

Introduction

Simon Smith and Emma Whipday

Enter severally 3. Gentlemen, as to see a play.

- 1 How now gallants, what ist? what ist?
 2 *The Ile of Gulls*.
 3 The Ile of Gulls, what should that be?
 2 A play by the name, but come shals quarter our selves?
 1 If some had had the wit to doe so in time, they might ha[ve] savde the
 hangman a labour. But come boy, furnish us with stooles.

Enter Prologue.

Prol. Pardon me sir, my office is to speake a Prologue, not to provide you
 stooles.

Three gentlemen enter a performance space, ‘as to see a play’. They enter from various directions, demand stools and a place to sit upon the stage among the ‘fashionable sort’, and enter into an extended discussion about the play, the playwright, and theatrical culture. These gentlemen perform the role of playgoers but are in fact boy players, following a script. As they seat themselves alongside paying attendees and pursue their discussion, theatrical performance begins. Perhaps the transition happens patchily, if some playgoers take longer than others to grasp that what is in front of them is a metatheatrical fiction and not a continuation of the usual exchanges between playgoers and company members that habitually precede the staging of scripted drama in a playhouse. Or perhaps the bodies, costumes, and movements of the boy players signal from the moment of their entrance that this is a performance. Either way, the entrance, actions, and words of the fictional playgoers interrogate the relationship between actor and audience: through the liminality of their own status as both players and ‘playgoers’, and in their emphasis on playgoing itself as a form of performance.

This is the induction that opens John Day's *The Isle of Gulls*, a comedy first performed early in 1606 by the company of youth actors based at the second Blackfriars playhouse.¹ *The Isle of Gulls* was one of a number of controversial plays that the company staged in the early years of James's reign, including *Philotas* in 1604 and *Eastward Ho!* in 1605, garnering considerable attention – and no little alarm – from both city and court. By the time *The Isle of Gulls* reached print in later 1606, the company appear to have been stripped of their royal patronage under Anna of Denmark, described on the title page simply as 'the Children of the Revels'.² This early modern theatrical performance is most often remembered for the furore it prompted, apparently stemming from its transgressive representation of 'all men's parts . . . of two divers nations', from 'the highest to the lowest' rank.³ Accordingly, the play is typically discussed when critics are interested in early modern politics, national identity, dramatic satire's radical potential, or the guilty pleasure of gossip and scandal.⁴ Yet the play itself, like much commercial drama from around the turn of the seventeenth century, actually makes quite another matter the explicit focus of its opening induction, as the above summary indicates: this theatrical framing text staging fictional player–playgoer exchanges is centrally interested in the relationship between actor and audience and the significance of this relationship to dramatic performance.

In its preoccupation with the player–playgoer relationship, *The Isle of Gulls* is a self-evidently rich text for introducing the subject matter of this book: the study of early modern drama through actor, audience, and performance. Indeed, the induction to *The Isle of Gulls* provides an opportunity to reflect on the conviction at the heart of this volume's approach, that the study of theatrical culture is crucial to the scholarly investigation of dramatic texts: not merely of historical interest, but necessary for a full understanding of the plays themselves. Whilst for a century and more there has been consistent and productive attention to playing and playgoing within Shakespeare and early modern drama studies, such concerns have historically been treated as a self-contained realm of enquiry – the preserve of theatre history rather than literary criticism and of only tangential relevance to the close reading of plays. The approach of this volume, in contrast, is reflective of a significant and necessary attitude shift in recent work. Scholars are increasingly recognising the benefits of attending to theatre-historical questions and concerns within literary-critical studies of early modern drama, rather than keeping the two approaches separate;⁵ simultaneously, the scholarly conversation about early performance has seen a striking diversification and integration of

methods, incorporating sensory approaches, practice-based enquiry, new theoretical models of performance and spectatorship, the ‘spatial turn’, and philological elements, into studies of playhouse culture.⁶

With the volume’s scope and ambitions in mind, then, we can consider *The Isle of Gulls* in a little more detail, in order to explore what such approaches might involve in practice, and to indicate some of the directions taken by the contributors in the following chapters. What kind(s) of evidence might a text of this nature provide, and what questions might thereby be raised, if we approach early modern drama through the lens of playing and playgoing? This introduction will explore these questions, first in relation to *The Isle of Gulls*, and then with reference to two further examples. In beginning with these precise textual and archival traces of playing and playgoing – examples that foreground the player–playgoer relationship at the heart of this book – we hope to set up some of the questions raised by this volume and to chart some of the resonances and shared interests that operate across the range of approaches these chapters offer.

We can start by considering what some of the induction’s more explicit statements about playhouse culture suggest about prevalent attitudes and practices. The expectation that fashionable gentlemen habitually sit onstage with visible prominence is clear throughout, from the first gentleman’s request that the Prologue ‘furnish us with stooles’ (and the Prologue’s indignant response that seating provision falls beyond his remit as an actor), to the latter’s anxieties towards the end of the induction that a conspicuously located playgoer’s early departure typically prompts a mass exodus, ‘leav[ing] the poore hartlesse children to speake their Epilogue to the emptie seates’ (A2r–A3r). Whilst theatre historians have given much productive attention to the convention of onstage playgoers at indoor theatres, there are nonetheless questions raised here – about fashionable playgoing, and the extent to which dramatic performance itself was even the main draw of a playhouse – that have yet to be fully answered.⁷

These questions are among those given fresh consideration in the pages that follow. For example, Lucy Munro’s account of playgoing as youth culture in Chapter 5 puts a similar dramatic representation of a modish playgoer – Francis Quicksilver in *Eastward Ho!* – in direct relief with previously overlooked archival evidence of a real-life apprentice, Richard Meighen, and his theatre-going habits. In doing so, Munro offers fresh suggestions as to how far characters like the three gentlemen who open *The Isle of Gulls* may have been drawn from life and, conversely, how far the culturally familiar trope of the prodigal playgoer, underpinning the second

gentleman's complaint that he 'lay in bed till past three a clock, slept out my dinner, and my stomacke will toule to supper afore five' (A3r), might structure not just dramatic representations but also forms of life-writing as far from the theatre as the legal deposition. Such questions of extra-dramatic theatrical activity recur across this collection. In Chapter 9, for instance, Tiffany Stern uses an extremely wide range of textual sources (including theatrical framing texts) to track the sheer variety of attractions offered by playhouses in the period, from eating and drinking to forms of 'play' (such as sword-fighting and gambling) that fall well outside traditional understandings of 'play'-going. When the third gentleman from our induction asks what 'The Ile of Gulls' might be, then, perhaps the second gentleman's reply that it is 'A play by the name' (A2r) is not merely a sarcastic statement of the obvious whilst sitting in a theatre but also indicative of a culture in which a visit to the playhouse could involve numerous activities, from book shopping to gaming, beyond actually paying attention to a dramatic performance.

Another way of approaching a theatrical paratext such as this might be to ask how it orientates the audience in relation to the drama that follows, including the specific aspects of performance it might encourage playgoers to attend to. Day's induction includes extensive discussion of dramatic genres, styles, and sources, on one hand presupposing playgoers' varied tastes and emphasising the impact of their preferences on the forms that commercial drama takes, but on the other perhaps also reflecting a desire on the part of the playwright and playing company to steer – even determine – their audiences' responses. In particular, Day foregrounds dramatic sources and the play's basis in what might traditionally be regarded as 'literary' materials (although '*poesis*' or 'poesy' may be more period-appropriate terms):⁸ the Prologue claims that 'the argument' is 'a little string or Rivolet, drawne fro[m] the full streine of the right worthy Gentleman, Sir *Phillip Sydneys* well knowne Archadea', making his case with such fervour that one gentleman suspects the playwright has 'promised [him] . . . some fee' for doing so. This suggests a desire to engage audiences with questions of poetic decorum and apt dramatic construction, and *The Isle of Gulls* is by no means unusual in making use of a framing text in this way. Paratextual remarks such as these indicate the crucial importance of considering audiences and playing companies, as well as writers, when reflecting upon the genre and construction of an early modern play. Such consideration is to be found throughout this volume, from the horizons of expectation brought to bear by playgoing students at

Introduction

5

the Inns of Court, explored by Jackie Watson in Chapter 10, to the implications of playgoers encountering early modern drama out of the sequences made familiar by theatre-historical chronologies of composition and first performance that Eoin Price draws out in Chapter 8.

This volume approaches early modern drama through both audience and actor, and whilst Day's induction is more explicitly preoccupied with the former, it also makes a point of drawing attention to questions of actorly craft, and the performer's role in the making of theatrical meaning, as part of its orientation of playgoers. For instance, in declaring his love of satire in deliberately absurd and overstated terms, the first gentleman claims that he will 'not like' any play lacking satire, even 'should *Apollo* write it, and *Rosius* himself act it'. A byword in the period for outstanding acting, the great Roman actor Roscius was a constant reference point on and around the early modern stage, and so it is not at all surprising to encounter the first gentleman's hyperbolic dismissal here. Yet, precisely by declaring that he will ignore actorly technique, the gentleman's words draw audience attention to this very matter, and even indicate habitual practice through his deviation from it: it is a measure of his absurdly extreme feelings about satire that he will ignore the quality of the playing that is by implication a standard consideration when assessing a play in performance, if the drama does not measure up to his generic expectations.

The pages that follow offer a range of focused insights into how the techniques and practices of early modern performance can be directly relevant to our understandings of the drama. To take a single example, Natasha Korda argues for the importance of motion and proprioception in Chapter 1, offering a radical re-framing of players' skill in performance (and audience experience) by focusing on players' (and playgoers') feet and drawing as readily on the tools of sensory studies as those of theatre history traditionally understood. In the approach taken, this chapter and others model the extent of methodological novelty, interdisciplinarity, and broad critical engagement that characterises work driving the scholarly conversation on playing and playgoing at present, and for which the volume advocates: as we seek to acknowledge and demonstrate, there is no single way of studying playhouse culture, but rather a range of overlapping concerns, methods, and approaches generating new and significant insights.

One more way of approaching Day's induction as potential evidence of early modern playing and playgoing is to ask what may have prompted its inclusion in the first place: not just what it appears to be saying, or how it seeks to orientate its audience, but why those producing and staging the

text might have felt such an induction to be necessary at all. Paratexts like this one operate from the particular perspective of play-makers, as opposed to that of playgoers or even of commentators from beyond the playhouse walls, and so it is important to place such material alongside other forms of evidence offering other perspectives, more of which we turn to below. Yet, there is a further opportunity, not always fully exploited in previous scholarship, to reflect upon *why* those involved with staging a play might feel the need to insist upon its Sidneian heritage quite so directly and vocally, for instance, or to begin a theatrical performance with a dramatic representation of playgoers behaving largely antagonistically towards the acting company.

With this in mind, it is striking how strongly the induction emphasises the multiplicity of playhouse response and the confidence of playgoers to engage with drama on their own terms: when the Prologue claims that one fashionable playgoer's conspicuous exit will rapidly 'emptie' the theatre, the third gentleman asks, somewhat belligerently, 'Why[,] doost thinke thy audience like a flock of sheepe, that one cannot leape over a hedge, but all the rest will follow[?]'. Insisting that playgoers 'ha[ve] more of reason in them' than to do so, this staged reaction hints at a culture of independent, assured, and divergent response to performance not obviously under the influence or control of those producing drama, and perhaps even raising questions of quite how straightforwardly the Prologue represents the voice of the playwright (and company) in this text.

This line of enquiry opens up the possibility that different playgoers – and indeed different playwrights – may bring a range of judgement criteria, modes of engagement, and horizons of expectation to bear on theatrical performance. This is a possibility that our volume interrogates: in Chapter 7, Jeremy Lopez asks us to take seriously the possibility of rather more widespread theatrical 'failure' than models of a well-adjusted, demand-led marketplace might allow, whilst in Chapter 6, Simon Smith traces a culture of censorious playgoing that appears to have been integrated with, rather than in opposition to, theatrical pleasure, and that reached well beyond any small subsection of taste-setting 'judicious' playgoers, despite the paratextual claims of certain playwrights.

The Isle of Gulls illustrates many of the concerns and approaches at the heart of *Playing and Playgoing*, but texts from other perspectives open up further questions motivating our study. Henry Jackson's account of performances of *Othello* and *The Alchemist* by the King's Men in Oxford in 1610 (here translated from the Latin) offers glimpses of a rather different performance context:

Introduction

7

- Recently the king’s stage actors were here. They performed to great applause, the theatre being full. [. . .]
- (They say that) our stage has never sounded with greater applause than when that masked scoundrel entered, who impiously and extravagantly defiled the Scriptures so as to place the Anabaptist’s feigned sanctity before the spectators to be derided. They also held tragedies which they acted decorously and aptly. They moved (the audience to) tears in these (tragedies) both by what they said but also by what they did.–
- But indeed that Desdemona, who was slain before us by her husband, although she always pleaded her case very well, nevertheless moved (us) more after she was murdered, when lying on the bed she appealed to the spectators’ pity with her very expression.–⁹

Whilst the previous text foregrounded the playgoing experience itself – in terms of both the (metatheatrical) presence or absence of members of the physical audience, and the wider discursive community around a play – Jackson focuses on the affective power of the imagined world of particular plays and how this compels particular audience responses, whether in applause or in tears. He constructs these responses as prompted by action *and* speech: ‘both by what they said but also by what they did’. In so doing, he writes of the emotive behaviour, not of actors, but of characters: the ‘masked scoundrel’ from the *Alchemist*, Desdemona slain by her husband in *Othello*. And yet the behaviour of these characters is situated in relation to the stagecraft of the players – it is the *entrance* of the ‘masked scoundrel’ that prompts applause, the speech and the action of the players in the tragedies that ‘moves tears’, the actor ‘playing dead’ as Desdemona who appeals to the pity of the spectators. It would seem that, at least for this early modern witness, it is difficult – or perhaps simply unnecessary – to separate the play from the act of playing.

As many critics have noted, this entails a fascinating slippage between performer and character.¹⁰ When Jackson praises Desdemona’s skill in ‘plead[ing] her case’, he could be referring to either the player or the character. When he writes that ‘she was murdered’, he evidently refers to Desdemona herself. But when he suggests that Desdemona has the ability to ‘move’ the audience *after* her murder, appealing to the spectators’ pity, he can only be referring to the player, not the (corpse of the) character played – his use of active verbs suggests not that she is an object of pity, but that she is active: she moves and appeals. And yet he persists in using the pronoun ‘she’, in no way registering the gender of the boy actor.

Jackson engages with the skill of the performance, but not with its artifice; he frames his response in simultaneous relation to the imagined world of the play and the stagecraft of the players, without drawing clearer distinctions between the two. Jackson seems to maintain a metatheatrical awareness of the actors' skill *because* he is able to enter into the imagined world of the performance so successfully. This account is suggestive of the valent and multi-layered exchange between player and playgoer through which dramatic meaning is made in performance, and with which this volume is centrally concerned: in the invocation of playgoers' imaginations through the use of the 'imagine' chorus explored by Helen Hackett in Chapter 12; the playful conflation of actor and character in a practice-as-research production of *Othello* discussed by Stephen Purcell in Chapter 11; and Emma Whipday's account in Chapter 2 of the ways in which the imaginations of the playgoers bridge (and interrogate) the disjunctions between the bodies of the players and the bodily descriptions a play provides.

In terms of the relationships between the bodies of the players and the bodies of the characters, the silences and omissions of Jackson's account are in many ways as telling as its inclusions. Just as Jackson does not engage with the gender of the actor whose skill he admires, so he makes no mention of the blackface performance of the actor playing Desdemona's here unnamed 'husband'. Many of the aspects of performance most of interest to scholars today – the performance of femininity, the performance of blackness, through the bodies of an all-white, all-male company of actors – are entirely neglected, as are the identities of the actors Jackson praises and the spatial context for the performance. Methods of historical enquiry – including those of repertory studies, material theatre history, historicist explorations of early modern gender and gender performativity, and critical race studies – can find evidence here only in what Jackson takes for granted.

The essays in this collection offer new approaches to, evidence of, questions about, and frames for the omissions and silences in the sources best known to early modern theatre history. They reflect explicitly upon much of what Jackson passes over in terms of how the gender and race of the character map onto the body of the performer: Farah Karim-Cooper in exploring the role of player gesture and 'gestural mutuality' in creating the racialised body on the early modern stage in Chapter 3; and Deanne Williams in situating the performance of femininity in professional playhouses in relation to a medieval and early modern history of 'girl players' in Chapter 4. This book focuses, for the most part, on playing and playgoing

Introduction

9

in purpose-built and repurposed London playhouses; yet, as in Williams's essay, the concerns of this collection intersect with wider cultures of performance in early modern England.

The interrelationships amongst early modern England's multiple performance cultures – as traced by Williams – can be seen in a third example: that of Alice Mustian, whose performance Martin Ingram has uncovered in the Salisbury church court records.¹¹ In 1614, Mustian erected a stage – a plank of wood balanced on two barrels – in the yard behind her house and performed a one-woman show, with songs, based on the adulterous affair of one of her neighbours. She charged her audience an inventive entrance fee: small objects, such as 'pins and points'. Mustian's staging of a neighbourhood scandal was not a commercial endeavour, but was rather designed to arouse gossip, entertain the neighbourhood, and shame the adulterous couple. Yet, it is notable that in setting up her production, Mustian mimicked the practices of a professional touring company, creating a formal stage space and charging for admission. Mustian's neighbours complained, and she ended up defending her actions in the church courts – which is how the record of her play and its performance survives today.

Mustian's play does not survive – indeed, it is doubtful that it was ever written down. It is in many ways entirely unlike the plays for the professional stage that are at the centre of much of the research in this collection. And yet, this account resonates in many ways with the traces left by commercial performance in legal proceedings and epistolary archives. Here, as so often, what is at issue is an emotive and personal response to the relationship between the imaginative world of the play, the player–playgoer interaction within the (in Mustian's case, makeshift) playhouse, and the wider communities and societal, legal, and ecclesiastical structures in which the play is embedded. These are concerns that recur throughout this volume: in Munro's exploration of how theatrical representations of playgoing are reflected in discourses of the law courts; in Watson's engagement with the spatial and intellectual co-presence of theatrical and legal communities; in Williams's examination of how ecclesiastical performance histories inflect playgoer understandings of commercial performances; and in Stern's suggestion that 'playing' sits alongside, and in relation to, a plethora of other cultures of entertainment at the early modern playhouse.

The twelve chapters that follow analyse interactions between play-texts; performance spaces; bodily, sensory, and material experiences of the playhouse; and playgoers' responses to, and engagements with, drama. The three parts into which they are grouped – 'Players', 'Playgoers', and

‘Playhouses’ – provide three frames for reading the imaginative encounter involved in early modern performance: the players in the act of playmaking; the audiences in the act of playgoing; and the role of playhouse playing conditions as material, temporal, sensuous, and above all conceptual frames for this encounter. Each of the three parts is preceded by a brief introduction, setting out the essays that follow and outlining the part’s principal concerns and its scholarly context. Of course, as our preceding discussion has emphasised, these groupings reflect only one set of continuities and interrelationships within the volume: the individual essays interact both within and across the sections, as part of a shared intellectual project. Through alternative methodological and theoretical approaches, previously unknown or overlooked evidence, and fresh questions asked of long-familiar materials, *Playing and Playgoing* brings together literary scholarship, theatre history, and performance studies in a new account of early modern drama and performance.

Notes

- 1 John Day, *The Ile of Guls* (1606), A2r–A3v (hereafter cited in the text).
- 2 Lucy Munro discusses the controversies that this sequence of ‘incendiary’ dramatic performances caused and the subsequent confusion over the company’s patronage status (even, it would seem, amongst those actually involved with the company: former shareholder and Blackfriars leaseholder Henry Evans was apparently unclear, in a letter of 1612, as to precisely which were the periods when the company held the ‘Queenes Ma^{tes} Children of her Revells’ title, and equivocal as to how far such changes in status were even acknowledged in the day-to-day business of performance). *Children of the Queen’s Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20–1, 174.
- 3 Sir Edward Hoby to Sir Thomas Edmondes, March 7, 1606, in *The Court and Times of James the First*, ed. Thomas Birch, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1848), vol. 1, 61.
- 4 See, for instance, Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 135; Lois Potter, *The Life of William Shakespeare: A Critical Biography* (Chichester: Wiley, 2012), 381; Lars Kaaber, *Hamlet’s Age and the Earl of Southampton* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 86.
- 5 Examples include Gillian Woods, *Shakespeare’s Unreformed Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Bart van Es, *Shakespeare in Company* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Susan L. Anderson, *Echo and Meaning on Early Modern English Stages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan,