Introduction
The play is not the thing

This is only accidentally a book about clowns. It began as an investigation of the history of early modern dramatic authorship, and an attempt at the prehistory of this category we need in order to make our current histories more coherent. Such a prehistory, I claim, involves not just changing patterns of dramatic publication, but underlying changes in the nature and meaning of theatrical performance itself. And if that prehistory involves performance, as we will see, then it passes pivotally through the figure of the stage clown. What makes this book challenging to write, however, is the fact that hardly anyone today – scholars of early English drama included – quite understands any longer what the term "clown" means, or what it meant to playhouse audiences in the period. This is not a fault; it is a legacy.

When we hear the word "clown" – if it does not immediately evoke the painted face, frizz wig, red nose, floppy shoes, and tattered hat of the half-hobo, half-circus-freak Victorian pantomime descended from Grimaldi, Pierrot, Punchinello, and Harlequin – we usually think, in the Renaissance theatrical context eclipsed by this lineage, of specific dramatic characters.[1] Asked to list some of them, a student of Shakespeare might name Bottom, Dogberry, Launce, Speed, Gobbo, Costard, Grumio, Dromio, Touchstone, Feste, Lavatch, Cloten, Thersites, Autolycus, perhaps (daringly) Falstaff, *Hamlet's* Gravedigger, *Lear's* Fool; there is a sometimes troubling distinction in here between "clown" and "fool," but we will come to that in due course. If they were versed in Shakespeare's contemporaries, they might also mention Robin and Rafe from *Doctor Faustus*, Miles from *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, Cob from *Every Man In His Humour* and Buffone from *Every Man Out*, Passarello from *The Malcontent*. Beaumont's *Knight of the Burning Pestle* is a trickier case, because here the most readily identifiable clowns, George and Nell, are – tellingly – members of the audience.

Nevertheless, such experimental deviations from type serve only
to confirm the type's basic traits. Clowns are, in accordance with our
present-day usage, essentially comic; clowns are, in accordance with the
strict early modern sense of the term, generally rustic. They have names
like Hob, Nobs, Strumbo, Booby, Derick, Curtis, Peter, Slipper, Mouse,
Much, Jenkin, Simkin, Sim, Swash, Elbow, Clem, Crotchet, Hodge,
Fiddle, Frisco, Jeer, Simpleton, Bottle, Bubble – a representative but frac-
tional list[2] – and they personify this largely monosyllabic crudity in more
or less the same way. They are clods, dolts, wags, oafs, bumpkins, shep-
herds, villagers, drunks, hired hands, tinkers, tradesmen, servants, por-
ters, pages, occasionally constables or criminals, the people who fill the
gaps of a society and who sometimes are those gaps themselves: strangers
to metropolitan life and its manners, but wise enough to critique them;
strangers to the nuances of language, but witty enough to manipulate
them; strangers to the duplicity of human desire and the intricacy of
social relations, but clever enough to survive them; strangers to the world
of the play in which they find themselves, and happy enough to remark
on that fact. If their names are a vision of life reduced to atomic sim-
plicity, an encyclopedia of household objects, body parts, noises, instru-
ments, and foodstuffs, by the same token they each attain a stubborn
uniqueness, unwilling or unable to surrender their quirky individualism
to the forces of social pretense. And the astonishing frequency with which
their name is given simply as "Clown" or "the Clown," not just in speech
prefixes but in *dramatis personae*, tells us we are looking at a fixture of
early modern dramaturgy. We know we are looking at a clown when he
is speaking prose – and an intensely colloquial, carnal, oath-laced prose
at that; when he is lower in rank than his interlocutors; when his name is
English rather than the Greek, Latin, or Italian of his superiors; when he
is tripping over his words, tripping over his feet, tripping over someone
else's feet, eating, expressing a desire to eat, being called "honest fellow"
by someone about to give him instructions, miscarrying the most rudi-
mentary of those instructions, being beaten or chased for his stupidity
and impertinence, complaining of his abuse, or issuing a verbal stream of
self-reference whose incomprehensibility might be alleviated if we could
see the physical antics that accompanied it. We know we are looking at
a clown when he considers himself the hero of his own story, yet is all
too aware that it is not his own; we may find that story a refreshment
from the main plot, or even surprisingly relevant to it, but it is never
the main plot itself. His marginality amuses us, and we marginalize that
amusement.

Above all, we know we are looking at a clown when what we are doing is reading, and when what we are reading is a play. Playbooks make up the overwhelming majority of our archive of early modern theatre: texts were the medium by which theatre preserved itself, and whenever we reconstruct it, we do so through their logic. Nowhere has this been truer than in critical accounts of the clown, which until well past the mid-twentieth century – when interest in this sort of study waned, and for better or worse became amalgamated with the more politicized field of "popular culture" – formed an extension of arguments for the "aesthetic unity" of English Renaissance drama.[3] Taking their cue from Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*, which condemned the tendency of the public playhouse to confuse the refined comedy of "delight" with the vulgar comedy of "laughter," critics have spent much of the past two centuries trying to vindicate canonical poets from the equally canonical charge of "mingling Kings & Clownes, not because the matter so carrieth it: but thrust[ing] in Clownes by head & shoulders to play a part in maiesticall matters, with neither decencie, nor discretion."[4] This – along with Hamlet's advice to the players to "let those that play your clownes speake no more than is set down for them," advocating instead a "purpose of playing" that "was and is, to holde as twere the Mirrour up to nature" – is the derogatory statement around which post-Romantic discussions of the clown crystallized, and the response was to argue that "the matter" did indeed "carry it," or more accurately that clowns carried the whole matter.[5] Since Thomas de Quincey first articulated it, there have been various elaborations of the "comic relief" hypothesis – still the reflex answer of college undergraduates today – according to which, in its most robust version, the presence of low comedy in tragedy worked to mitigate (or amplify) the intensity of audience emotion, whose exact humoral balance was necessary to achieve Aristotelian *catharsis*. This notion of clowns as physiological pressure valves, of course, does nothing to explain their ubiquity in comedy as well, thereby leaving arbitrary their relation to the *mimesis* whose affective force they supposedly helped to calibrate.[6] If it did not especially matter what genre of play clowns were in, it becomes harder to argue, from this functional perspective, that clowns especially mattered – and that they were not, as Pope and Johnson had (with Sidney) snobbishly maintained, simply an excrescence, the playwright's regrettable capitulation to the demands of a boorish public.[7]

The New Criticism, in turn, sought to integrate clowns into those *mimeses*, positing tiered networks of signification through which plays conveyed their meaning. Seminally established in essays like Jonas Barish's "The Double

Plot in *Volpone*" (1953) and Richard Levin's "Elizabethan 'Clown' Subplots" (1966), this effort consisted of structural analyses of how plays employ resonant exchanges between seemingly segregated tragic, historic, or romantic "main plots" and low-comic "subplots" – linked by motif, wordplay, situational parallel, parodic inversion – to achieve the grander, socially inclusive expression of a single thematic architecture.[8] Far from introducing a note of discord, the clown refuted Sidney's castigation by being the active principle of drama's didactics: he was the play's moral made accessible, reduced from esoteric verse to the hard-headed vocabulary of prose, dumbshow, and common experience. He was not an anomaly to be dismissed or apologized; rather, like his classical antecedent in the *servus* type of Greek New Comedy and Roman drama, he was precisely what defined a nascent cultural institution trying to bridge diverse audiences, and what had enabled its greatest triumph – a unified vision of both art and nation.

Several other, more sophisticated critical schools have since arisen that use clown characters variously to elaborate or complicate this synthesis: Robert Weimann's studies of how the purely "presentational" performance traditions on which they drew helped to reinforce the Shakespearean drama's increasingly complex representational systems, for instance, making the play an organic collaboration between author and actor; Richard Helgerson's more pessimistic view of those same plays as staging the breakdown of that collaboration; the complementary readings of Marxist critics, finally, for whom the clowns' roles give voice to genuinely plebeian desires subversive of the plays' dominant ideologies.[9] We shall have occasion to revisit each of these perspectives in greater detail. For now, however, we must begin by recognizing the anachronistic assumption under which all of these approaches continue to labor, which renders them – however disparate their conclusions – methodologically equivalent. From the Romantics onward, every theory of the clown has taken at face value his status as a character, seeking to reconcile his meaning with that of the overarching aesthetic structure in which we find him, "the play." This is an understandable assumption: playbooks are what we have, and plays, along with everything in them, have meanings.

Thanks to the New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, and allied poststructural movements, we have replaced the formalist fantasy that every play possesses only one meaning with an attention to the ideological frictions that texts, as culturally embedded productions, continuously negotiate and perform. But the autonomy of dramatic texts – and how we can speak of their ability to "perform" things, as if they perform themselves – remains nevertheless uninterrogated, the invisible lens through

which all the foregoing accounts of the clown are focused. As a result, we have merely replaced one mode of reading with several, when if clowning ultimately suggests a tension between text and performance, it should prompt us to ask why we "read" theatre at all, and whether playbooks are really the place to look for theatre. The clown, in other words, is the stray thread that potentially unravels the whole fabric, by revealing the successive interpretive fictions our dependence on playbooks has dictated. By subordinating the clown to the play, we presuppose a superstructure of representation to which he exists in a necessarily supportive relation: because plays have meanings, the clown – whether therapeutically, thematically, or oppositionally – must have one too. Whatever that meaning, furthermore, we presuppose its fixity: because the clown is so stable a type, there must be a single theory to explain how plays use him, as surely as there is a single theory to explain how plays work. We presuppose that plays were established communication technologies whose dominant language was always mimesis, a hierarchy to which the non-mimetic was merely an adjunct and never a rival. We presuppose that *plays* were the dominant commodity of theatre to begin with, that a play inherently possessed a commercial legibility and experiential integrity sufficient to be perceived as, and afterward rendered as, a text. We presuppose that what audiences paid to see were, thus, essentially *texts*, and that they paid to be moved, diverted, dazzled, pained, surprised, edified, humbled, ennobled, transported, and transformed by them. We presuppose that the texts we have today reflect what audiences wanted; we presuppose that they reflect – indeed, could ever reflect – what audiences actually got.

In doing these things, we are perpetuating a project begun four hundred years ago by – and in – the early modern playhouse itself, for institutional reasons borne out by the very survival, study, and pedagogy of the texts we unthinkingly treat today as complete, transparent records of its production. Those texts were not the first fruits of that project: early modern playgoers themselves were, insofar as it plotted an eventual convergence between the phenomenology of performance and the phenomenology of reading, the mutual interchangeability of live and textual events. That is why, for most of those past four hundred years, our theories of "the clown" have devolved onto theories of the play. Regardless of whether we choose to view plays as the willed creation of an individual mind or as the spontaneous emanation of a cultural moment, we still conflate them with the textual deposits they left behind, and conflate that residue in turn with the first half of the word "play-house" – as the sum total of what theatres were about, as if such discrete aesthetic objects as "plays" were the base unit of

theatrical experience, and the theatrical transaction as clearly defined then as it is for us now. We do so because those texts have predisposed all of us to be, as suggested at the outset, students of "Shakespeare," or Marlowe, or Jonson, rather than of the early modern theatrical landscape in its fullest and thickest sense. As a result, a stage figure whom Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences would have associated far more intimately with the organizing agency of the theatrical event has become for us reducible merely to a minor species of dramatic character, his theatrical role coterminous with his fictional one, evacuated of any historical specificity or function beyond the words accorded him on a printed page.

This is a remarkable outcome, since the historical reality was the reverse. As we all know, it was dramatic authors who began as anonyms, their identity the most obscured from audiences' apprehensions. And, as we are often told – usually without connecting the two – it was the comedians, like Richard Tarlton and Will Kemp, who were the first celebrities of the early modern stage. If it is not to be found in their limited duties in plays, what were clowns doing to earn such renown, and how did they and authors come to trade places? What must have been the real shape of early modern performance, and what was at stake in clowning that demanded – and at the same time enabled – this transposition? And yet, if the problem clowning poses is the degree to which it exceeded the written, where do we look for evidence of a process whose constraints place it beyond the reach of those texts – playbooks – that, despite being the readiest sources we might consult, were also its end products? How helpful is the information plays give us, after all, when the two most basic facts about the clown that we glean from them are contradictory: that what was seemingly always getting him into trouble was doing precisely what he was supposed to do – talking to the audience?

If plays tell us anything about this shift, indeed, they tell us that it was a far more complex negotiation than they alone can, or perhaps wish to, record. A playbook is not a performance: it is the retrospective fantasy of one, abstracted from the play's synchronic and diachronic stage lives, privileging certain voices over others, retroactively framing playgoing as a continuous, monological, readerly experience. When we do theatre history through playbooks, we are looking through an artifact *of* theatre history, a filter biased toward the values that constructed it – and designed to make that bias undetectable, to naturalize its representation. In the case of clowning, they invariably turn theatre history into literary criticism, insofar as playbooks represent plays as books, and theatre as plays, autotelic verbal systems into whose matrix the clown can be assimilated. In so

doing, of course, they also obscure what conditioned their own existence: how playing came to be equated with writing in the first place, its integrity stabilized and its agency fixable, such that dramatic authorship could be foregrounded and performance excluded.

The evidentiary obstacles to a study of stage clowning thus become part of its object. To recover clowning from beyond the margins of printed plays is inescapably to *account* for that marginalization – and with it, the origin of those margins themselves, the constructedness of print as a medium of theatrical preservation and consumption. If early modern theatre starts with clowns and ends with (or at least ends gesturing toward) authors, the middle term that bridges them is textuality. Ironically, because it can make only limited use of playbooks, a history of the stage clown *becomes* a history of the playbook: the former entails the latter, because it entails discovering just how *unlike* our playbooks early modern theatre really was – and hence just how unlikely its subsequent translation into them was, and what discursive work it took to make the two conversible.

This book has two axes of inquiry, then, an archival and a theoretical one, which, while split more or less across its midpoint, remain organically interlocked. Since its theoretical concern is the emergence of dramatic textuality itself, furthermore – not the dramatic authorship on playbook title pages, but the genesis of those playbooks – its archival excavations are correspondingly deep. Chapters 1 and 2 attempt to recover the conventions of clown stage practice, which requires recovering the elements of early modern performance – and in the process, revising its fundamental dynamics. In Chapter 1, "What audiences did," I begin by observing that early modern audiences did not passively consume drama as we now do. They demanded to participate, registering their pleasure and displeasure alike with violent, disruptive intensity. Hardly a utopian space of authorlessness either, the playhouse environment was one of authorial competition, wherein spectators vied aggressively with both the players and each other for possession of the stage. Surveying the extant evidence of audience behavior, it becomes possible to see the underlying content of "theatre" as precisely the struggle to determine the content of theatre. In their compulsive invasions of the stage – invasions physical as well as vocal, as uniformly distributed across the geography and socioeconomic spectra of early modern London as they were ubiquitous throughout the period – playgoers behaved not as consumers, but as collaborative producers. To them, "the play" was not a static, self-contained verbal artifact, but an occasion for spontaneous social exchange. "Plays" were merely a subset of "playing": far from commodities capable of being concretized in a fixed

form or of ascription to any single creative agency, they were scenes of contest over that very form, and over that very agency.

And yet, as the remainder of the chapter illustrates, this immediately confronts us with a problem. Play*books* represent those contests as if their agency were pre-decided – indeed, as if those contests had never taken place. Printed playbooks were a relatively late institutional innovation: they began to proliferate only in the mid-1590s, nearly twenty years after the inception of dedicated playhouses. And viewed in relation to the theatrical performances that preceded them, they are incipiently authorial productions. Collapsing the plurality and multiplicity of theatrical events into monological, atemporal objects – now containing only what the players said and did (or perhaps merely intended to do), as if in a vacuum – playbooks silently reconfigured their material into literary property. And people – largely the *same* people who had exercised their agency so strenuously at the playhouse – bought them. How did they recognize these two phenomena – "the play" as both live, malleable social event and as ahistorical, impermeable text – to be related? Why did they purchase representations of theatrical experience that erased them? Before they could even acquire authors, how did plays become capable of existing on paper? In their increasing consumption of such texts, playgoers seemed to understand that theatre existed *before* performance, and thus could survive beyond it – that performance was not its originary moment, and that plays possessed their own independent, textual authority. The sheer fact of a playbook cannot retroactively teach this. Such a discursive remapping, rather, could only occur in the contact zone *between* performance and print, where each domain might gradually take on the character of the other. If playgoers were learning that plays could also be books, I argue, the place they were learning it had to be at the playhouse – where plays were emphatically *not* books.

What begins as the motivating question of this study, then, by the end of Chapter 1 becomes its core paradox. If the problem with dramatic textuality was its disjunction with the reception conventions of performance, the solution likewise lay in performance – amid those very same conventions, as resistant to textual authority as they were constant. For most of Chapter 2 it will seem as though clowning, in its response to these audience pressures, merely widened the gap between text and theatrical event. Indeed, this tendency conforms to our traditional view of clowning: namely, that clowns were transgressive, anti-textual agents, in league with the audience against the rule of the author. Yet this impression again derives anachronistically from their appearances *in* plays, where

such rebellion is foreclosed: whatever the clown says or does there has, of course, already been absorbed into a text. The clown's *theatrical* function, on the other hand, vastly exceeded his token role in the play – unsettling, in fact, the centrality of the play itself – and was fundamentally disciplinary in its conception. Unlike the flattened, uniform textual landscapes of playbooks, the theatrical program consisted of a medley of interstitial, interactive entertainments, whose goal was to check the agonistic energies of the audience by giving them an individual opponent. The stage clown, whose origins are here traced not to the "Vice" character of Tudor morality (as has long been supposed) but to the sacrificial folk-motif of the Jack-a-Lent, developed a repertoire of sadomasochistic performance genres – face-pulling preludes, slapstick interludes, jig postludes, rhyming contests with the crowd – suited to this task. In "Send in the clown," I systematically reassemble that repertoire, incorporating along the way the exploits of lesser-known comedians such as John Singer, Thomas Greene, John Shanke, Timothy Reed, William Kendall, and others, but primarily through the career of Richard Tarlton (*c.* 1553–88), its undisputed pioneer. In the facial contortions with which he began the show, for instance, the clown made himself a grotesque extension of the audience's will, only to convert that collectivity into a sudden statement of defiance; in the custom of "themes" with which the show ended, playgoers bombarded him with versified prompts, with spontaneous barbs volleyed back and forth until the loser was shamed into departure; still other evanescent ludic forms – the "merriment," the jig – interrupted, and defined, the day's offerings. For many playgoers, indeed, the play was what interrupted *them*: it was an afterthought, and the clown, the ringmaster who transcended it, was the main attraction.

Clowning thus met short-term institutional needs while exacerbating longer-term ones. He embodied the authority of the playing company, ritually negotiating their right to the stage, but at the expense of the integrity of performance; he became the "protoauthor" of the Elizabethan stage, his name motivating and governing its earliest textual documentation, but such documentation merely reinforced the paradigm of theatre as instantaneous, polyvocal event. Rendering every performance particulate, dialogic, and unique, the clown personified the heterogeneous, improvisatory dimension of theatre that playgoers craved – everything, in other words, inimical to its perception as literary commodity. In that protoauthorship and its radical concentration, however, lay enormous potential. If the clown was the epicenter of theatre's "liveness," only he could deactivate it – and he could do so only from within his own performance, by

merging it with writing. As we might expect – only more so – the clown was the most un-booklike thing about theatre. So what happened if the clown became a book?

That is the fulcrum of this study's thesis. The way around the paradox is through it: if the clown necessitates a history of dramatic textuality, that history in turn requires him. Challenging the received narrative in which theatre "banished" its clowns in favor of more stable, iterable dramatic products – somehow transforming itself, unilaterally and overnight, from a performance-centered experience to a textual one – I argue that clowns *created* those very products, installing a hierarchy of text over performance at precisely the site of their maximum dislocation. Before theatre could have individual authors, it had to claim institutional ownership of itself, from its audience; in order to become a book, theatre had to unfold as if it were *already* a book, making visible in performance its prior origin in writing. Our word for this immanent, phantom book is "the script," and our tacit consciousness of it during a performance accounts for nearly every major difference between early modern reception habits and our own. The missing link between a theatre whose audience instinctively participates and one whose audience instinctively consumes is that theatre's legibility as pre-produced, as something purely recititative and rehearsed. Today, we expect performers to mask such "scriptedness," because we are all too aware of it; Elizabethans needed it revealed, because to them it was a new idea.

The remainder of this study tells the story of that idea – the idea that theatre was scripted, its textuality always present in its performance, and its performance, as a result, capable of being absented from those texts – from, I argue, its inception. Certainly I do not pretend that plays were hitherto unscripted, though the degree to which even late sixteenth-century drama seems to have called for improvisation is often overlooked.[10] Rather, at stake here was the *awareness* of that scriptedness, the audience's ability to *distinguish* the play from its own contributions – a distinction the expressly improvised occasions which surrounded and pervaded the play made difficult to draw. In the extradramatic games, the audience participated; in the drama proper, the audience also participated. What was the difference? Why was one an open text and the other closed, one porous and the other permanent? Eradicating improvisation from the play – much less the clown from it – was thus never the point, because the clown was more than the play. His own man, his potential to generate theatre was founded elsewhere, and he carried it with him. Because he already embodied "unscriptedness," no one could script him. And for this reason,