ENTERTAINING UNCERTAINTY IN THE EARLY MODERN THEATER

Stage Spectacle and Audience Response

Lauren Robertson’s original study shows that the theater of Shakespeare and his contemporaries responded to the crises of knowledge that roiled through early modern England by rendering them spectacular. Revealing the radical, exciting instability of the early modern theater’s representational practices, Robertson uncovers the uncertainty that went to the heart of the playgoing experience in this period. Doubt was not merely the purview of Hamlet and other onstage characters, but was in fact constitutive of spectators’ imaginative participation in performance. Within a culture in the midst of extreme epistemological upheaval, the commercial theater licensed spectators’ suspension among opposed possibilities, transforming dubiety itself into exuberantly enjoyable, spectacular show. Robertson shows that the playhouse was a site for the entertainment of uncertainty in a double sense: its pleasures made the very trial of unknowing possible.

Lauren Robertson is Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University.
ENTERTAINING UNCERTAINTY
IN THE
EARLY MODERN THEATER

Stage Spectacle and Audience Response

LAUREN ROBERTSON
Columbia University, New York
For Chester
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Figures</th>
<th>page viii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Convention</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivating Uncertainty in the Early Modern Theater</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part I Dramatic Action

1 Bodies | 35 |
| Lively Corpses and the Rise of Tragicomedy |

2 Time | 71 |
| Dramatic Suspense, the History Play, and the Elizabethan Succession Crisis |

## Part II Playhouse Structure

3 Props | 113 |
| Staging the Minuscule in the Jacobean Theater |

4 Space | 148 |
| Dramatic Impersonation, Playgoing Community, and the Amphitheater |

## Part III Theater History

5 Audience | 185 |
| Expecting Surprise in the Caroline Theater |

Coda: Frame | 218 |
| Resolution in the Restoration Theater |

**Bibliography** | 226 |
**Index** | 254 |
Figures

2.1 Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *A King and No King* (1619)  
2.2 Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna* (1612)  79  
2.3 *A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland* (1595)  80  
2.4 Stephen Harrison, *The Arch’s of Triumph Erected in Honor of the High and Mighty Prince. Iames* (1604)  90  

All illustrations are used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.
I owe thanks to the many people who provoked me into uncertainty and restored me to resolution in the process of writing this book.

The idea for *Entertaining Uncertainty in the Early Modern Theater* was sparked in a graduate seminar taught by Joe Loewenstein at Washington University in St. Louis. I am grateful for his mentorship, a bolstering balance of rigor, enthusiasm, and patience, which modeled the precision of thought and expression to which I still aspire.

In Columbia’s Department of English and Comparative Literature, I am incredibly lucky to be surrounded by colleagues both brilliant and generous. Sarah Cole, Denise Cruz, Jenny Davidson, Austin Graham, Matt Hart, Edward Mendelson, Dustin Stewart, and Dennis Tenen have all shared invaluable advice and encouragement. Jim Adams’s invitation to give a talk on *King Lear* to a lively group of Columbia alumni helped me clarify the reading of the play that appears in Chapter 1. The responses I received to a department works-in-progress presentation helped shape Chapter 5; Erik Gray subsequently offered galvanizing feedback on the whole project, carrying me through a revision of the introduction just as New York went into lockdown in March 2020. Julie Crawford, Eleanor Johnson, Molly Murray, Jim Shapiro, and Alan Stewart each read multiple chapters with precision and care; I am deeply appreciative, and still a bit overwhelmed, when I register their collective contribution to the pages that follow. There simply aren’t thanks enough in the world for the incomparable Jean Howard, whose clear-eyed wisdom helped me both see what the book could be and chart the path to its completion.

Material support from Columbia University was essential to the book’s completion. Leave provided by the Junior Faculty Development Program and the Chamberlain Fellowship gave me the time to finish it, and funding from the Hettleman Junior Faculty Summer Research Grants Program allowed me to undertake necessary research at the British Library.

The book benefited from people and support beyond Columbia, as well. Brad Gregory’s inspiring direction of an interdisciplinary seminar at the
Acknowledgments

Folger Shakespeare Library helped me frame the project for a broad audience. Members of the Rutgers Medieval-Renaissance Colloquium, who read Chapter 1, and the Yale Renaissance Colloquium, who listened to material from Chapter 3, asked excellent questions. The students in Rhodri Lewis’s graduate seminar on tragedy at Princeton engaged incisively with the introduction and Chapter 1; Rhodri’s further questions and conversation proved essential as I finalized the manuscript for publication. Anita Gilman Sherman generously invited me to lead a seminar on theatrical skepticism with her at the 2019 Shakespeare Association of America conference; the participants’ fantastic papers and invigorating discussion left me with whole new sets of ideas. I am particularly grateful to Anita for her ongoing support since.

At Cambridge University Press, Emily Hockley expertly guided me through the publication process, and the book was made better by the press’s two anonymous readers, who offered serious, substantive feedback. George Laver’s, Natasha Burton’s, and Thirumangai Thamizhmani’s assistance as I prepared the manuscript was instrumental.

Material from Chapter 3 originally appeared as “False Evidence and Deceptive Eyewitnesses: The Theatricality of Uncertainty in The Picture and Cymbeline” in Renaissance Drama, where it benefitted enormously from Will West’s incisive comments; material from Chapter 5 originally appeared as “‘Bootless are your thoughts’: Audience Expectation and Surprise in the Caroline Commercial Theater” in Publicity and the Early Modern Stage, expertly edited by Allison Deutermann, Musa Gurnis, and Matthew Hunter. I thank the University of Chicago Press and Palgrave Macmillan for permission to include this material in revised and expanded form.

I am endlessly grateful to the friends who, in serving as writing partners, improved the book with their insight and made the solitary process of writing one less so: Joe Albernaz, Caralyn Bialo, Adhaar Desai, Allison Deutermann, Aubrey Gabel, David Hershinow, Jayne Hildebrand, Matthew Hunter, Laura Kolb, Debapiya Sarkar, Steven Swarbrick, Hannah Weaver, and Michael West. Meg Dobbins’s, Kelly Oman’s, and Merrill Turner’s life-saving commiseration has stretched across multiple years and states. Musa Gurnis has read multiple drafts, listened to talks and practice talks, asked the best questions, and shared the best theater tickets for over a decade. Maggie Heim is a friend for all time.

The love and encouragement of my family, especially my parents, Tom and Kim, and my sister Marta, is foundational. My husband Chester has listened to all the ideas that made it into this book and many more that did not; he’s also reliably made me laugh every single day as I’ve worked on it and dinner almost as often. It is dedicated to him.