle of Hamlet’s supposedly immaterial spirit marching onto the Globe stage in the middle of the afternoon likely did not announce itself as a ghost so much as exactly what it was: an actor, entirely alive and material to the point of excess.\(^5\) As the appearance for theatrical ghosts settled into a conventional emphasis on “their immateriality, their invisibility” by the nineteenth century, the materials of the Ghost’s representation to which the play draws repeated attention – its “fair and warlike form” resembles “the very armour” worn by King Hamlet (1.1.59) – became an “increasing
embarrassment” for audiences and readers of Shakespeare’s play. Yet this evolution toward embarrassment sheds light on a possible audience response to the spectacle at the moment of its original staging. If Hamlet’s Ghost “embarrassed” its Elizabethan spectators, it did so in the senses that the word conveyed when it was introduced to the English language during Shakespeare’s lifetime: to block, to impede, to confuse, to perplex. The excessive materiality of Hamlet’s Ghost was an interpretive roadblock – “a mote,” as Horatio describes it, “to trouble the mind’s eye” (1.1.111). At a moment when the theater had not yet decided on a standard representation for its ghosts, the sudden appearance of one in Hamlet likely invited spectators to share in the very uncertainty that the play’s characters variably exhibit about it.

A supposedly spectral visitor who is materialized by a living actor and allegedly resembles a dead king could just as easily be a demon. Who’s there? No one, onstage or in the playhouse, knows. It goes without saying that Hamlet, which includes perhaps the most famous uncertain rumination in the whole of English literature, is a play about doubt. Horatio doubts whether the figure he has just seen is really the ghost of Hamlet’s father; Hamlet wavers back and forth about the Ghost, too, and in the process manages to doubt nearly everything else, from the nature of death’s undiscovered country to the sincerity of his uncle’s prayer. But what the Ghost’s visual ambiguity reveals is that Hamlet is more than just a dramatic representation of various responses to uncertainty – detached skepticism in Horatio’s case, crushing mental torment in Hamlet’s. The play just as deliberately entangles its spectators in uncertainty from its very opening scene, which renders the Ghost semiotically illegible by underscoring the means by which the spectacle is brought into being. Hamlet makes a paradigmatic drama of uncertainty not simply by representing it on the stage, but by producing it in the playhouse.

This book is about the phenomenology of the early modern English commercial theater, and it takes as its premise that this theater and the culture in which it arose were epistemologically akin; they shared, that is, the same basic form. It is commonplace to describe early modernity in England as Janus-faced, a period of epistemological flux: modes of thought that were actively unsettled through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not simply disappear, but lingered in aggravated relation to the burgeoning methodologies and disciplines that would eventually replace them. Yet the form of theatrical representation that emerged within this mosaic of cultural change was itself oppositional – and more than that, acutely attuned to its own opposition. All theater is, at heart, paradoxical, “a presentation of an imagined act.” But the insistently metatheatrical,
Introduction

highly experimental early modern theater regularly invited its spectators to dwell in that paradox by drawing attention to its fictional representations as theatrical presentations, its imagined acts as stagecraft. London’s commercial theater industry prospered at the close of the sixteenth century because it transformed the very shape of its culture into entertainment; it rendered the essential contrariety of early modernity, quite simply, spectacular.

The theater enacted that transformation, I will suggest, by actively and repeatedly entangling its spectators in uncertainty. The cultivation of playgoers’ unknowing was less the result of a singular agenda than the London theater’s emergence as an innovative commercial enterprise, one that responded to the demand for “Play[s] Spick and span new” by offering its spectators fresh stories and spectacles nearly every day of the week. Working quickly, practitioners borrowed material freely from one another, invented new representational practices and dramatic genres, and exploited the very conventions they codified. The last decade of the sixteenth century alone saw the transformation of the medieval Vice into the early modern villain, the development of the dramatic sequel, the invention of the history play, the cultivation of the soliloquy, and the flourishing of the complex semiotics of disguise plots. These and other dramatic experiments regularly put plays in contested relation to the formal resources of the theater itself, and the result was often spectacular incoherence: representations that were brazenly, even deliberately, at odds with the mechanics of their own production. As in the case of Hamlet’s Ghost, this troubling of what spectators saw in the theater, whether by accident or design, impeded what they could know about the fictional worlds unfolding before them onstage.

Yet that uncertainty served a theatrical purpose, for it enabled spectators’ imaginative participation in stage performance. In a theater with no scenic backdrops and relatively little stage furniture, much of the labor required to realize its fictional representations fell to spectators themselves. (“Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them” [Prologue.26], the speaker of Henry V’s prologue implores.) Theatrical apprehension, simultaneously imaginative and interpretive, is a spatiotemporal process that depends on the smooth transmission of meaning from stage to audience. Such transmission requires the security of interpretive discernment and expectation: A revenger who announces, toward the end of a tragedy, that he is about to stage his own play will likely kill at least one of the dramatic participants; the actor playing his victim will likely remain prone on the stage floor until he is carried off. But interspersed with these reliably conventional moments...
were those that deliberately frustrated spectators’ abilities to apprehend the action unfolding before them: An actor playing a seemingly dead character hops up from the stage floor without warning; a revenger gleefully introduces his play only to get straight to the business of murdering without staging it at all. What I term “uncertainty” in the chapters that follow does not name a particular feeling or response, then, so much as a concrete theatrical effect: the disturbance of the phenomenological tie that linked early modern spectators to performance. It is certainly true that the effectiveness of all art, in all times and places, depends on the careful interplay of familiarity and surprise. But the clash of the two was particularly volatile in the early modern theater, where spectators were required to make sense of a highly experimental art form while also making sense of playgoing as a new kind of social activity and “playgoer” as a new kind of social identity. And yet it was precisely because the theater encouraged its spectators’ close imaginative and interpretive involvement with stage show that the very disruption of that participation worked counteractively to spur the dynamic process of performance itself. Early modern performance ran on its audiences’ uncertain responses to stage spectacle.

In focusing on the ways that the theater unsettled spectators’ interpretive connection to performance, I depart from work that has so far been done in historical phenomenology, a methodology that seeks to identify the cultural practices and assumptions that shaped spectators’ responses to what they saw in the playhouse. Like these scholars, I take as a new formalist premise that the theater was not a closed semiotic system, and that audiences’ responses to its spectacles were therefore necessarily conditioned by the discourses that spectators would have both consciously and unconsciously absorbed outside the playhouse and brought with them into the theater. Yet it is equally true that experiential familiarity with performance was itself a key form of tacit knowledge on which spectators relied to make sense of new plays. To be sure, we lack concrete evidence of how exactly playgoers responded to the spectacles of the commercial stage, and this book is not an attempt to reconstruct the panoply of early modern audience responses lost to us. It instead reads the plays in concert with the array of material evidence we do possess about the historical conditions of theatrical representation in order to make informed claims about the semiotic effects of various stage moments. The surviving playtexts of this period are material traces of the ephemeral event of performance, and the same lines that have been read for decades in service of the search for thematic meaning contain troves of untapped evidence about what the plays did on the stage. This book extricates those phenomenological effects.
Introduction

Conventions of Uncertainty

A familiar explanation for the early modern commercial theater’s success is that, over the seven decades of its operation, it increasingly rewarded theatergoers’ experiential knowledge of its practices. Trends across the industry shaped the representational strategies of individual companies, and blockbuster plays sparked imitations for years into the future; there would arguably be no *Titus Andronicus* (1592), *Hamlet* (1600), *Antonio’s Revenge* (1600), *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606), or *The White Devil* (1612) without *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587). At the same time, companies defined themselves by regularly staging plays that reused popular theatrical devices, while the repertory system ensured that spectators could reliably see old favorites alongside new plays. Actors were typecast. Genre announced itself as a determining framework from the opening lines of nearly every play spectators saw. Above all, spectators’ interpretive security depended on their recognition of conventions — those repeated devices, as Jeremy Lopez defines them, that were deployed onstage “in similar circumstances and accompanied with informational and ideational baggage similar to those other moments of its kind.” Theatrical conventions were dynamic collaborations with spectators through which meaning emerged in the moment-by-moment unfolding of a single performance. The repetition of common devices cultivated the theatrical literacies of early modern playgoers. As William N. West and others have shown, the semiotics of early modern dramatic representation were established intertheatrically; the significance of any single theatrical moment, especially for experienced playgoers, was always informed by its conventional overlap with the similar deployment of like devices in other plays. Audiences increasingly made sense out of what they saw in response to the systems of meaning that the “reverberant constellation” of early modern drama produced. In this account, the theater scene witnessed, from the Elizabethan to Caroline era, a gradual evolution of spectators into playgoers, playgoers into increasingly sophisticated critics. If the commercial theater began as a site of eclectic, even haphazard experimentation with dramatic form, the various devices and practices it employed eventually hardened into conventions that reliably conveyed information and meaning, in the process cultivating “an audience of active taste, critical, discriminating and alert.”

But this is only part of the story. For even as spectators grew more experientially attuned to what they saw onstage, the theater did not consistently deliver to them the recognizable and familiar alone. Throughout the period, theater practitioners actively worked to remain an interpretive...
step ahead of their spectators who made sense of new plays with increasingly deep recourse to those they had already seen. Upsetting spectators’ intertheatrical expectations thus meant upsetting the conventions that had generated them in the first place. As thinkers across the disciplines of the theater and artistic representation more broadly have long understood, the actions, language, gestures, and images that eventually coalesce into identifiable conventions often first emerge into view as surprising departures from the established conveyance of meaning on the canvas, the page, or the stage. As Bert O. States puts it, the “efficient and invisible chips in the informational circuitry” of performance make their way into that conventional circuit as precisely their opposite: “anticonventions, or anti-signs” that interrupt the established transmission of meaning.

As I will show in Chapter 1, for example, disruptions to the conventions governing the removal of dead characters’ bodies from the stage quite literally gave rise to the unexpected (and incredibly popular) reanimations of seventeenth-century tragicomedy. The emergence of the hybrid genre is itself evidence of the innovations spurred by conventional rupture. Yet rather than focusing solely on the theatrical consequences of these conventional disruptions – that is, on the coalescence of those disruptions into newly meaningful conventions – I isolate their immediate phenomenological effects because it was precisely by upending spectators’ expectations that the theater exposed the limits of their theatrical acuity. The volatile conventions of the early modern theater brimmed with potential to be revised, upended, and bent into new relations to one other; in producing these disruptive jolts to the otherwise smooth transfer of meaning from stage to audience, the theater imbricated surprise and familiarity to particularly potent effect. “Performances in the Elizabethan playhouses,” West writes, “were provocations toward meaning rather than representations of a meaning.” Entertaining Uncertainty argues that spectators of this theater were so provoked under constantly shifting semiotic circumstances; their interpretive judgment was honed not through an unwavering knowingness with regard to stage spectacle, but through moments when individual plays pushed beyond the ever-broadening horizons of their dramatic expectations.

Forms of Uncertainty

Early modern theater practitioners could unsettle spectators’ interpretive complacency because they understood what the Prague formalists would articulate four hundred years later: To gaze on stage spectacle is to see with...
doubled vision. In the playhouse, spectators are required to apprehend the mechanics of stagecraft as the fictional elements for which they must substitute. A chair, dagger, and cushion on the stage can all signify royal accoutrement in the fiction, as Falstaff recognizes in *1 Henry IV* (1597), but these materials inextricably retain their status as technologies of representation, as Hal points out:

**Falstaff.** This chair shall be my state, this dagger my scepter and this cushion my crown.

**Prince.** Thy state is taken for a joint-stool, thy golden scepter for a leaden dagger and thy precious rich crown for a pitiful bald crown. (2.4.368–72)

On the stage, the materials of representation are manifest paradoxes, both the fictional thing itself and the tool used to create it at once. Early modern spectators acknowledged this contradiction even in the process of registering their commitment to stage fiction. When Henry Jackson praised a performance of *Othello* at Oxford in 1610, for instance, he alluded to the boy player’s material role in bringing the fictional Desdemona into being while conflating the two of them: “Desdemona, murdered by her husband in our presence, although she consistently delivered her speech well, moved us even more having been killed, when, lying on the bed, she implored the pity of those watching with her face alone.” Practitioners of the early modern theater regularly fragmented the fragile coherence of contradictory spectacles like the one Jackson describes; they exacerbated the inherent instability of theatrical form by drawing attention to both the material technologies and the conventional tools of their fictional representations. Readers of Shakespeare’s plays have long been attuned to moments when, as Luke Wilson puts it, “the actor speaks out from inside his character.” But this particular playwright was not uniquely capable of “being in uncertainties,” nor was emphasizing the contradictory hybridity of the actor the only way that practitioners foregrounded the materials of theatrical representation. In Philip Massinger’s *The Picture* (1626), spectators were required to search, in the uneven lighting of Blackfriars, for the impossible change of colors in a magical miniature purportedly able to detect a wife’s adultery; in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, playgoers’ expectations about the harmlessness of performance were overthrown during Hieronimo’s deadly inset play. Along with Horatio, spectators saw the bulkily spectral figure that he claimed “harrow[ed] [him] with fear and wonder” (1.1.43); along with Olivia, they gazed on the sight of the strangely doubled Cesario that gave her such joy: “Most wonderful!” (5.1.221). The theater’s near-constant attention to the tropes and tools
underlying its representations allowed it to inculcate in spectators the very uncertainty that its characters experience, for to draw spectators’ attention to plays as plays is to point to the margins of theatrical form itself: where the technologies of theatrical representation began to break down, to reach their limits as tools of representation, to cease to contribute dependably to the creation of fictional worlds. The early modern theater regularly transformed the doubled vision it required of spectators into epistemological dilemmas with which they were interpretively forced to reckon.

Four hundred years later, the consequence of spectators’ compelled attention to the mechanics of stagecraft would be described by Bertolt Brecht as the “alienation effect” (Verfremdungseffekt). A Brechtian model, predicated upon the integrity of an enclosed mimetic representation against which moments of spectatorial estrangement are sharply registered, has been most influentially integrated into studies of the early modern theater through Robert Weimann’s categories of the locus, the defined place of symbolic representation, and the platea, the unlocalized site of presentation. The former isolates the “picture of the performed,” while the latter discloses “the process of the performer performing.” While Weimann is attentive to what he terms the “interplay” between both performance modes on the early modern stage, his model nevertheless construes the locus – the self-contained site of representational authority, where “matter of ‘worthiness’, the discourse of epic and romance, historical and novelistic narrative, could be presented” – as the foundational mode of early modern performance. If the locus belongs to kings, to the platea is relegated the sidelined clown, who, in his indecorous commitment to playing himself rather than a fictional role, functions as a challenge to the mimetic representation which both precedes and outlasts him. Weimann’s methodology is, in part, New Historicist; in his earliest elucidations of the locus and platea binary, the “unsanctioned social energy” of the commercial stage is figured as a threat to the mimetic authority of Renaissance poetics. And while the great contribution of New Historicist scholarship has undeniably been its demonstration of the ways that commercial playing on London’s margins subverted authoritative modes of representation in the period, it is also true that this historical upheaval cannot be neatly mapped onto the process of performance as it unfolded, moment-by-moment, in the playhouse, which did not privilege representation over presentation but dynamically integrated them. The Ghost’s armor places him in the platea; his status as a king lends him the authority of the locus. An awareness of both simultaneously unsettles spectators’ interpretive capabilities and aligns them with the unknowing characters onstage; their alienation
Introduction

from the fictional world invigorates their imaginative involvement in it. Rooted in a claim about the imbrication of Renaissance modes of mimesis and popular forms of playing, Weimann’s phenomenology constructs an anachronistic binary, better suited to the darkened theaters and proscenium stages of the twentieth century, that necessarily subordinates estrangement to absorption. In the early modern theater, by contrast, the self-consciousness of the platea did not disrupt absorption in the locus; rather, the locus required the platea to come into being in the first place.

This book supplies a new model by which to understand the interplay of representational and presentational performance modes in the early modern English theater. Rather than taking absorption in a mimetic representation as spectators’ foundational relation to performance, it outlines the dynamic contingency of their imaginative participation in the realization of stage fiction. On the early modern stage, representations did not so much exist as continuously come into being, emerging through spectators’ constant negotiation of their interpretive tether to the stage. This theater exacerbated, that is, what phenomenologists have identified as the fundamental condition of all sensory and embodied experience: the uncertain grounding in a world that is never fully perceptible. That world, Edmund Husserl writes, presents itself as “a horizon of indeterminate actuality, a horizon of which I am dimly conscious.”48 In and beyond that horizon, the world is “on hand,” if not fully there – an opacity which requires Husserl to “exercise the ‘phenomenological’ ἐποχή [suspension of judgment] that utterly closes off for me every judgment about spatiotemporal existence.”49 The world emerges as a dynamic process of phenomenological apprehension and interpretive suspension, coming into being only at an interpretive distance from the observer. What tethers the observer to that world is, at heart, her uncertainty about it. And yet the very act of doubting, Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests, allows one to grasp oneself as a particular thought, as a thought engaged with certain objects, as a thought in act; and it is in this sense that I am certain of myself. […] I am a thought which recaptures itself as already possessing an ideal of truth (which it cannot at each moment wholly account for) and which is the horizon of its operations. This thought … searches after clarity rather than possesses it.50

Uncertainty ignites the wish for interpretive lucidity by holding clarity at bay. Early modern theatricality heightened the effect of what Merleau-Ponty elsewhere describes as a primordial immersion in “the impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself
Introduction

before our eyes.” By regularly inviting spectators to reflect on the tools of stagecraft, by upending their judgments about a play’s unfolding action, and by exposing the limits of their visual acuity, performance in this theater required spectators, nearly continually, to negotiate and renegotiate their connection to the onstage world. That dynamic process of performance propelled their interpretive investment in the stage fiction.

Cultures of Uncertainty

Yet this account of theatrical uncertainty – one that does not “negate” the world or “doubt its existence,” but merely refrains from making judgments about it – could just as aptly describe the unsettled feeling of life at the end of the sixteenth century, for the early modern English commercial theater arose, thrived, and was eventually shuttered within a culture that experienced multifaceted and overlapping provocations to doubt. This period’s intellectual culture has been described as “possessing “a widespread concern – one might even say obsession – with the simultaneous experience of contrary states,” its political culture as hovering “between attachment to the status quo [and] alienation from it,” its religious culture as “ideologically restless.”

London, home to the theaters that registered and reimagined these radical changes, was itself “a city in flux.” That this period saw the destruction of old modes of thought in an array of disciplines and, eventually, the gradual emergence of new ones is, by now, a familiar account of English early modernity. But what is harder to remember at a historical distance is that the people who lived through these epistemological shifts inhabited, for the most part, the interim; they existed in the midst of the very uncertainty that demarcated waning methods for finding truth and certainty from their nascent replacements. Perhaps most familiar to scholarship on the theater of this period are the effects of the spiritual whiplash caused by the Protestant Reformation, which sparked a crisis of uncertainty across Europe by destroying the previously singular – and therefore, unshakably certain – criterion of religious knowledge. In England, the effects of this destabilization were particularly keenly felt, as the country’s official confessional alignment changed with each new monarch and sectarian splintering proliferated within religious communities.

“Great is the variety of Religion in this our age, and great is the contention about the truth thereof,” Jesuit Leonardus Lessius admitted in 1618. But this period’s broader culture of uncertainty did not arise from confessional conflict alone. “Ambiguities, doubts, and diuisions” emerged in response to provocations as public as the fraught question of Elizabeth I’s successor.