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Introduction
The Merry Worlds of Merry England

'Hey ho, tis nought but mirth | That keeps the body from the earth.'[1] So in praise of good times ends what seems to have been one of the least enjoyable experiences of the early modern theatre, at least in the view of contemporary playgoers: Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, which was 'utterly reiected' by its first audiences at the Blackfriars theatre in 1607.[2] This failure has come to define the *Knight* for critics, perhaps in part because the play itself is so interested in the idea of audience enjoyment. Mirth is the central subject of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, a comedy about the difficult business of crowd-pleasing. Mirth as bodily and social experience is the explicit object of the pleasure-seeking Merrythought, an ambiguous figure who is nevertheless vindicated by the play's celebratory finale. Understood historically as ritual festivity, mirth makes repeated incursions in the play's otherwise decisively contemporary urban milieu. Finally, it is also the equivocal answer to a question posed by the *Knight*'s meta-narrative: what do audiences want?

This ambivalence is characteristic of contemporary understandings of mirth, which in the years around 1600 was a concept at once evocative and contested. For many people in post-Reformation England, mirth was strongly associated with what the physician John Caius, writing in 1552, called 'the old world, when this countrie was called merye Englande'.[3] 'Merry England' is usually understood in terms of the festive ritual calendar, which flourished from around 1400 and then declined gradually during the second half of the sixteenth century.[4] As I will show, however, the merry world of nostalgic Tudor memory was at once a more capacious

[1] Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, ed. Sheldon P. Zitner (Manchester, 1984). Quotation is from this edition.
[2] Walter Burre, 'To his many waies endeered friend Maister Robert Keysar', preface to Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (London, 1613), A2r.
[3] John Caius, *A Boke, or Counseill Against the Disease Commonly Called the Sweate* (London, 1552), D7r.
[4] Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994).

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and a slipperier idea than the focus on seasonal ritual allows. The language of lost mirth incorporated grievances and absences far in excess of declining festivity. While these often included aspects of traditional devotion (including calendar rituals), at least equally pressing was a sense of disappearing charity, sociability, stability, and a generalised abundance no less plangent for its unspecificity. Again, while these losses were typically pegged to religious reform and in particular the dissolution, merry world nostalgia was widespread across confessional boundaries. At the same time, this longing was closely related to and often included its apparent opposite: a consciously Protestant nostalgia that looked back to a reformist native tradition and valorised ideas of plain Englishness and rustic simplicity accordingly.

Alongside this historical freight, 'mirth' continued to connote pleasure and communal enjoyment, understood both socially and as a descriptive term for particular kinds of literary entertainment, as in 'merry' ballads and books. While these senses were distinct, however, they were also linked in asymmetric relationship. From the 1530s onwards secular merry-making, including the consumption of songs and stories, had been described as 'ungodly' mirth by reformers and associated with the old regime, a hostility which became even more pronounced during the 1580s. Attacks on mirth were often also attacks on cheap print and the theatre, as two of the major venues in which these pleasures were made commercially available, and further complicated by the perception that these forms preserved and reproduced 'the idolatrous superstition of the elder world'.[5] This charge was both specific, in that ballads and plays often reprinted or reworked old stories – Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Hampton, Robin Hood – and more general, in that they were regarded as vestiges of a culture not yet sufficiently reformed.[6] This perspective has been echoed by twentieth-century critics, who have often described late sixteenth-century commercial entertainment – particularly theatre – as appropriating, absorbing, or otherwise redeploying the energies of a vanishing carnival.[7]

[5] Edward Dering, *A Briefe and Necessary Instruction, Verye Needefull to be Knowen of all Housholders* (London, 1572), A2^{v}–3^{r}.

[6] See e.g. Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583), ff. 87^{v}–92^{r}, 94$^{r–v}$; William Tyndale, *The obedience of a Christen man* (Antwerp, 1528), C4^{r}; Helen Phillips, 'Reformist Polemics, Reading Publics, and Unpopular Robin Hood', in *Robin Hood in Greenwood Stood: Alterity and Context in the English Outlaw Tradition*, ed. Stephen Knight (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 87–117.

[7] C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959); Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater* (New York, 1985); Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* [1967] (Baltimore, 1978); François Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* [1988], trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, 1991).

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This reciprocal relationship between the historicised, politicised mirth of the 'old world' and the contemporary 'business of representation' as Douglas Bruster terms it, was at its most pronounced and most productive in the many nostalgic fictions dealing explicitly with the pre-Reformation era.[8] This book explores a body of material set in or otherwise dealing with the 'merry' past – Robin Hood, disguised kings, and other pseudo-historical or legendary figures – widespread in commercial art, focusing in particular on broadside ballads and the plays which drew upon them. The rapidly expanding book trade and the emergence of the professional London theatres offered a cultural space in which the merry past could be endlessly re-imagined and reproduced. This evocation was commonplace in Elizabethan cheap print and peaked onstage in the 1590s: so much so that the stylistic tropes of the 'old world' are one of the decade's most distinctive cultural products, and were themselves the subject of nostalgic recollection in later years.

The first part of this book argues for a widespread nostalgia for the pre-Reformation era, emerging from confessional polemic and subsequently commodified in the merry world fictions of cheap print. It suggests that this appropriation played a transformative role in public understanding of the recent past, from the painful subject of divided memory to a locus of a cosy ahistorical communality. The formulaic repetitiveness of mass print was key, paradoxically, to providing a context and a language in which these emotions could be articulated and, ultimately, managed. This argument is underpinned by the wide consumption of cheap print, and consequent ability to shape public understanding of the past. This transformation offers an alternative perspective on the 'revival' of mirth in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Critics have traditionally identified the Stuart resurgence as the moment in which the 'myth of merry England finally emerged', stressing its top-down, ideologically driven, hierarchical nature.[9] By contrast, this book suggests that the myth of merry England was above all a market-driven process, under active construction in the closing decades of the sixteenth century. Through and in the commercial art of the broadside and the play, entertainers, printers,

[8] Douglas Bruster, 'The Representation Market of Early Modern England', *Renaissance Drama*, 41 (2013), 1–23, at 3.

[9] Keith Thomas, *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England* (London, 1983), p. 21; Storm Jameson, *The Decline of Merry England* (London, 1930); Hutton, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 153–199. On the political valences of 'traditional' games, see Leah Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defence of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago, 1986), and Peter Stallybrass, '"Wee Feaste in Our Defense": Patrician Carnival in Early Modern England and Robert Herrick's "Hesperides"', *ELR*, 16 (1986), 234–252.

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readers, and spectators collectively re-imagined the merry worlds of the pre-Reformation past into being.

The second half of the book explores the nostalgic fictions of the commercial entertainment of the 1590s and 1600s, focusing for the most part on the London stage. In this period, a growing sentimental interest in 'traditional' mirth coincided with the emergence of a rapidly developing, highly competitive theatre, alongside an increasingly specialised and diversified print culture. The tropes of the merry world, developed in the historical narratives of ballads and pamphlets, established a distinctive language of nostalgia inextricable from its mass print origins. There was an important paradox here, since broadside ballads and plays which represented the merry world as a source of timeless authenticity did so in novel formats often understood as bearers of a toxic modernity. Broadsides survive only in any number from the 1550s onwards, while the professional fixed-site London theatre developed from the 1570s. This dissonance was a key part of the experience of performed nostalgia, since both the stylistic repertoire of the commercial merry world and the contexts of its performance were strikingly at odds with the fantasy of timeless authenticity it proffered. The inadequacy of a nostalgic language degraded by commercial reproduction appears in plays such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1600) and *Cymbeline* (c. 1610) and is central to the controversy surrounding the Marprelate Tracts (1589–90), which uneasily straddle the boundary between polemic and entertainment. Elsewhere, the sheer formulaic fungibility of merry world tropes was widely exploited in the service of innovation: as an ironic effect; an opportunity for meta-theatrical play; or as a way of legitimising or emphasising the writer's own modernity. This was heightened by a commercial context in which familiarity and novelty competed as ways to satisfy an audience. The dynamic of desire, disappointment, and recognition is central to the nostalgic fictions of this era, in which fantasies about the pre-Reformation past were often inseparable from anxiety about its reproduction and the experience of repetition.

Nostalgia and novelty face off in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, in which the desires of the paying customers – the grocers George and Nell – triumph over the plans of the theatre company. The *Knight* stages an extended tussle between audience and players over control of the play, an antagonism apparently mirrored off stage: according to the first printed edition the play died on its feet and 'for want of acceptance was even ready to give up the ghost'.[10] This failure has sometimes been attributed to

[10] Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (London, 1613), A2^r.

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Beaumont's misreading of the social dynamics of his audience, although in precisely what way remains contested.[11] George and Nell are typically seen as interlopers in the indoor theatre of the Blackfriars, where Nell confesses herself 'something troublesome; I'm a stranger here. I was ne'er at one of these plays, as they say, before' (Induction, 49–51).[12] This insistently signalled social standing is keyed to their theatrical expectations, which are those of the public playhouses ('shawms', Induction, 98, 101; 'waits', Induction, 106) and their larger and supposedly less exclusive audiences.[13]

In fact the most important aspect of the grocers as audience members, which puts them decisively at odds with the onstage players, is their aesthetic conservatism rather than their social status per se. A growing critical consensus suggests that the cultural marketplace of early modern England was much less rigidly and predictably striated by class than has sometimes been assumed: indoor and outdoor theatres did not necessarily have markedly different repertoires or audiences, while a taste for chivalric adventure – the genre which George and Nell demand in the opening scenes of the *Knight* – was common across the social spectrum.[14] What is most distinctive about their theatrical tastes, in fact, is how backward-looking they are. The plays George cites with approval ('*The Legend of Whittington;* or *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Gresham, with the Building of the Royal Exchange;* or *The Story of Queen Elenor, with the Rearing of London Bridge upon Woolsacks*', Induction, 19–22) are markedly retrospective: exercises in urban nostalgia, setting the lives of London citizens in historico-legendary context. The playwright Thomas Heywood's work is emblematic of this genre, and the grocers are familiar with it: most notably *The Four Prentices of London* (c. 1594–99) which George has read (4.50–51), but also probably his wildly successful *Edward IV* (c. 1599)

[11] Michael Shapiro, *Children of the Revels: The Boy Companies of Shakespeare's Time and Their Plays* (New York, 1977), pp. 76–77; Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford, 1996), p. 102.

[12] Brent E. Whitted, 'Staging Exchange: Why *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* Flopped at Blackfriars in 1607', *Early Theatre*, 15 (2012), 111–130; Joshua S. Smith, 'Reading between the Acts: Satire and the Interludes in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', *Studies in Philology*, 109 (2012), 474–495; Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 89–90.

[13] Smith, 'Reading between the Acts', 480–489; Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, ed. Zitner, p. 57.

[14] Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, ed. Zitner, pp. 12–14, 29–30, and Zachary Lesser, 'Walter Burre's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', *ELR*, 29 (1999), 22–43, at 40. Lori Humphrey Newcomb notes in 'Romance', in *Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660*, ed. Joad Raymond (Oxford, 2011), pp. 363–376, that printed romances were not even available in the cheapest formats until the 1660s.

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to which Nell may be referring when she says 'I should have seen *Jane Shore* once' (Induction, 51).[15]

George and Nell's taste for historical drama is consistent with their fondness for traditional mirth more generally, as witnessed by Rafe's extended re-enactment of the London May Day celebrations (then in decline for many years) in Interlude 4 as well as Nell's thwarted desire to have him dance the morris (22–24).[16] As or more important, however, is their experience of play-going in the 1590s and early 1600s. *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* represents an audience whose unruliness comes not from ignorance but a high degree of familiarity with the early modern playhouse, and whose demands are shaped by their previous play-going experience. When Rafe auditions for his 'huffing part' (Induction, 74), he chooses a speech from *1 Henry VI* (another historical play, first performed 1596–7):

RAFE By heaven, me thinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon,
Or dive into the bottom of the sea,
Where never fathom line touched any ground,
And pluck up drowned honour from the lake of hell. (Induction, 77–81)

The version Rafe gives here is slightly different from the then-recent (1604) quarto, in which the last two lines read 'Where fadome line could never touch the ground, | And plucke up drowned honour by the locks', raising the tempting possibility that it is remembered or mis-remembered from performance rather than from reading.[17] Clearly an aficionado of the late Elizabethan stage, Rafe also performs snippets of other theatrical smashes of the 1580s and 1590s: *Mucedorus*, the pastoral romance first performed in 1590 and reprinted the previous year (Interlude, 84), and *The Spanish Tragedy*, first performed c. 1584–7 and printed five times by 1603 (Interlude, 85). The play the grocers' household imagine into being is a tissue of quotation: as well as *The Spanish Tragedy* (5.290–294), allusions include the *Palmerin* romances, translated by Anthony Munday from the late 1580s (1.216–229), and *Amadis de Gaul*, again translated by Munday throughout the 1590s (2.120–129).

[15] The storied lover of Edward IV was the subject of an extensive poetic tradition in the sixteenth century and appears in Shakespeare's *Richard III* (c. 1592) as well as Heywood's play and apparently also a play or plays by Henry Chettle and John Day (c. 1601) recorded in Philip Henslowe's *Diary*, ed. R.A. Foakes, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2002) p. 226.

[16] Hutton, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 121–122, 136.

[17] William Shakespeare, *The History of Henrie the Fourth with the Battell at Shrewsburie* (London, 1604), B4v.

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What is most distinctive about the citizen trio is their appetite for familiar pleasures, preferably from the last century, putting them out of sympathy with the 'new subjects' (Induction, 17) offered by the players in *Knight of the Burning Pestle*. What George and Nell want, by and large, is more of what they have already seen; by contrast, the players are driven instead by the desire to remain current. Even when George suggests that Rafe might re-enact the final scene of the – very recent – *Travels of the Three English Brothers* (1607) and have a child christened by the 'Sophy of Persia' (4.29–30), the company rejects it, insisting 'Believe me sir, that will not do so well. 'Tis stale. It has been had before at the Red Bull' (4.31–32). The play projected at the outset, a citizen comedy called *The London Merchant* apparently in the mode of *Eastward Ho!* (previously performed at the Blackfriars in 1605), belongs to a consciously contemporary theatrical tradition of smart urban comedy, rather than the pseudo-historical citizen-adventure favoured by George and Nell.

The Boy's intervention here is one of several reminding the audiences both on and offstage of the competitive commercial environment in which the players were operating (e.g. 3.296–297). This context centrally informs the competing claims of novelty and repetition debated onstage, and one to which theatre companies were especially sensitive. As Alexander Leggatt has pointed out, after around 1600 the London theatres were increasingly reliant on paying audiences instead of the aristocratic patronage on which they had previously depended, a process in which the Children of the Revels (formerly Children of the Queen's Revels, soon to be Children of the Blackfriars) were themselves negotiating in 1606 as they staged *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*.[18] Playing companies have often been assumed to be driven by competitive novelty, with their dependence on a limited pool of theatre-goers at fixed sites enforcing a punishing schedule of new plays at frequent intervals.[19] This book suggests that the opposite was also true: a culture of rivalrous innovation fostered in parallel the equally distinctive (and equally saleable) pleasures of repetition and familiarity. In a climate in which old plays were much less common on the stage than new ones, there was a strong incentive to reproduce elements known to be successful in new packaging. As Tiffany Stern notes, based on Philip Henslowe's

[18] Alexander Leggatt, 'The Audience as Patron: *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', in *Shakespeare and Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England*, ed. Paul Whitfield White and Suzanne R. Westfall (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 296–315, at p. 297.

[19] Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, p. 147; Tiffany Stern, *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page* (London, 2004), pp. 62–63; Akihiro Yamada, *Experiencing Drama in the English Renaissance: Readers and Audiences* (London, 2017), pp. 81–83.

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diary almost half of new plays were only ever performed once and even a successful play was rarely performed a year after its first production.[20] It is this background that lends urgency to the play's minute-by-minute tracking of its onstage audience's response: from boredom (2.91–94), irritation (2.251–258), distraction (2.352–358), and disappointment (Interlude 2, 5–8), to sympathy (2.261–266), speculation (2.8–12), fear (3.130–137), and pleasurable recognition (Interlude 1, 5–6). George and Nell get what they want because they are prepared to pay for it (Induction, 105; Interlude 2, 5–6; 3.178–180; Interlude 4, 19–20), and what they want, by and large, is more of what they have already had.

The transactional quality of performed mirth is also reflected in *The London Merchant*, in which the adventures of Master Merrythought offer an oblique commentary on George and Nell. 'Old Merrythought' is a carnivalesque figure defined by his reckless pursuit of pleasure, in pointed opposition to the prudence and aspiration championed by his wife. Merrythought's love of food, drink, fellowship, and (especially) song is represented as radically out of date in the urban middle-class milieu in which he finds himself. Repeatedly referred to by others as 'old' (1.361, 374; Induction 1.1, 2.437, 475, etc.), Merrythought is a holdover from a lost festive past. This is a point made by his wife, who on returning home with her youngest son to find Merrythought senior carousing with his 'mangy companions' (3.495) declares: 'Hark, hey dogs, hey, this is the old world, i'faith, with my husband' (483–484).

Like the grocer couple, Merrythought's attraction to the atmosphere of the 'old world' is also signalled through his literary preferences. His presence onstage is characteristically announced by song, most of which are broadside ballads: 'In Crete when Daedalus first began' (1.434–435); 'Fair Margaret and Sweet William' (2.438–441 and 3.569–570); 'A pleasant ballad of two new lovers' (3.515); 'As you came from Walsingham' (2.481–484); 'He set her on a milk-white steed' (2.492–495); 'A plesant song of … Guy de Warwick' (2.552–557); 'Go from my window' (3.503–507, 522–526); 'The ballad of Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard' (5.208–212); 'A lady's daughter of Paris' (5.229); 'Fortune my foe' (5.426).[21] Others cannot now

[20] Stern, *Making Shakespeare*, p. 63.

[21] Some of these have been identified from later manuscript collections or from the Stationers' Registers rather than extant broadsides from the period: see Katrine K. Wong, 'A Dramaturgical Study of Merrythought's Songs in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', *Early Theatre*, 12 (2009), 91–116, at 103–106, and Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, ed. Zitner, Appendix D, pp. 173–183. Other sources include John Dowland (1.414, 2.502–503) and Thomas Ravenscroft (1.349–350, 354–355; 4.327–328, 365–368).

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be traced but strongly resemble existing ballads in style and content: 'My lord of Lowgrave's lassy' (2.509–512); 'Give him flowers enow, palmer' (2.516–517); 'I would not be a serving-man' (4.336–343); 'With that came out his paramour' (5.268–272). This music comes to dominate the play, as the final reconciliations are made conditional on several rounds of communal singing (5.222–229, 243–246, 344–357) and an agreement to 'be merry' (5.239, 247, 263). It is with one of these choruses that the play ends, uniting the play's divided persons and plots in a dramatic collective affirmation of the triumph of 'mirth'.

This triumph includes George and Nell as well as old Merrythought, all of whom have successfully imposed their will – in spite of reason or taste – on the cast of *The London Merchant*: a triumph signalled visually (by the grocers' onstage presence) and aurally (by Merrythought's constant balladeering), as well as through the mutations of the plot. In both cases, a larger historical nostalgia ('the old world'; May Day celebrations and morris dances) is allied to conservative aesthetic preferences in the present. The early modern ballad trade fostered just the same kind of crowd-pleasing repetition that characterises George and Nell's theatrical tastes. Not only did ballads often republish, as hostile critics put it, the songs and stories of the 'elder world', they were often reprinted repeatedly, so that successful ballads of all kinds could stay in print for decades. By the early 1600s there was already an established 'stock' of ballads that would remain more or less continuously in print to the end of the century and sometimes beyond; many of these had already acquired this status by the mid-1580s.[22] Nell, George, and Merrythought all have a marked preference for old favourites as well as the old world: 'Use makes perfectness' (1.371), as Merrythought puts it.

Merrythought's relationship to this material can also, therefore, be understood as a kind of consumption analogous to George and Nell's own avid play-going; and like theirs, it is thoroughly mediated by commerce. His resistance to this context, and refusal to understand his pleasures (food and drink as well as song) as commodities that must be paid for, is itself one of the many ways in which he is yesterday's man: merry world nostalgia often emphasised the comparative abundance and liberality of the past. It is not, however, a position supported by the play, which repeatedly emphasises the costs and consequences of Merrythought's actions:

[22] Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 76–77.

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MRS MERRYTHOUGHT But how wilt thou do, Charles? Thou art an old man, and thou canst not work, and thou hast not forty shillings left, and thou eatest good meat, and drinkest good drink and laughest?

OLD MERRYTHOUGHT And will do.

MRS MERRYTHOUGHT But how wilt thou come by it, Charles?

OLD MERRYTHOUGHT How? Why, how have I done hitherto this forty years? I never came into my dining room but at eleven and six o'clock I found excellent meat and drink a'th'table; my clothes were never worn out but next morning a tailor brought me a new suit and without question it will be so ever. Use makes perfectness. If all should fail, it is but a little straining myself extraordinary, and laugh myself to death.

WIFE It's a foolish old man this; is it not George? (1.360–374)

Merrythought's final victory is ambivalent, since it does nothing to counter these concerns and instead celebrates the irrational triumph of desire: 'Well, you must have your will, when all's done' (5.225–226), as his wife concedes in the play's final moments. This parallels the grocers, whose success in shaping the materials of *The London Merchant* into *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is likewise a triumph of desire over reason. As the Boy responds to Nell's demand that Rafe meet the princess of Cracovia: 'Sir, if you will imagine all this to be done already, you shall hear them talk together. But we cannot present a house covered in black velvet, and a lady in beaten gold' (4.42–44). In both cases, the force of imaginative desire – to mentally inhabit another world – is shown to be crucially mediated by the market. George and Nell's imaginative agency is directly linked to their purchasing power, whereas Merrythought's is in spite of his; a conflict resolved within the play by sheer emotional affect. This affect is in many ways unearned: literally so by Merrythought, but also implicitly by the grocers, since it comes after a nonsensical sequence of plot twists that offend against reason and decorum ('Twill be very unfit he should die, sir, upon no occasion, and in a comedy too', 5.286–287). That it stems entirely from the desire of the play's staged consumers, Merrythought and the grocers, makes it no less seductive and compelling as theatrical experience, however: an emotional response invited in part by the sequence of well-known broadside ballads ('It was a lady's daughter of Paris', 'Fortune my foe') leading up to the celebratory closing chorus. While the evidence of the playbook might suggest that *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* failed to seduce its first audiences, it is possible to imagine this moment otherwise: as an invitation to 'entrainment', a phenomenon in which musical performance and audience response align. Simon Smith has recently written of the way that music could 'ravish' playgoers, suggesting that entrainment is a

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