

## Acting amiss

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Acting amiss: towards a history of actorly craft and playhouse judgement

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In 1598, theatre enthusiast and future playwright John Marston published a scathing verse satire, in which he imagines a caricatured, gullish and obsessive playgoer named Luscus. Besides speaking '[n]aught but pure *Juliat* and *Romio*', this memorable figure is particularly recognizable for his tendency to reflect at length on the respective merits of his favourite actors:

Say, who acts best, Drusus, or Roscio?

Now I have him, that nere of ought did speake

But when of playes or Plaiers he did treat.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Marston, *The Scourge of Villanie* (London, 1598), sig. G7v. Excellent actors are often labelled with the names of Classical forebears like Drusus and Roscius in the early modern period.

This playful and somewhat slippery text attests to the fashion for theatregoing in the late 1590s, as well as to a range of anxieties about playgoers and their behaviour rather more nuanced and subtle than those articulated by anti-theatricalists in preceding decades. Perhaps most striking of all, however, is what playhouse reception seems to involve for Luscus: for him, playgoing is about judging the craft of the early modern actor just as much as engaging with fictional worlds created upon the stage.

In 1598, Marston had long been part of an Inns of Court milieu famous for passionate theatre attendance, his own father later bemoaning his ‘delight in plays and vain studies and fooleries’, yet his career actually writing for the professional stage appears to have begun after the clamp-down on satire and Bishops’ Ban of 4 June 1599, which saw *The Scourge of Villainy* publically burned.<sup>2</sup> His fictional account of a playgoer’s relentless theoretical and critical reflection on the art of playing is thus the product of his experiences amongst audiences, this exaggerated character embodying glimpses, fragments and echoes of 1590s playhouse engagements from the perspective of paying customer rather than company member. In this light, it is telling that Marston sees Luscus stereotypically and hyperbolically as a playgoer precisely *because* he loves to offer critiques of actorly technique, discoursing enthusiastically and indefinitely on the topic at the slightest invitation.

It is not entirely unexpected to find Marston imagining a fellow playgoer who reflects on the process of play-making; after all, for many early modern subjects it was the skill of the Lord Chamberlain’s or King’s Men that created Shakespeare’s plays, transforming fragmentary sets of texts – parts; letters; songs; backstage plots – into dramatic performances.<sup>3</sup> Working under

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<sup>2</sup> Marston’s father made this remark, later deleted, in a will of 24 October 1599. The National Archives (TNA): PROB 11/166/71; James Knowles, ‘Marston, John (bap. 1576, d. 1634)’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <www.odnb.com> [accessed 13 November 2016].

<sup>3</sup> These textual fragments are discussed in: Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 120–231; Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 15–79.

strikingly different conditions of rehearsal and repertory from those of the twenty-first century commercial stage, and trained with an entirely different set of theoretical principles in mind, the players who brought drama into being at the Globe and Blackfriars drew upon a substantial set of professional competencies and collective skills. Perhaps, then, it is all the more surprising that from a late modern critical perspective, Luscus's fascination with technical accomplishment actually highlights a significant lacuna: scholarly accounts of the early modern theatre generally have very little to say about audience members' attention to actorly skill.

It is well established that the craft of his fellow actors was both crucial to the realization of Shakespeare's plays and, in all probability, central to the dramatist's very conception of his work as he wrote. However, rather less attention has been afforded to early modern playgoers' awareness of the skills that this involved. Despite renewed interest in the practicalities of acting from Tiffany Stern, Evelyn B. Tribble and others, scholars have generally pursued investigations of actors separately from studies of playgoers.<sup>4</sup> What, then, might we deduce from the textual record about how, or how far, a less caricatured late Elizabethan might be expected to engage with actorly skill? Does Marston's poem present a figure who gets playgoing wrong, or simply one who takes characteristic playhouse behaviour to extremes? Was it odd, in 1598, for a playgoer to consider 'who acts best', or is Luscus only a bore because the player's craft is his sole topic of conversation? The critical tendency towards separate histories of actors and of playgoers, whilst

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<sup>4</sup> See: John Astington, *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare's Time: The Art of Stage Playing* (Cambridge, 2010); Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (3rd ed., Cambridge, 2004); B. L. Joseph, *Elizabethan Acting* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1964); Jeremy Lopez, *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2003); Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Action* (Newark, 1985); Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford, 2000); Evelyn B. Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe: Attention and Memory in Shakespeare's Theatre* (Basingstoke, 2011); Charley Whitney, *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 2006).

productive in many ways, leaves these and many other questions about playgoer engagements with actorly skill requiring further investigation.

John Astington wonders whether such a separation may be for the best, arguing that, whilst ‘there would have been a lively tradition of talk about plays and players, then, our impression today, based on surviving texts, is that contemporary dramatists were the chief critics and theorists of the arts of theatre, performance included’. He notes, too, that Simon Forman makes no mention of particular actors performing in the various plays he saw at the Globe in 1611, nor of ‘the immediate and particular effects of their performances’.<sup>5</sup> It is certainly true that there was a strong tradition of early modern dramatists (often those who were themselves players) reflecting upon plays and playing – in paratexts for stage and page; in the dialogue of plays themselves; in dedicated tracts such as Thomas Heywood’s *Apology for Actors* – but the converse implication that the textual record has little to offer regarding playgoers’ critical and theoretical engagements with actors and acting – or indeed that such engagements may not have taken place at all – is challenged by eyewitness accounts and a range of other sources.

This article examines playhouse attention to the craft of the early modern actor, in order to test two related hypotheses. The first is that playgoers habitually reflected upon and judged actorly skill, often whilst taking pleasure in the fictional worlds and characters created by that very craft. If accepted, this claim would not only require us to revise histories of playgoing to take account of judicious engagements with performers’ technique, but would also demand reconsiderations of the wider relationship between playgoers and performers, and of methods for interrogating early modern theatrical culture: if actorly craft was the explicit subject of audiences’ attention, is it therefore necessary to interweave playgoing and acting more closely in accounts of theatre history, rather than treating them as separate topics of investigation?

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<sup>5</sup> Astington, *Actors and Acting*, pp. 10–11.

The second, broader suggestion, considered in the later part of the article, is that the particular combination of judicious regard for actorly skill with imaginative, potentially playful engagements with fiction is itself indicative of a wider culture of playgoing that treated pleasure and judgement not as alternative modes of response, but simultaneous aspects of playhouse experience. This would represent a significant challenge to the current picture of early modern drama and its reception, in which a critical tradition with roots in Ben Jonson's polemical paratextual distinctions between 'popular delight' and 'be[ing] censur'd by th'austerest brow' has often treated judicious criticism and unthinking pleasure as distinct modes of engagement, sometimes associating each response with separate sub-groupings within a typical audience.<sup>6</sup> In pursuing playhouse engagements with actorly craft, then, this article begins to sketch an alternative account of early modern theatrical experience predicated upon a widespread *expectation* that one could take pleasure in many aspects of a dramatic performance even whilst remaining critically engaged – in short, a culture of playgoing in which drama by Shakespeare and his contemporaries was expected to delight and to provoke censure in equal measure.

We can begin by turning to some early modern accounts of playgoing – both real and imagined – that record playhouse attention to actors' technical skill. One of the few first-hand testimonies of Shakespearian performance before 1642 is that of Henry Jackson. His reflections in Latin upon several plays performed by the King's Men at Oxford in 1610, including *Othello* and *The Alchemist*, survive in a letter held at Corpus Christi College Library. His observation that Desdemona could 'move ... spectators' pity with her very expression' is well known and often

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Comicall Satyre of Every Man Out of His Humor* (1600), sig. B2r; *Sejanus his Fall* (1604), sig. ¶2r.

Recent work in this tradition includes Gurr's distinctions between '[t]he wiser sort' and 'audiences ... in the mass as passive tasters of what was set before them', building on Alfred Harbage's account of how 'the average' playgoer and 'the exceptional member of the audience – the "judicious" spectator' are separated, at least in the view of certain dramatists. Gurr, *Playgoing*, pp. 116, 129; Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience* (New York, 1941; repr. 1961), pp. 125–6.

explored in accounts of how gender may have been performed on the early modern stage. Less commonly quoted, however, are his more general remarks on how the King's Men 'held tragedies which they acted decorously and aptly', moving the audience to tears 'not only by what they said but also by what they did'. Jackson represents himself as part of the crowd that packed out the venue for these performances, referring to 'Desdemona slain before *us*' (my emphasis).<sup>7</sup> In so doing, he frames his account as that of an eyewitness deeply engaged with the technical craft of dramatic performance. Strikingly, even as Jackson describes powerful emotional responses of sorrow and pity – and even whilst referring to 'Desdemona', rather than the actor playing this role – he is quick to comment on the players' skill that allows them to move playgoers in this way. He identifies 'what they did' as well as 'what they said' as key technical accomplishments, an explanation of *how* the King's Men are able to shape and control the responses he observes in other playgoers and, at times, in himself. Jackson seems to be just as interested in the actorly skill required to evoke aesthetic effects as he is in what those effects might be.

Jackson's letter is extremely valuable as apparent eyewitness evidence of a specific early modern performance, but in isolation this source cannot demonstrate widespread playhouse critiquing of actorly craft. Beside the fact that it is only a single text, as a senior member of an Oxford college, writing in Latin, Jackson is scarcely representative of the full range of attendees to be expected in a London theatre. Other evidence is required, if we are to speculate that Jackson's critical instinct reflects broader conventions of playhouse response to drama. Indeed, eyewitness accounts may not be the most revealing form of evidence, if we are interested in wider cultural expectations of playgoers' behaviour, rather than specific instances. In contrast, oblique sources are often particularly helpful to the study of historically distanced cultures for their capacity to

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Jackson, Letter to D.G.P. dated September 1610, Oxford, Corpus Christi, MS 304, fols 83v–84r. Translated by Patrick Gregory in *Records of Early English Drama: Oxford*, ed. John R. Elliott, Alexandra F. Johnston, Alan H. Nelson and Diana Wyatt, 2 vols (Toronto, 2004), vol. 2, pp. 1037–8.

highlight the familiarity that allows a given idea – in this case playhouse judgement – to serve as a tangential reference point in work not otherwise interested or invested in that matter. Passing references may therefore indicate not how a specific individual responded at a given performance, but whether critical engagement with the player’s craft was a broadly recognized component of playgoing, a cultural expectation perhaps analogous to judging when to boo a pantomime villain or verbally abuse a referee in more recent popular entertainment contexts.

Such evidence includes one early modern text entirely unrelated to practical playhouse performance: lines set as a madrigal by Orlando Gibbons, published in 1612 and probably written by Walter Raleigh whilst imprisoned in the Tower in the first decade of James’s reign.<sup>8</sup> The poem, widely circulated in manuscript with attribution to Raleigh, takes the playhouse not as its historical subject but as an extended point of comparison:

What is our life? a play of passion,  
Our mirth the musicke of diuision,  
Our mothers wombes the tiring houses be,  
Where we are drest for this short Comedy,  
Heauen the Iudicious sharpe spectator is,  
That sits and markes still who doth act amisse,  
Our graves that hide vs from the searching Sun,  
Are like drawne curtaynes when the play is done,  
Thus march wee playing to our latest rest,  
Onely we dye in earnest, that’s no iest.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See: Mark Nicholls and Penry Williams, ‘Raleigh, Sir Walter (1554–1618)’ in *ODNB*.

<sup>9</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh?, ‘What Is Our Life?’, in Orlando Gibbons, *The First Set of Madrigals and Mottets of 5. Parts apt for Viols and Voyces* (London, 1612), sig. C1v. Words repeated for musical reasons have been omitted.



The *theatrum mundi* trope, beloved of early modern writers, typically compares the performances required of playing companies with those required in life, either itemising the many roles performed between birth and death, like Jacques in *As You Like It* (2.7.139-66), or, like Francis Quarles, enumerating the various kinds of performance encompassed by a play, from dumb show (a baby's first breath) to epilogue (death), via prologue (a baby's first cry) and inter-act music (life's many distractions).<sup>10</sup>

Raleigh draws upon both traditions, but also, unusually, populates his *theatrum mundi* with an audience: Heaven sits as a spectator, presumably in an upper gallery, noting 'who doth act amisse'. In choosing this metaphor for the watchful and judgemental eye of God, Raleigh reveals his expectation of what spectators do at a play: they sit, view and censure. Yet this is not censure of the play itself, often discussed in prologues and epilogues by dramatists hoping their work will receive a favourable reception; rather, this spectator is judging how each performer 'doth act'. Gibbons's setting has Heaven 'mark[ing]' the quality of the acting, whilst other versions of the same poem circulating in manuscript describe the celestial critic 'behold[ing]', 'not[ing]', or simply 'veiw[ing] whoeoere doth Acte amiss'.<sup>11</sup> Strikingly, in every text, the imagined playgoer attends in order to assess the craft of the performers, not even making reference to the quality of the play itself, and this in turn facilitates a slightly laboured pun on God's judgement of the 'act[s]' of a person's life. Edward Burns asks whether Raleigh's poem might 'trivialise heaven' by 'present[ing] it as one of those critical spectators often mocked in plays as one of the playhouses'

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<sup>10</sup> Francis Quarles, 'On the Life and Death of a Man (1630?)'; transcribed in Gurr, *Playgoing*, p. 285. On the range of elements that might be considered part of the dramatic performance in an early modern playhouse, see: Tiffany Stern, 'Before the Beginning; After the End: When Did Plays Start and Stop?', in *Shakespeare and Textual Studies*, ed. Margaret Jane Kidnie and Sonia Massai (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 358–74.

<sup>11</sup> *The Poems of Walter Raleigh: A Historical Edition*, ed. Michael Rudick (Tempe, AZ, 1999), pp. 69–70 (poems 29A–C).

most recognisable types', but Raleigh's Heaven has little to do with the negative playhouse censoring of plays remarked upon in dramatic paratexts, and far more to do with a separate tradition of expected and desirable judgements concerning the skill of the dramatic performers.<sup>12</sup> As an incidental account of a playgoer judging actorly skill, the poem provides a significant step in reconstructing the cultural familiarity of such judgements.

Another *theatrum mundi* poem, published, coincidentally, in the same year as Gibbons's setting, makes a similar observation. The poet mirrors Raleigh's relatively unusual addition of an audience to his allegorical playhouse, this time the heavenly '*Iehoue*', who

doth as spectator sit.

And chiefe determiner to applaud the best,

And their indeuours crowne with more then merit.

But by their euill actions dommes the rest,

To end disgrac't whilst others praise inherit.<sup>13</sup>

Again, it is explicitly actors rather than plays that are to be judged, those performers displaying 'euill actions' damned to disgrace whilst the 'best' are rewarded with 'praise' for their 'indeavours'. This time the pun is sharp, the actor's gestural skill mapped precisely onto God's judgement of a person's actions. Significantly, the pun relies upon the assumption, shared with Raleigh's poem, that playgoers attend the theatre in order to judge the performers' technical abilities, again emphasising the cultural familiarity of this expectation in earlier seventeenth century England.

The lines are the work of a playwright and actor, serving as the author's dedication 'to his Booke' in Heywood's 1612 defence of his profession. Taken in isolation, or in conjunction with

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Burns, *Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage* (London, 1990), p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors* (London, 1612), sig. a4v.

the paratextual and other reflections of practicing actors and dramatists, Heywood's poem might read as the view of producer rather than consumer; a fantasy of the audience reaction an actor might hope for, or indeed fear, particularly given that the lines preface a text explicitly intended to praise and glorify actors. Yet when placed in relief with Marston's early satire, and, particularly, Raleigh's *theatrum mundi* poem – the latter the work of a man far removed both socially and professionally from the world of commercial dramatic production – a rather different reading emerges. All three texts take as an assumption – and critically, in the cases of Raleigh's and Heywood's poems, this assumption is tangential to their central concerns with heavenly judgement – that the censuring of actorly technique is a playhouse behaviour recognizable to their intended readers. This suggests familiarity well beyond those with a professional investment in the technical competence of dramatic performers: Heywood's conceit is not an insular and ultimately questionable actorly fantasy, but rather the rehearsal of an expectation about playhouse behaviour that appears to have been relatively commonplace in early modern London. In this light, his text can contribute to a history that places rather less emphasis on 'contemporary dramatists' as 'chief critics and theorists of the arts of theatre' than might otherwise be expected.<sup>14</sup>

The observations of Marston, Jackson, Raleigh and Heywood all suggest strongly that the player's craft was an expected target of playgoer censure, but questions of precisely how such judgements were made, and what exactly playgoers thought actorly skill involved, require further investigation. Indeed, audience members' opinions on the subject could differ considerably from those of early modern play-makers, and may likewise be distinct from accounts developed, for instance, through social-scientific and cognitive models by later scholars. In recent years, research by Tiffany Stern on the significance of actors' parts to the process of rehearsal and performance has fundamentally reshaped understandings of how early modern dramatic performance worked, whilst Evelyn B. Tribble's interrogation of players and the playhouse space through the lens of

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<sup>14</sup> Astington, *Actors and Acting*, p. 10.

Distributed Cognition has offered a new view of the enskilment of early modern players and playing companies.<sup>15</sup> It does not necessarily follow, however, that early modern subjects encountering plays from a relatively casual consumer's perspective would typically have thought in terms of the textual fragmentation encountered materially by members of an acting company, or the socially distributed professional competencies experienced as embodied knowledge by the actors themselves. We must look again to the early modern textual record, then, in order to trace exactly how ideas of actorly craft circulated amongst playgoing non-specialists.

Of relevance here is a slightly older tradition of scholarship that traces the ways in which the skill of acting was discussed and theorized in the early modern period, when models derived largely from Cicero and Quintilian emphasized the primacy of well-chosen 'action' (*actio*) and 'accent' (*pronuntio*) in both oratory and dramatic performance.<sup>16</sup> It seems that many early modern subjects were familiar with the idea that skilful dramatic performance involved apt gesture, facial expression, gait, and other movements – all encompassed by 'action' – as well as judicious uses of voice, emphasis, and other aspects of verbal delivery, encompassed in turn by 'accent'. Importantly, as Tribble reminds us, the actor's task combines rather than opposes these elements, for gesture is 'not simply decoration' but has 'deep links with speech', links as explicit in early modern manuals noting the hand's 'naturall competency to express the motives and affections of the Minde' as they are fundamental to recent scientific studies of language, gesture and cognition.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Stern, *Rehearsal* (Oxford, 2000); Palfrey and Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts*; Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe*.

<sup>16</sup> See, in particular: Joseph, *Elizabethan Acting*, pp. 1–24; Roach, *Player's Passion*, pp. 23–57.

<sup>17</sup> Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe*, p. 97; John Bulwer, *Chirologia: or The Naturall Language of the Hand* (London, 1644), sig. B2v. See: Susan Goldin-Meadow, *Hearing Gestures: How Our Hands Help Us Think* (Boston, MA, 2003); Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge, 2004); David McNeill, *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal About Thought* (Chicago, 1992); *Language and Gesture* (Cambridge, 2000).

Several of the texts already encountered directly frame judgements of actorly craft through the categories of action and accent. Henry Jackson's admiration for 'what [the King's Men] did' as well as 'what they said' when performing at Oxford in 1610 posits the formal categories of *actio* and *pronuntio* as the basis of these actors' skill. Likewise, Thomas Heywood's fictional Jove is explicitly concerned with 'euill actions', drawing on the same conceptual framework as Jackson but focusing in particular on gesture for the sake of a pun on 'actions'.<sup>18</sup> Another epistolary account that, unlike Jackson's, relates to performance in London's commercial playhouses proceeds similarly. In August 1624, when Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess* was staged at the Globe, John Chamberlain wrote to Sir Dudley Carleton in an attempt to convey something of the commotion that the play had caused; this hubbub of discussion related principally to the drama's political resonances, and to the King's Men's sheer impudence in staging such material publically.<sup>19</sup>

Yet despite being faced with the outrage of players personating living political figures, Chamberlain's astonishment is nonetheless marshalled by a judgement upon the skill of the King's Men, framed through action and accent: he notes how the players and, in particular, one actor, were judged to have 'counterfeited' the Spanish ambassador Gondomar's 'person to the life, with all his graces and faces'.<sup>20</sup> Here, Chamberlain reports widespread admiration of the skills required to personate Gondomar so effectively. In particular, the actor's facial expressions – a key element of early modern gesture – and his 'graces' are picked out for praise, the latter potentially encompassing characteristic modes of speech as well as deportment, and thus requiring the

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<sup>18</sup> Jackson, 'Letter to D.G.P.', in *Records of Early English Drama: Oxford*, p. 1037; Heywood, *Apology*, sig. a4v.

<sup>19</sup> See: Thomas Howard-Hill, *Middleton's 'Vulgar Pasquin': Essays on 'A Game at Chess'* (London, 1995), p. 109 and *passim*.

<sup>20</sup> John Chamberlain, 'Letter to Sir Dudley Carleton, Saturday 21 August 1624', in *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture: A Companion to the Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and James Lavagnino (Oxford, 2007), pp. 870–1.

performer to demonstrate skilled accent as well as action.<sup>21</sup> Even whilst principally concerned with the precedent for public comment on contemporary politics set by the King's Men's performances (and by the authorities' anticipated response), reactions to *A Game at Chess* still apparently took in the question of the actors' technical accomplishment, treating such judgements as an expected or integrated aspect of playhouse engagement with dramatic performance. Whilst the model of action and accent was – like any theory – at times tested and stretched in practice, it is to these twin categories that early modern playgoers habitually turned when seeking to expound actorly craft.<sup>22</sup>

Why might early modern playgoers have been so interested in a matter as technical and specialized as the skill of a commercial player, and so quick to turn to *actio* and *pronuntio*? Certainly, there appears to have been a general culture of censure in the early modern playhouse, where 'in a sense, audiences were jurors', and everything from the decoration of the theatre to the pre-show music, via the dramatist's writing and the narrative itself, was subject to value judgements.<sup>23</sup> But there may be yet more specific reasons why actorly craft was a particular locus for censure. For those privileged enough to have attended grammar school or received private tuition as a child – and it is important to note from the outset that such a subset of playgoers excludes many, particularly women and those of lower social status – the apt use of action and

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<sup>21</sup> See: 'grace, *n.* 13.a–c', in *Oxford English Dictionary* (3rd ed., Oxford, 2013), <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> [accessed 13 November 2016].

<sup>22</sup> On skill at the limits of action and accent, see: Tom Bishop, 'Boot and Schtick', *Shakespeare Studies*, 43 (2015), 35–49; Richard Preiss, 'John Taylor, William Fennor, and the "Trial of Wit"', *Shakespeare Studies*, 43 (2015), 50–78.

<sup>23</sup> Laurie Maguire, 'Audience-Actor Boundaries in *Othello*', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 181 (2012), 123–142; p. 124. Gurr gathers accounts of many such judgements in: 'Appendix 2: References to Playgoing', in *Playgoing*, pp. 247–301.

accent would have been a central pillar of their education.<sup>24</sup> As Astington has recently explored, Cicero's *De Oratore* and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, 'both, especially the first, recommended as school reading', outline the proper development of action and accent as part of rhetorical training with specific reference to playing.<sup>25</sup>

Not only do Quintilian and Cicero present the specific skills of *actio* and *pronuntio* as common to oratory and acting, but both advocate the use of actors as models for students in their oratorical training. Cicero suggests of 'delivery' that 'the orators ... have abandoned this entire field', leaving 'the actors, who are only imitators of reality' as the best exemplars of *pronuntio*. Likewise, in relation to *actio* – specifically facial expression – he refers approvingly to the renowned Roman comic actor Roscius, a reference point later adopted, as we have seen, by Marston in *The Scourge of Villainy*.<sup>26</sup> Quintilian shows particular interest in how pupils should develop skill in accent with reference to players, suggesting '[t]he comic actor' could provide a source for the 'future orator[s] ... knowledge of Delivery', with the qualification that the performance of 'drunkenness', 'cringing manners', and 'the emotions of love, greed, or fear' are to remain strictly absent from the curriculum (for '[f]requent imitation develops into habit'). Like Cicero, he warns against the 'staginess' of 'some kinds of gesture and movement' used by 'comic actors', but nonetheless notes that 'the orator must indeed master both to a certain extent'. In

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<sup>24</sup> For a recent account of the social make-up of grammar school pupils, see: Lynn Enterline, *Shakespeare's Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia, 2012), pp. 15–18.

<sup>25</sup> Astington, *Actors and Acting*, pp. 44–5. On the teaching of rhetoric, see Quentin Skinner, *Forensic Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 25–47 and *passim*. T. W. Baldwin's monumental study of the sixteenth century English grammar school curriculum remains the standard reference work on the broader topic: *William Shakspeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke* (Urbana, 1944).

<sup>26</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Cicero: On the Ideal Orator (De oratore)*, trans. and ed. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (Oxford, 2001), III.214–5, 221, pp. 291–4; Marston, *Scourge of Villainy*, sig. G7v.

order to differentiate between stage actions suitable and unsuitable for oratorical imitation, pupils are reminded that the ‘first rule’ of the art of action ‘is not to seem to be art’.<sup>27</sup>

This Classical connection – via action and accent – between the skills of oratory and acting is widely rehearsed in vernacular early modern texts. In the Caroline period, Sir Richard Baker writes in response to William Prynne that ‘*Gracefulness of action*, is the greatest pleasure of a Play, seeing it is the greatest pleasure of (the Art of pleasure) *Rhetorick*: in which we may be bold to say; there never had been so good Oratours, if there had not first been Players’.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, Baker draws upon a long-standing and culturally familiar trope in order to make this argument, the connection even extending to the classroom performance of drama. Charles Hoole’s *New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching School* (1661) encourages schoolmasters to provide students with ‘an Act or Scene that is full of affection, and action’, to be learned and then acted ‘first in private among themselves, and afterwards in the open Schoole before their fellowes; and herein you must have a main care of their pronounciation, and acting every gesture to the very life’. Such performance is apparently an ‘especiall remedy’ for ‘subrustick bashfulnesse and unresistable timorousnesse’, which if not corrected by dramatic performance is ‘apt in riper yeares to drown many good parts in men’.<sup>29</sup> Hoole rehearses a long-established view of the value of dramatic performance in grammar school education, Thomas Wilson having noted some hundred years previously that ‘[t]here are a thousand such faults among men both for their speech and also for their gesture, the which if in their young years they be not remedied, they will hardly be forgot when they come to man’s state’.<sup>30</sup> Early modern playgoers with such an education, then, would certainly have studied the theory and probably have practiced the craft of dramatic performance,

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<sup>27</sup> Quintilian, *The Orator’s Education*, trans. and ed. D. A. Russell (Cambridge, MA; London, 2001), I.xi.1–3, pp. 236–9; Cicero, *De oratore*, III.220, p. 294.

<sup>28</sup> Sir Richard Baker, *Theatrum Redivivum, or, The Theatre Vindicated* (London, 1662), sig. D1v–D2r.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Hoole, *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching Schoole* (London, 1661), pp. 142–3.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetoric* (1560), ed. Peter E. Medine (University Park, PA, 1994), pp. 242–3.



bringing a body of theoretical and embodied knowledge about action, accent, and other actorly skills to their engagements with performance.

The knowledge of actorly skill from school could have had a direct bearing upon playgoers' interest in an actor's technique. Early modern audiences, and indeed audiences at the reconstructed Globe that stands on Bankside today, have often been likened to football crowds, although as scholars including Paul Prescott have traced, straightforwardly suggesting equivalence between the two groups is not always particularly productive.<sup>31</sup> However, an analogy concerned with the theoretical and embodied knowledge of individuals rather than the behaviour of whole crowds may have more potential to elucidate the relationship between playhouse response and prior knowledge and experience.

Today, those who spent their childhood kicking footballs around school playgrounds and local parks are often quick to venture opinions on exactly which players bring certain technical qualities to the England national team, or on the efficacy of the '4-4-2 Diamond' formation given the positional competencies of the players currently available for selection. For such fans, embodied and theoretical knowledge based on childhood experience frames a mode of engagement that could also obtain for early modern playgoers with similarly embodied and theoretical knowledge of *actio* and *pronuntio*. Guillemette Bolens has recently explored how embodied knowledge can shape responses to skilled bodily actions through kinaesthetic empathy: 'I may infer ... kinesthetic sensations on the basis of the kinesic signals I perceive in [someone else's] ... movements. In an act of kinesthetic empathy, I may internally simulate what these inferred sensations possibly feel like via my own kinesthetic memory and knowledge'.<sup>32</sup> Thus,

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<sup>31</sup> See, for instance: Paul Prescott, *Reviewing Shakespeare: Journalism and Performance from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 163–5; Andrew Gurr, *Rebuilding Shakespeare's Globe* (London, 1989), p. 53; *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574–1642* (4th ed., Cambridge, 2009), p. 279.

<sup>32</sup> Guillemette Bolens, *The Style of Gestures: Embodiment and Cognition in Literary Narrative* (Baltimore, 2012), p. 3.

playgoers' judgements of an actor's technical ability could be rooted in their own understanding *and experience* of actorly enskilment, a means of connecting personal experience with professional performance. Indeed, such a connection may go so far as providing a mode of playhouse self-reflection, closer aligning an audience member's perspective with that of an actor and his part.

In truth, the technique of one of the King's Men's player-shareholders was probably far removed from that of schoolboys attempting a comic scene for the benefit of their sub-rustic bashfulness; indeed, the skill of the early modern professional actor was far more complex, social and environmentally distributed than the model of action and accent could possibly hope to acknowledge, as Astington, Tribble and Lois Potter have variously demonstrated.<sup>33</sup> Yet as we have seen, playgoers repeatedly make judgements about actorly skill, their conclusions perhaps shaped by their own understandings – based partly in experience – of what skilful acting looks and sounds like, even if Ciceronian concern for *actio* and *pronuntio* provides them with somewhat limiting paradigms.

It would be easy to suggest that playhouse censure of actorly skill was the particular preserve of those who had access to a grammar school education or private tutor, a view that would generally limit such engagements to males of a certain social status and thus a relatively circumscribed subsection of Shakespeare's audience. Moreover, Heaven and Jove were both explicitly sitting, as opposed to standing in the yard, as they made their judgements, just as in real life, John Holles sat in the gallery of the Globe as he determined that *A Game at Chess* was 'more wittily penned, then wysely staged' in 1624.<sup>34</sup> Yet this may not be the whole story. Both Baker and

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<sup>33</sup> Astington, *Actors and Acting*, pp. 76–149; Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe*, pp. 111–50; Lois Potter, "'Nobody's Perfect": Actors' Memories and Shakespeare's Plays of the 1590s', in *Shakespeare Survey Volume 42: Shakespeare and the Elizabethans*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 85–98.

<sup>34</sup> John Holles, 'Letter to the Earl of Somerset, Wednesday 11 August 1624', in *Middleton and Textual Culture*, ed. Taylor and Lavagnino, pp. 867–8.

Heywood – in vernacular texts directly concerned with commercial drama rather than Classical theory – describe judgements upon actorly craft that hint at a wider cultural movement of the ideas of action and accent, perhaps in oral as well as textual form. Recent studies of topics as diverse as human-animal transformations and musical performance suggest that we underestimate the capacity of complex ideas and practices to circulate amongst less educated or illiterate early modern subjects at our peril.<sup>35</sup>

A refracted and tentative glimpse of less privileged playgoers censuring actorly skill appears in a printed paratext slightly removed from actual playhouse practice. In 1589, Thomas Nashe addressed a somewhat cantankerous passage to ‘the gentlemen Students of Both Universities’, complaining, among other things, of

how eloquent our gowned age is growen of late; so that euerie mechanicall mate abhorres the english he was borne too, and plucks, with a solemne periphraſis, his *vt vales* from the inkhorne: which I impute not so much to the perfection of arts, as to the seruile imitation of vainglorious tragœdians, who contend not so seriouslie to excell in action, as to embowell the cloudes in a speach of comparison; thinking themselues more than initiated in poets immortalitie, if they but once get *Boreas* by the beard and the heauenlie bull by the deaw-lap.<sup>36</sup>

Nashe’s concern is to flatter the university educated and, ultimately, to set up a separate complaint about playwrights themselves. Yet his image of ‘mechanical[s]’ spouting Latin or Latinate phrases in approving imitation of ‘vainglorious Tragedians’ suggests that any playgoer,

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<sup>35</sup> Susan Wiseman, *Writing Metamorphosis in the English Renaissance, 1550–1700* (Cambridge, 2014); Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 32–70.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Nashe, ‘To the Gentlemen Students of Both Universities’, in Robert Greene, *Menaphon Camillas Alarum to Slumbering Euphues* (London, 1589), sig. 2\*2r.

regardless of background or education, could be perfectly confident in their own capacity to judge – and imitate – the craft of the early modern actor, not to mention being enthusiastic about doing so. This combination of judgement and imitation appears to relate to verbal construction and perhaps accent, given that the tragedians they mimic are accused of an excessive focus on choice words over apt action.

The Cambridge-educated Nashe displays an anxiety that such modes of censorious engagement with actorly skill might be widespread amongst playgoers of lower social status. Moreover, his apparent discomfort at a mechanical mate's approving appropriation of a professional player's 'solemn periphrasis' and, perhaps, *pronuntio*, hints at a culture of judgement not limited to former students of Cicero. Whilst the nature of the textual record generally allows more precise accounts of privileged playgoers' knowledge, their experience and their possible motivations for censure, it is just as important to attend to the patchy evidence concerning other audience members, for such material offers glimpses of playhouse judgement as a less elite and more democratic mode of engagement with early modern drama in performance. Such glimpses may even serve to warn more generally against attending only to fuller materials, given the risk of replicating the socially myopic nature of many of the most forthcoming early modern sources.

Having traced playhouse judgements upon actorly craft through eyewitness accounts and wider discussions, and speculated as to the possible motivations for such judgements, the final part of this article turns to consider how actorly judgement might fit into a wider history of early modern responses to drama. Playgoers are often presented as experiencing pleasure at the theatre, from the lascivious delight that Stephen Gosson fears 'slye' on-stage 'whordome' will evoke, to the gratification that, at the end of *Twelfth Night*, Feste promises the Lord Chamberlain's Men will 'strive' to provide on a daily basis (5.1.404).<sup>37</sup> At first glance, these responses may seem distinct from the kinds of distanced reflection that might be associated with censure, yet if we attend to a

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Fiue Actions* (London, 1582), sig. C5v.

full range of surviving textual evidence, it is striking how often pleasure and judgement are not just represented as occurring simultaneously, but actually framed as interlinked parts of the same response.

One such conjunction of pleasure and judgement appears in accounts of playgoers pleased by the quality of a performer's *actio*. Mary Wroth, author of an important closet drama, *Love's Victory*, did not write for the commercial stage, but she does make passing reference to a playgoer's awareness of actorly skill, framed in precisely these terms, in *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621). In the first book of her expansive prose romance, a lustful and somewhat duplicitous queen takes a keen interest in a particularly well-proportioned and attractive gentleman visiting her court; whilst not the tallest, he was 'farre from being low', and his beard was 'something inclind to yellow'. She seeks his love with 'all passionate ardency', but despite her best efforts, he is 'no further wrought, then if he had seene a delicate play-boy acte a louing womans part, and knowing him a Boy, lik'd onely his action'.<sup>38</sup> The very point of the analogy is a playgoer's archetypal awareness of a performer's artifice, even whilst admiring the veracity of his personation: she assumes that her readers will unproblematically recognize the playhouse practice of assessing how skilfully a boy player 'usurp[s] the grace, / Voice, gait and action of a gentlewoman' (*Shrew*, Induction 1.129–30). Moreover, Wroth suggests that this hypothetical playgoer takes pleasure of some kind in the 'play-boy[']s ... action', implying that playhouse censure of *actio* and *pronuntio* occurred not as an alternative to or substitute for emotive engagement with performance, but rather as a simultaneous, mutually informing response, a pleasure perhaps resulting in part from the playgoer's approval and thus interwoven with the act of judgement.

Such a combination of pleasure and judgement also appears when Thomas Platter describes how 'very pleasingly performed' the Julius Caesar play was that he saw on 21 September

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<sup>38</sup> Lady Mary Wroth, *The Countesse of Mountgomeries Urania* (London, 1621), pp. 59–60.

1599, probably Shakespeare's at the Globe, but possibly another on the same subject at the Rose.<sup>39</sup> Significantly, the very notion of pleasing performance suggests both a positive judgement upon the craft of the performance and pleasure in watching it. A similar blend of discretion and satisfaction in relation to a very specific kind of gesture or movement also seems present in Platter's further comment on how 'admirably and exceedingly gracefully' the company danced at the end of the play, dressed as men and women. Indeed, the Swiss visitor seems particularly interested in this specific skill, also noting how 'gracefully' a second troupe of players danced at the end of a performance at the Boar's Head or the Curtain.<sup>40</sup> Once again, the very act of judgment upon actorly craft – both in the laudable action of the players' dancing and in their more general pleasing performance – seems itself to be pleasurable, this time for a historical eyewitness of the London playhouses.

We might also return to Henry Jackson's account of the King's Men's performances in 1610, where emotive responses of 'pity' and 'tears' were inextricably bound up with precise and measured censuring of the players' action and accent, discharged 'decorously and aptly'. Jackson's 'moved' playgoers are further suggestive of a culture of playhouse response in which critical scrutiny and emotive responses – including but not limited to pleasure – were not considered mutually exclusive playhouse behaviours.<sup>41</sup>

Descriptions of actorly censure interwoven with emotive engagement also chime with accounts of playgoing not directly concerned with the player's craft. John Manningham's approving reference to the 'good practise' used to gull Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* is both a reflection upon Shakespeare's apt dramatic construction and a record of one witness's pleasure in

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<sup>39</sup> Translated in: Ernest Schanzer, 'Thomas Platter's Observations on the Elizabethan Stage', *Notes and Queries*, 201 (1956), 465–7; p. 466. Schanzer also discusses the identity of the play (pp. 466–7).

<sup>40</sup> Schanzer, 'Thomas Platter's Observations', p. 466; Gabriel Egan, 'Thomas Platter's Account of an Unknown Play at the Curtain or the Boar's Head', *Notes and Queries*, 245 (2000), 53–6.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson, 'Letter to D.G.P.', in *Records of Early English Drama: Oxford*, p. 1037.

this stagecraft; likewise, the ‘wytt & mirthe’ in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* that Sir Walter Cope reports will ‘please’ the queen ‘exceedingly’ brings together critical reflection on the quality of the play’s ‘wytt’ and pleasure in the ‘mirthe’ that Shakespeare’s comedy is expected to provoke in Elizabeth I.<sup>42</sup> These tantalising passing references to pleasure and judgement hint at rich and multifarious playhouse engagements, quite comfortably encompassing a range of seemingly contradictory responses of censure and delight in a single visit to a venue such as the Globe, and of relevance far beyond the particular issue of actorly skill.

This article has taken steps towards a history of actorly craft and playhouse judgement, tracing references to the censoring of players’ technical skill, examining playgoers’ potential motivations for judging actors, and placing these considerations in wider contexts of early modern theatrical response. What emerges has clear ramifications for understanding playgoers’ motivations and behaviour, and assessing the paradigms within which early modern drama was performed and written, as well as indicating new directions in studies of Shakespearian performance and early modern playhouse culture. Most immediately, this investigation has offered considerable support for the hypothesis that actorly craft was indeed an explicit topic of playhouse attention, something just as significant to early modern subjects’ engagements with drama in performance as was narrative structure, apt characterization, a playhouse’s capacity for visual and aural stagecraft, or the poetic abilities of playwrights themselves.

A history of judicious playgoing has further implications, not least for the ways in which Shakespeare and other dramatists would have anticipated audiences engaging with fictional worlds created for the commercial stage. Playgoers keen to reflect upon the practicalities of performance even as they engage more imaginatively with dramatic narratives and characters would provide strikingly idiosyncratic target audiences for the King’s Men and their dramatists,

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<sup>42</sup> *The Diary of John Manningham of the Middle Temple, 1602–1603*, ed. Robert Parker Sorlien (Hanover, NH, 1976), p. 48; Sir Walter Cope, Letter to Sir Robert Cecil (1604), Hatfield House Library and Archives, MS CP 189/95.

and, crucially, would require texts written with precisely these audience expectations in mind. Unlike some later theatrical contexts, the early modern stage is renowned for requiring audience members themselves to participate in the creation of drama through the forces of imagination. If, as this study suggests, playgoers were also quite consciously attentive to the means of theatrical production – in this case, the technical craft of the performers – then we must acknowledge an additional element of self-reflexivity: early modern playgoers not only participated in the creation of Shakespeare, but even dwelt upon the practicalities of that creation as it took place.

This in turn affects critical approaches to play-texts written for theatres such as the Globe and Blackfriars. Plays like *Hamlet* or *Antony and Cleopatra* read rather differently if we imagine a playwright composing in conscious anticipation of close engagement with the technicality of a role as expansive as Hamlet, or as tonally complex and virtuosic as Cleopatra. Perhaps, too, the sheer number of technically demanding parts in plays such as *Twelfth Night* or *King Lear* needs to be understood differently, if Shakespeare constructed these ensemble pieces fully expecting playgoers to engage closely with the question of ‘who acts best’ amongst the performers of Lear, Cordelia, Edgar, Edmund, the Fool, Gloucester, Regan and Goneril, or amongst the many substantive roles that populate Illyria.<sup>43</sup> Theatre history is not simply concerned with what happens to texts after they emerge from a playwright’s pen, but bears directly upon the conditions under which Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote, requiring us to take its suggestions into account when reading early modern drama closely, just as when attending to the history of Shakespearian performance.

What is also clear from the textual record is the need to locate playhouse judgements as precisely as possible within wider early modern discourses of actorly skill. The ubiquity of *actio* and *pronuntio* in educational contexts certainly indicates one significant sphere of discussion shaping engagements with commercial players, but the sheer range and number of sources

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<sup>43</sup> Marston, *Scourge of Villanie*, sig. G7v.



suggesting widespread familiarity with action and accent implies that these categories were also familiar to subjects neither part of elite circles, nor privy to a grammar school education. Whilst texts are often more forthcoming about the experiences of some playgoers than others, there is nonetheless clear scope for further investigation of just how widely models of actorly craft predicated upon action and accent may have circulated, and thus how relevant these versions of technical skill are for examining playhouse engagements with the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

The second, wider hypothesis tested in this article, that delight and censure were not alternative modes of engagement but intertwined features of playhouse response in early modern England, has also proved productive. A thoroughgoing history of playgoing, pleasure and judgement before 1642 lies beyond the scope of this article, although such a study is certainly required. Nonetheless, this account of the pleasures and judgements invited specifically by actorly skill demonstrates the need to reconsider the potential interaction of the two responses from the ground up, moving away from neater distinctions between ‘the wiser sort’ and ‘audiences ... in the mass’ that have held sway in previous theatre histories and returning to the textual record with an open mind as to the potential complexity, entanglement and variety of early modern playhouse engagements with drama.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Gurr, *Playgoing*, pp. 116, 129.