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# How Should I Act?: Shakespeare and the Theatrical Code of Conduct

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**HOW SHOULD I ACT?:  
SHAKESPEARE AND THE THEATRICAL CODE OF  
CONDUCT**

A Dissertation Presented

by

ANN E. GARNER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2012

Department of English

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Approved as to style and content by

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Arthur F. Kinney, Chair

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# **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to

My parents who taught me the value of strong argumentation tempered by  
generous compromise,

my siblings who showed me how to practice it,

and their children who reminded me why it matters.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I wish to thank, first and foremost, my dissertation committee, Professor Arthur F. Kinney, Professor Joseph L. Black and Professor Harley Erdman for their time, their careful reading of my work, their invaluable direction and suggestions, and their scholarly and personal generosity. Thanks are also due to the many excellent professors who have given me their attention throughout my graduate career and to the English department administrators for their expert assistance over the years. I thank all the people at the Center for Teaching and Faculty Development for their support, both financial and emotional, as well as the occasional gentle shove to get working. Thanks, too, to my fellow English graduate students whose good cheer sustained me. Special thanks to the Renaissance graduate students, especially those who were writing along with me; I would never have gotten here without our dissertation group. Finally, and most importantly, I thank my family, especially my parents, who offered me unqualified support over these many years, even at those times when I was distinctly unpleasant to be around.

## ABSTRACT

### HOW SHOULD I ACT?: SHAKESPEARE AND THE THEATRICAL CODE OF CONDUCT

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This dissertation examines the intersection of English Renaissance drama and conduct literature. Current scholarship on this intersection usually interprets plays as illustrations of cultural behavioral norms who find their model and justification in courtly norms. In this dissertation, I argue that plays present behavioral norms that emerge from this nascent profession and that were thus influenced by this profession and the concerns of the people who worked in it, rather than by the court. To do so, I examine three behavioral norms that were important to courtiers, specifically Disguise, Moderation and Wit through the work of the English Renaissance theater's most celebrated professional, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plays evince a theatrical code of conduct that, rather than being an illustration of courtly norms, was sometimes in direct contrast to them and sometimes

formed an alternate or lateral code. This code shows a distrust of disguise, a lack of interest in moderation and a belief in the need to eschew wit in favor of a happy ending. The modern theater has retained many of these essential behavioral norms, including the value of community above the self, the need for sympathy and compassion, and the willingness to risk.



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

A couple of years ago, I was at a production of *The Winter's Tale* by Shakespeare & Company, a theater company in the Berkshires which has been offering interpretations of Shakespeare's work for over thirty years. I like to show up early to Shake&Co shows because the setting is beautiful, and there's usually something else happening out on their spacious lawn. This time, however, there seemed to be a lull in activity; on top of which, the sky was threatening rain. The upshot was I had quite a while to wander around the lobby of their Founders' Theater, where it was impossible to avoid noticing huge posters dangling from the ceilings on invisible wires. These posters featured pictures of actors in their rawest moments and captions that asked:

*What does it mean to be alive?*

*How must we act?*

*What should I do?*

It struck me at the time, and has recurred to me several times since, that these are questions which the theater is particularly suited to answer in very complex ways. Obviously, they are not the purview of the theater alone, but the answers provided in the theater are unique to it as a profession. When the theater asks "How must we act?" or "What should I do?," the question is obviously two-fold. The actors ask, "How should we act onstage?" but the plays seek to answer, "How should we behave in the world?"

How should I act?

That question forms the nexus between drama and courtesy literature because both kinds of literature attempt to answer it. The problem, however, is that at times the answers provided by these different kinds of literature have been confused. Many scholars, especially in recent years, have looked at the concerns and attitudes of Renaissance courtesy literature and imagined that plays were illustrations of those concerns and attitudes.<sup>1</sup> This confusion is exacerbated by the almost proverbial observation that the Renaissance in England was a “theatrical age.” Although in a pure sense, the word “theatrical” should simply mean “like the theater” or “having to do with the theater,” in reality, it is used almost exclusively to suggest some sort of performance in everyday life. Such performances are often interpreted through anthropological or sociological lenses as displays of power or political acts.<sup>2</sup> Thus it has been easy to blur the lines between conduct literature and drama; it has been easy to imagine that when both kinds of texts are “theatrical,” then their motivations and attitudes must be similar.

That idea of the theater, however, tells only half the story. The actual theater industry is also deeply concerned with the first of Shakespeare & Company’s questions: what does it mean to be alive? Renaissance courtesy literature largely answered that question by implying that the meaning of life is political advancement, worldly wealth and power. In the theater, the answer is less clear, in part because the question is

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<sup>1</sup> A longer and more specific discussion of this scholarship following in this chapter under the heading, “The Scholarly Narrative.”

<sup>2</sup> There is a huge body of critical work on performance in everyday life, generally categorized under the term Performance Studies. For one example, see Victor Turner’s *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1988. See also *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, Eds. Lizbeth Goodman, Jane de Gay. New York: Routledge, 2000 for an example of the ways in which the line between marked (staged) and mundane (everyday life) performance has been blurred.

continually being asked. There are some behaviors and values, however, that form perennial parts of what I will call the theatrical code of conduct, a code that arose from the nature of the profession itself, that guides the behavior of theater people, that very often stands in contrast to behavioral advice being offered in courtesy literature and that can be gleaned from reading plays. Indeed, when this code is uncovered, it offers us, I think, expanded ways to interpret plays.

In this dissertation, I hope to offer a fuller picture of this theatrical code of conduct just as it was beginning to emerge with the profession itself in Renaissance England. The following chapter will offer an overview of the larger scholarly narrative on conduct literature, explaining how it has interacted with and influenced the interpretation of Renaissance drama. I will then describe the culture of the Renaissance theater which emerges as very different from that of the court, especially in regard to the idea of community. I will begin, however, by discussing some of the conduct books that were most essential to the people of the English Renaissance. Although my chapters will continue to engage with these texts in greater depth, the following few pages will provide background information in order to make those discussions more intelligible.

### **Conduct Literature and the English Renaissance**

Conduct literature in Western culture may be understood as any literature that suggests or seeks to codify behavioral norms. The Ten Commandments, for example, can be considered a kind of conduct literature that teaches one how to achieve a godly life on earth. Practically speaking, however, conduct literature tends to be far more terrestrial

and seeks to teach people how to behave around other people. It focuses on the *principles* of good behavior (manners) as well as *specific rules* (etiquette) that indicate knowledge of those principles.

Several kinds of conduct literature were prominent in the Renaissance. The most important kind for this dissertation is *courtesy literature*, literally conduct literature meant to help one navigate the court.<sup>3</sup> There were also *rhetorical handbooks* which offered extensive instruction on how to use language, a skill which almost all courtesy literature demanded of the courtly aspirant. In fact, it would not be incorrect to consider rhetorical handbooks a sub-genre of courtesy literature.<sup>4</sup> Finally, there were *schoolmaster* texts, ostensibly directed at young men or boys, although sometimes with an eye toward the men who taught them. These books tend to cover the basics of good manners (how to behave at table, how to keep oneself clean, etc.) and / or how to approach learning. Most studies of conduct literature, since they are looking at large social movements, tend to lump all of these kinds of texts together, but because I am dealing only with specific texts and because my dissertation will have a much narrower focus than these studies, it is worth spending some time discussing the conduct literature that will appear in later chapters of this dissertation.

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<sup>3</sup> There were, of course, other kinds of conduct literature. One genre is the “mirror for Princes” of which Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is probably the best known example. Another kind of text were spiritual guides such as Erasmus’ *Enchiridion militis Christiani* (*Handbook of a Christian Knight*). For a wide-ranging list of texts, see Ruth Kelso’s *The Doctrine of the English Gentleman of the Sixteenth Century*, Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1964. For the sake of length and because my interest in conduct literature is ancillary to my interest in the theater, I have elected to narrow my discussion to the major courtly conduct texts which are already essential in the scholarly conversation about Renaissance drama and courtesy literature.

<sup>4</sup> There were other sub-genres of courtesy literature that dealt in great detail with other aspects of creating a courtly persona. These included specific instruction on dancing, painting, music and heraldry. My dissertation does not deal with these sub-genres.

One of the most, if not *the* most, influential and important courtesy text of the Renaissance was Baldassarre Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528, trans to English 1561).<sup>5</sup> Although my interest is specifically in the English theater, the Italian masterpiece of courtiership cannot be ignored, in part because the English did not ignore it. The text is composed of four books; the First Book focuses on the outward appearance and qualities of the courtier, the Second Book on ways of ingratiating oneself with the king, the Third Book on the ideal woman of the palace (female courtier) and the Fourth Book on the idea of spiritual love. Castiglione appears to have composed the first draft of it between 1513 and 1518, but he wrote a second draft in the 1520's. It was during this revision that the Fourth Book on the idea of spiritual love appears to have been added, possibly because "Castiglione had shifted to a semi-clerical career and the need for moral reform was under discussion" (Burke 36). Adding this Fourth Book, which sometimes feels out of step with the rest of the text, as well as excising some of the jokes made the work more serious and thus a more appropriate credential for Castiglione, himself a rather indifferent courtier who had turned his hand to more intellectual and literary employment in clerical work (24, 36). The first edition was published in Italian in 1528. It was then translated first into Spanish in 1534 and into French in 1537; by the time that Thomas Hoby created the first English translation in 1561, it had already gone through 70 editions in other languages. German (1565), Latin (1569) and Dutch (1675) translations eventually followed.

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<sup>5</sup> For an extended discussion of the popularity of this text, see Peter Burke's *The Fortunes of the Courtier*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

The text is set in 1507 in the court of Urbino during a period in which the Duke is ill and the court has therefore gathered around his wife, the Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga. By way of entertainment, the court members set out to describe the perfect courtier, a parlor-game structure familiar from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1351/3). As such, the text is sometimes described as "a play rather than...a treatise" (25) which accounts for its ambiguity and openness (37). Certainly, the text leaves room for ambiguity. Very often, the court members debate large questions (such as whether or not the courtier should accent his speech with foreign words, or whether noble birth is essential for the ideal courtier), but these questions are often not resolved, or at least not with any definitive capitulation of one side to the other. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to tell what exactly makes the ideal courtier.

Hoby's translation was very popular in England, and there is evidence that at least some men studied it quite carefully. These readers, however, reveal a deep concern with the concept of *sprezzatura*<sup>6</sup> and with outward accomplishments such as a comely person, gracefulness and talents such as music and painting (79-80). Castiglione's text, however, is notably short on specific instructions for achieving these skills.

Much more explicit instruction could be found in another popular Italian courtesy text, Giovanni Della Casa's *Galateo* (Italian 1558, English 1576). The title refers to a Galeazzo (Galateus) Florimonte, a bishop whom Della Casa had met and who was "widely famous as a model of intellectual and moral probity at a time when laxity in these matters was fairly general" (Pine-Coffin 11). Galateo himself appears in a story in

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<sup>6</sup> See my chapter on *Disguise* for a more detailed discussion of *sprezzatura*.



the fourth chapter, giving further insight into his connection to the work. In the story, one Count Ricciardo comes to visit the bishop Giovanni Matteo Gibreti. Both men are renowned for their excellent manners. However, the bishop and his attendants, including Galateo, come to notice that the count has one fault, specifically that he makes unpleasant noises while eating. Therefore, the bishop dispatches Galateo to tell the count of this fault, which he does in so gracious a manner that the count is grateful and parts with him on a benediction. The chapter serves at once as a kind of apology and explanation for the work of the text (i.e. Della Casa's pointing out others' faults so as to help them improve), as well as clues us in to the fact that it was at Galateo's very request "and on his advice that [Della Casa] set out to write this book" (28).

The book was written between 1551 and 1555 and published posthumously in Italian in 1558 (Della Casa died in 1556). Although *Galateo* did not enjoy the wild publishing success that *The Courtier* did, it was nevertheless translated into several languages, the English version by Robert Peterson appearing in 1576. Its purpose is far less grand than *The Courtier*, covering "the minor diplomacy of everyday human relationships" (16) rather than the complex intricacies of courtly advancement.

While the English certainly read and even studied these foreign conduct texts, nevertheless they also wrote their own with a distinctly more English feel. Thomas Elyot's *Book named the Governour* appeared in 1531, three years after the first Italian publication of Castiglione. It engages with many of the same questions as Castiglione's *Courtier*, but it is stylistically very different. For one thing, Elyot does not employ the parlor-game fiction that Castiglione does. *The Governour* is a straightforward treatise on

behavior. For another, Elyot is clear in the introductory “Proem” that he is not setting himself up as an expert:

Which attempt is not of presumption to teach any person, I myself being in most need of teaching, but only to the intent that men which will be judicious about the weal public may find the thing thereunto expedient compendiously written (xiii).

The idea seems to be that *The Governour* can act almost as a reference book, gathering the wisdom of these men into one convenient volume.<sup>7</sup> The substance of the book also differs from Castiglione in that Elyot is concerned almost exclusively with the moral virtues (justice, faith, fortitude, patience, magnanimity and temperance) as well as their accompanying vices or stumbling blocks (fraud, deceit, hinderance of promotion, obstinacy and detraction).

These were classical concerns, and indeed it is plausible that the overlap among conduct books owes itself not so much to the tendency of contemporary authors to imitate each other as to the fact that most authors used the same source texts. The way they used those sources, however, does seem to suggest different cultural values. For example, the Aristotelean virtues of prudence and self-control were reformulated “in Cicero’s *Orator*, where the author recommended what he called a kind of ‘studied negligence’ (*neglegentia diligens*) in which the orator concealed his skill in order to give the audience the impression that he was not using rhetoric at all” (Burke 11). The connection between prudence and the ‘studied negligence’ of the orator has to do with the

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<sup>7</sup> Elyot does allude later to having schoolmaster tendencies. In Book I, Chapter XXII, he writes, “the principle cause of this my little enterprise is to declare an induction of mean, how children of gentle nature or disposition may be trained in the way of virtue” (78).

idea of moderation in one's speech and gesture.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, Cicero's 'studied negligence' comports well with Castiglione's *sprezzatura*, but Elyot also discusses this same virtue of prudence, uses Cicero's definition of it and further argues that Cicero is the model for a way to use rhetoric to help the state. The difference in emphasis may be slight, but it is still worth noting; *The Courtier* is concerned almost exclusively with personal advancement while *The Governour* at least makes a show of, and is possibly sincere in its emphasis on service to the greater good.

Henry Peacham's *Complete Gentleman* (1622) appeared almost 100 years after *The Governour*. Like Elyot, Peacham continues to reach back to antiquity for his exemplars and to organize his ideas around moral virtues, but his text is less earnest than Elyot's. While not as overtly concerned with the management of appearances as Castiglione's book, *Complete Gentleman* focuses on the acquisition of manners that would indicate nobility. Indeed, the text is somewhat fixated on ideas of nobility and bloodlines, and one gets the impression that, for Peacham, English nobility is in a rapid downward spiral which an attention to their manners is meant to reverse or at least retard. In that way, he is more like Elyot than he is like Castiglione; both Englishmen are confident that manners and morals are inextricably connected whereas, again, *The Courtier* is clearly more concerned with personal advancement in a highly politicized realm.

Another Englishman, Thomas Wilson, produced a solid example of a very popular kind of conduct book, the rhetorical handbook, entitled *The Art of Rhetoric* (1553).

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<sup>8</sup> The third chapter on *Moderation* will deal with this idea in great detail.

Wilson uses biblical and philosophical exemplars to model the use of rhetorical figures, but the effect is one of weaving together rhetoric and morality. For example, Wilson includes a lengthy letter written by Erasmus in praise of marriage. The sheer length of the letter makes the reader almost forget that he is reading a rhetorical handbook, until he comes to the end of the letter and finds the section entitled “On Exhortation.” The Erasmian letter is then used as an example of exhortation. Still, the length of the letter makes it just as much the content of the book as the rhetorical instruction seems to be.

This generally easy mixing of content and style finds something of a challenge in the interesting case of John Lyly; his very popular *Euphues* (1578) was at once a model of style and a kind of conduct book, but his own life seemed to suggest the failure of that kind of humanist courtiership. Lyly does not appear to have been a particularly gifted scholar, but he managed to have an excellent facility with language. His *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* tells the story of a young man, Euphues, who is also naturally gifted but badly trained. His youthful over-confidence leads him to reject the advice of the wise old man who attempts to direct him toward serious study. Instead, Euphues becomes embroiled in a love triangle with his good friend Philautus and Philautus’ near-betrothed Lucilla. Euphues emerges from this debacle but is chastened into pursuing true learning and takes himself to Athens to do so.

The chief interest of the book is less its discussion of morals and manners, which could be found in many other sources, than in its highly stylized use of what came to be known as *euphuism*, a balancing of clauses such as,

This young gallant of more wit than wealth, and yet more wealth than  
wisdom ...(89)

and

As therefore the sweetest rose has his prickle, the finest velvet his brack,  
the fairest flower his bran, so the sharpest wit hath his wanton will, and the  
holiest head his wicked way (ibid).

The style caused an immediate sensation. It was not long, however, before such high style became tiresome and Shakespeare, among others, was mocking it.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, a text that seemed to argue in content for less focus on the exteriors of intelligence such as a witty high style eventually became obsolete because of its own high style. Lyly himself was never able to recapture that height of popularity and eventually ended his days clinging to the desperate but unfulfilled hope that the queen would one day offer him some kind of position or pension.<sup>10</sup> At the very least, Lyly's situation may indicate a failure of both courtly literature's emphasis on wit as well as earlier humanist ideals. Lyly's grandfather had been part of the set of Christian humanists which included Thomas More and Erasmus; it is from this generation was he would inherit his eventually disappointed hopes. Neither facility with language nor interest in moral virtue could guarantee success in the court.

Erasmus' name has appeared twice so far in this brief discussion, and his influence on Renaissance thinking was both wide and deep. It is perhaps inevitable, then,

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<sup>9</sup> I Henry IV, 2.4.386-9, Falstaff: "For though the camomile, the more it is trodden on, the faster it grows, yet youth, the more it is wasted, the sooner it wears."

<sup>10</sup> G.K. Hunter's *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962 is an excellent exploration of Lyly's life and career.

that he is the author of one of the more central books in the discussion of conduct literature as well. His book, *De civilitate morum puerilium* (On Good Manners for Boys) (1530) was part of the generation that included Castiglione's *The Courtier* (two years before) and Elyot's *The Governour* (one year after) and rivaled the former in publication and popularity. *De civilitate* is noteworthy for a number of reasons, but perhaps most especially because it comes at the end of Erasmus' distinguished life and career, and it is a comparatively simple text. *De civilitate* is a kind of schoolmaster text, and like most schoolmaster texts, it is simply written and offers very specific instructions on etiquette. However, Erasmus is scrupulous to tie his instructions to justifications that are rooted in a Christian ideal of concern for the other. In that way, *De civilitate* continues the work of Erasmus' life which was deep attention to one's duty as a Christian. Yet the text feels somehow disappointed. Perhaps it is that very simplicity that makes it seem so. It is as if all the grander hopes have failed, and now there must be a return to the most basic of all instruction, how to be polite.

The emergence of three such important conduct books around the same time has not escaped the notice of scholars of conduct literature. Most studies, therefore, begin or spend considerable time on this moment in history. According to a largely accepted scholarly narrative, this is the moment in which the absolute power that the Catholic Church seems to have held for centuries is beginning to wane. Renaissance courtesy literature thus emerges from the shadows of chivalric tales, and here is where the scholarly narrative begins in earnest.

## **The Scholarly Narrative**

The most expansive and influential scholarly discussions on conduct literature and the development of etiquette in Western society share two basic tendencies. The first is the tendency to focus on a social elite, or to put it in useful terms for this dissertation, on courtly norms. The reason for this focus is simple. Courtesy literature was originally addressed to those aspiring toward nobility, that is, toward being men at court, or courtiers. When tribal culture gave way to a centralized government in the early medieval period, men who formerly gained power through military feats were forced to engage in politics and diplomacy at court. The Catholic Church, whose vast lands and complex organization had given it tremendous insight into how such diplomacy worked, engaged in the establishment of proper behaviors. Courtly conduct books, or courtesy literature, often produced by men who took their religious duty very seriously, suggested behavioral strictures that were meant to contain and redirect the thuggish aggression of tribal warfare that the system of kingship and nobility replaced.<sup>11</sup> Modern studies of behavioral norms, which almost always begin in the medieval period, must therefore begin in courtly conduct literature. Naturally, perhaps inevitably, these studies maintain that elite focus as they trace social mores throughout the centuries.

That brings us to the second tendency of these studies, namely that they cover vast swaths of time and space. This tendency may be owing to Norbert Elias' highly influential work, *The Civilizing Process* (1938-9), which has served as a model for the field. In it, Elias compiles an immense amount of historical and literary documentation

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<sup>11</sup> For a recent, comprehensive history of the development of etiquette, see Benet Davetain's *Civility: A Cultural History*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009 (Ch 2, especially pp. 35-44).

from across Germany, France, Italy and England, beginning in the medieval period and continuing to the present day. Much of the work makes comparisons among rules of etiquette pulled from different courtly conduct books; many of these rules highlight table manners and the repression of “disgusting” bodily functions. Elias then finds analogues in modern behavioral norms in order to show our progression toward evermore refined manners. *The Civilizing Process* is undoubtedly masterful. The sweeping overview it provides allows Elias to make the argument that the civilizing process in Western society is a process whereby aggression has, since the middle ages, been moving steadily into the hands of government. Such an argument further allows him to discuss the emerging dangers of Nazi Germany, which is clearly part of his motivation for pursuing the study.

Subsequent writers seem to have felt the need to respond in a similar way. Jorge Ardití's *A Genealogy of Manners* (1998), for example, follows the development of etiquette as a way for the aristocracy to define itself while Anna Bryson's *From Courtesy to Civility* (2002) offers a voluminous exploration of conduct books; both texts span the 14th to the 18th centuries and several Western European countries. The most recent of these kinds of studies is Benet Davetian's *Civility: A Cultural History* (2009) in which his goal is plainly stated:

I have set out to produce a comprehensive account of civility from historical, sociological and psychological points of view while providing a template for proficient field studies of civility and cultural ideology across ethnic and national boundaries (8).



To historical and geographical immensity, Davetian has added methodological complexity. The sheer scope of these works is inspiring, as is, I think, their obvious though sometimes unstated goal: to help solve the uncivilized problems of a world that purports to be civilized.

Elias' treatise locates the early 16th century as the moment in which the religious virtues of medieval England are replaced by secular virtues. Elias sees this shift embodied in the transition from the use of the word *courtesie* to the use of the word *civilite* to describe the largest underlying principle guiding behavioral norms. This shift occurred "for Western Society at a time when chivalrous society and the unity of the Catholic Church were disintegrating" (53). According to Elias, as the Catholic Church's authority in England wanes and the city begins to draw more and more people into close proximity, behavior comes to be moderated by concern for maintaining civic order rather than by ideals of Christian virtue; society moves from medieval / Catholic / chivalric motivations to Renaissance / secular / civic motivations.

Arditi and Bryson mostly agree with Elias on the fact that the early 16th century is precisely the moment in which the social change begins and that it dramatically shifts the focus of conduct literature. But whereas Elias sees Erasmus' *De civilitate* as the seminal text of this new kind of conduct literature, Arditi prefers Castiglione's *The Courtier*. "Castiglione," Arditi writes, "no longer associates manners, at least not primarily, with religious virtue and moral goodness" but replaces it with a "secular ethics and a secular politics" (55). Elias' analysis of Erasmus, however, does not conflict with Arditi's of Castiglione. For Elias, Erasmus is not so much the great Christian humanist as the first

real recorder of modern etiquette which Elias then traces through the cultures of Western Europe. The result is the same as Arditì's emphasis on Castiglione. What emerges from both analyses is a highly secularized idea of conduct, connected mostly with a growing distinction between superior and inferior behavior. Elias also suggests that it is precisely our own awareness of the repugnance of certain behaviors that marks our participation in the civilizing process; to become civilized is to become conscious of our own superiority (52).

Arditi is explicitly interested in the aristocracy, a group that was certainly aware of its own superiority. He argues that codes of conduct helped the aristocracy define itself in the 16th and 17th centuries through etiquette, rather than ethics (3), completely severing conduct from virtue and allowing morally ambiguous practices to arise and dominate. Anna Bryson takes this argument a step further, stating that "the development of the court and of London as social centers increasingly provided the English gentry and nobility with an urban experience, which was crucial for the development of codes of conduct" (61). In other words, since Elias' work, scholars have been arguing that, over the course of the 16th century, the religious impulses toward virtue which dominated medieval England were transformed into secular virtues promulgated by personal exchanges in the city of London and the court, many of which were exclusively defined by economics or politics.

In terms of the intersection of conduct literature and dramatic literature, the scholarly trajectory first laid out by Elias has led to analyses of plays as reflectors of

courtly and civic behavioral values. In one such analysis,<sup>12</sup> for example, the sartorial display of the servants in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* is read as a reflection of larger social norms that guided the behavior of servants and the ways in which servants reflected on their masters in the real world. In another,<sup>13</sup> the schemes of the Merry Wives of Windsor are understood as a reflection of and a reaction against the proscriptive advice of *The Ladies Dictionary* (1694), a 17th-century conduct book obviously directed at women. These analyses are part of the larger movement of academic discourses rooted in historicism and material culture, but those movements owe something of their focus to Elias' narrative of civilization and life in the city as a movement toward a more secular society. People are thus understood as motivated primarily by economic, political and ultimately self-centered concerns.

Both Bryson and Arditì take Elias's premises as givens and thus tend to read literature, including drama and dramatic practice, in similar ways. For Bryson,

[S]ocial theorists and historians have lagged behind novelists and dramatists in recognizing the active strategic and highly practical considerations involved in the operation of social codes...Restoration comedy in seventeenth-century England offers a ruthlessly cynical view of social and sexual rules as forms of strategy and one-upmanship (18).

Bryson starts her study with the assumption that what she is reading in drama is an illustration of social codes that find their more obvious expression in conduct literature.

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<sup>12</sup> Amanda Bailey, "Livery and Its Discontents in *The Taming of the Shrew*." *Flaunting: Style and the Subversive Male Body in Renaissance England*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Natasha Korda's "Judicious Oeillades: Supervising Marital Property in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*." *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

She is not wrong that Restoration drama plays out ruthless social games, but the unfortunate result of jumping to that era is the backward assumption that arises in the rest of the study, specifically that Restoration drama may be substituted for Renaissance drama. The two, however, are entirely different beasts, a claim that my final chapter will discuss.

Similarly, Arditì argues for the idea of the self as “player,” a theoretical lens familiar since Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), which presupposes the necessity of interpersonal detachment (Arditi 86). Detachment is a major trope for Arditì who argues that the civilizing process is largely a process of etiquette detaching from virtue (Castiglione’s major contribution) and human beings detaching from each other (55, 4-5). Since one man plays many parts and moves in and out of interpersonal relationships, these relationships are necessarily detached. Arditì’s conclusions, however, are based on a misunderstanding of how acting works; playing multiple parts creates not detachment but its very opposite, a matrix of complex and overlapping associations that bind players together, as my third chapter will investigate. The drama analogy of social life as “acting” is not reversible as a way of understanding drama. Still, the results of such analyses have been extremely influential. One of those results is the presentation of a hegemonic Renaissance worldview constructed by courtly and capitalist concerns and behaviors. Thus, from this scholarly perspective, all plays can be read as records of those concerns and behaviors, rather than as a record of concerns and behaviors for theatrical professionals, as I will argue throughout this dissertation.

What exactly were these courtly values? According to Frank Whigham's *Ambition and Privilege* (1984), a courtier's main pursuit was to store up "reputational capital"; one of the best ways to acquire reputational capital was by a display of wit.

In the short view [verbal bouts] enable one to score against a current antagonist; in the longer view, they add to the investment capital of one's reputation -- as a wit, a stout verbal adversary, or even just a man or woman to be invited back, sheerly for entertainment's sake (like Beatrice or Benedick) (142).

Thus conduct literature, particularly rhetorical handbooks, were essentially instructional manuals on how to acquire reputational capital. He argues, "the presumptive link between rhetoric and the current God-given order of things snaps when the Wilsons of the age [who wrote rhetorical handbooks], with fully conservative self-consciousness, convert the tools of rule, of domination and self-determination into a commodity packaged for the open market of the literate" (2). In other words, according to Whigham, conduct books like Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetoric* are more than willing to sacrifice social order and religious duty in the name of ambition and cynical self-aggrandizement; Wilson's and, more particularly, George Puttenham's rhetorical handbooks provide the keys to the kingdom in order that Wilson and Puttenham should gain a reputation as superior courtly gentleman.<sup>14</sup> What happens to plays, however, when Whigham's compelling theory on the economy of wit is applied, is that characters are immediately thrust into the world of the court and the plays themselves become mere illustrations of courtesy literature,

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<sup>14</sup> According to Whigham, George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesy* (1588) treats many standard rhetorical devices as "verbal weapons" (Whigham 131) and is therefore indicative of the combative nature of courtly rhetorical exchanges.

especially rhetorical handbooks. Whigham does as much when he alludes to Beatrice and Benedick as figures in this economy. As I will argue in my fourth chapter, however, the merits of wit were still under debate in the industry of the Renaissance theater and particularly in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

While Elias' narrative has certainly been dominant since its appearance in 1938, it is not the only lens through which to view conduct. Prior to Elias, the discourse on Renaissance conduct gave much more attention to the influence of moral obligation, rather than personal advancement. In *Doctrine of the English Gentleman* (1929), Ruth Kelso writes that "even stronger than the desire to justify nobility, the desire to make nobility worthy of its place actuated the apologists for the gentleman, who bent their main efforts toward defining the obligation and preparing and persuading the gentleman to meet it" (38). Kelso views the motivations of the authors of conduct literature without Whigham's skepticism. For her, the insistence on a gentleman's attainment of moral virtue, which figures largely into almost all English Renaissance conduct books, is sincere.

Kelso insists that the English gentleman was not to spend his time in "the attainment of personal perfection (and herein he differed from the Italian courtier), but in the performance of public service" which derived from "medieval doctrines" and "the classical ideal of citizenship" (39-40). For Kelso, the English gentleman differs widely from Castiglione's courtier (and thus Kelso's interpretation of conduct literature differs widely from Arditì's). Moreover, her understanding of the ideal of citizenship harkens back to ancient civilizations, not the new one being formed by the emergence of the city

of London, as Elias will argue, a claim supported by the concentration on classical virtues by Renaissance conduct writers. In many ways, Kelso's study deals more generously with English conduct literature than later scholarship and gives its writers the benefit of the doubt. If they claim to be concerned with virtues like magnanimity and prudence and spend time explicating them for their readers, Kelso takes their interest in such virtues as genuine. At the same time, she is alert to the complicated history of vicious English gentlemen, but unlike later scholars, she sees conduct literature as opposing such vice, rather than cynically participating in it or promoting it for the writer's personal gain.

Although Kelso's interpretation of conduct literature was certainly displaced by Elias' ten years later, it did not disappear altogether. Elements of it have experienced something of a resurgence in recent scholarship. Terry Sherwood's *The Self in Early Modern Literature* (2007) argues that the early modern self, although perhaps thrown off-balance by the shifts in religious allegiances of the 16th century, was still largely defined by its sense of moral obligation.

However much they differ in some assumptions, particularly the limits of human capacity and the reach of divine intervention, both civic Christian humanism and Protestant vocation stress the importance of responsibly serving the common good. This widely held cultural assumption withstood dislocations that opposed moderate Catholic Reform to Reformed Protestantism, 'Anglican' to 'Puritan,' new science to old, monarchical absolutism to parliamentary republicanism. Responsible contribution to common good stabilized and sustained the self (8).

Sherwood extends Kelso's premise. Serving the common good was not simply the purview of the gentleman (although he was certainly in a position to do more for it) but rather was demanded of all people, regardless of creed, occupation or political affiliation. Sherwood's work is important to me for two reasons. First, it suggests that a sense of communality was still current in the early modern mindset. As I will argue below, theater professionals were heavily invested in communality, but, if Sherwood is correct, this investment does not inevitably make them odd or implausibly virtuous. On the contrary, if Sherwood's analysis is correct, theater practitioners were in the majority who could disagree vehemently and be at political and theological odds with one another without sacrificing a larger sense of obligation to the common good.

Second, Sherwood's work suggests that alternate codes of conduct to the dominant (at least from the scholarly perspective) code supplied for courtiers did in fact exist in early modern England. Even if we assume, as Whigham does, that ambition was the major motivator for courtiers and producers of conduct literature, communality is ultimately incompatible with ambition. A truly ambitious person will think very little of sacrificing others if it results in personal advancement. Even if courtiers were willing to do so (as Whigham argues), other people may have considered service to the greater good an essential element of their personal identity (as Sherwood argues). It is likely that theater professionals would have seen more value in the latter. In the theater, not only is personal advancement impossible without the help of others, but also, as I hope to show below, community was deeply valued.



What I am suggesting, then, is that plays should not be read as illustrations of the received etiquette of conduct literature, as many scholars seem to do. Players were not courtiers, and despite theoretical metaphors to the contrary, courtiers were not players. The lives of professionals in these two industries were incredibly different, and not surprisingly, so were their values. A sketch of the kinds of experiences that comprised a Renaissance player's life follows.

### **The Theater Community**

The theater community of Renaissance England was a small one. Andrew Gurr estimates that there were usually “four regular companies” (11) making their living in London at any one time and “twenty-five or more poets who made a living or part of a living by writing for the playing companies” (20). Gurr is including Caroline playwrights in this estimate as well as those in the Renaissance. Even including the stray Inns of Court playwrights and allowing a generous margin for error, the theatrical profession in any given year was probably comprised of no more than two hundred people, possibly much fewer.

These players knew each other, not just in passing but in a very real way. Companies formed, broke up and reformed with members of once-rival companies working together. Gurr describes a touring situation he calls “the amalgamation” in which Will Kemp, Thomas Pope and George Bryan perform one night and then split up to go to different engagements. Pope and Bryan are then joined by Augustine Phillips, Richard Cowley and Edward Alleyn, the three of whom seem to have all been touring together.

Kemp later rejoins them. Everyone in this group eventually joins up with the Chamberlain's Men, except Alleyn who would go on to lead the other great London company, sometimes described as Shakespeare's rivals, the Admiral's Men (34-6). The point I wish to emphasize here is not who worked with whom necessarily, but rather the fluidity with which players passed into new performance situations and how easily they came to work together. The ability of these players to arrive at a venue, give a performance or two, move on and meet up with other players with whom they entered into another performance for another day or two suggests a shared set of customs, practices and values that governed the theatrical community. That is, it suggests the existence of behaviors that were necessary to a successful performance and known by everyone in the community.

The ease with which players moved in and out of ensembles also suggests that these players knew each other very well; the demanding rehearsal and performance schedule supports that claim. Tiffany Stern has argued that players learned their parts in isolation with an "instructor" who was either author, prompter, manager or friend to the actor" (11). It seems likely that that friend would also be a member of the company who would be available to run lines. The players would then come together for an afternoon performance. Thus, after having spent some portion of the day working on the play, often with another member of the company, players would then spend the afternoon together, averaging about eight hours a day on theater work. Some of that time, no doubt, must have been spent horsing around in the tiring house while they waited for their cues.

Roslyn Lander Knutson's description of a typical season would support the idea that players needed considerable rehearsal time:

[C]ompanies opened a new season with continuations from the previous season and introduced the first new show within a week or two; in the weeks thereafter, they brought new plays and revivals into production at about the rate of one every two weeks. The first few performances of a new offering were often scheduled within a week of one another, but by the fourth show, the performances were more widely spaced (32).

The production schedule is not unlike modern two-week summer stock theater in which a company rehearses 5-6 hours during the day and then performs at night, a considerable amount of time to spend with any group of people. Such proximity would inevitably lead to shared values and behaviors.

Moreover, traditional familial connections, such as Henslowe and Alleyn's connection through marriage and the Burbages' father-son relationship, existed alongside social and professional ones. The overlap between professional and personal life is evidenced by wills in which players remembered each other like family. Of Shakespeare's company, Harrison writes that,

there is plenty of evidence that the Chamberlain's Men were a company of friends closely united. When Augustine Phillips died in 1605, he left 30*s.* in gold to Shakespeare and Condell, and 20*s.* in gold to five other members of the company. Similarly Shakespeare himself left 26*s.* 8*d.*

apiece 'to buy them rings' to his fellows John Hemming, Richard Burbage and Henry Condell (138-9).

Stanley Wells further notes that boy actors often informally apprenticed and therefore lived in the households of adult actors and behaved as family:

When Edward Pyk, or Pig, was touring with his master Edward Alleyn, probably, in 1593, he got Alleyn to write on his behalf a jokey letter to Mrs. Alleyn, in London. His intimate familiarity with the household is revealed by the way he signed it: 'your petty, pretty, prattling parleying Pig' (57).

Pig's easy and confident banter makes his position in the household seem more like that of an adopted child than a servant or employee.

Wells also notes that "[p]laywrights attended performances of plays by their colleagues and rivals" (13). Evidence of the attention playwrights paid to each other's work can be found in the plays themselves; as Knutson describes,

the Admiral's men introduced "*Joronymo*" on 7 January 1597, and they still had it in production in October, when some members from Pembroke's company came over to the Rose. There is also an allusion to it in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*...One of the gulls-in-training, Matheo, raves about a play called *Go By, Hieronimo*. He quotes several lines, thus identifying it to audiences as Kyd's play. Jonson had reason to know the plays at the Rose. He had himself sold a plot to the Admiral's men in December of 1597 (12).

The self-referential allusions by various playwrights to *The Spanish Tragedy* suggest the interest theater people were taking in their own community; simultaneously, these references help build the matrix of community, creating a shared knowledge set. The induction of *The Malcontent* suggests a similar sort of exchange, in this case the boy company's stealing *The Spanish Tragedy* from the adult company who returns the theft in kind by stealing *The Malcontent* (104-7). Perhaps when the players became attached to certain companies and stopped shifting so rapidly between them, the plays took up that shifting, passing information across company divisions.

The conflict between Ben Jonson and John Marston / Thomas Dekker, known as the Poetomachia, suggests just how closely playwrights could watch each other. Jonson, it seems, took exception to what he perceived as Marston's characterization of him as Chrisogonus in *Histriomastix* and responded by characterizing Marston as verbose in *Every Man Out of His Humour*. Roman a clef characterizations then flew back and forth over the next two years. In 1600's *Jack Drum's Entertainment*, Marston makes Jonson a cuckold (here, a stand-in for any foolish person) while Jonson retaliates with *Cynthia's Revels* characterizing Marston as a "reveler" and Dekker as an "arrogant puff." Marston's *What You Will* (1601) escalates the war by painting Jonson as a bitter, misanthropic satirist who opposes a lighthearted epicurean (Jonson as killjoy). Jonson's *Poetaster* (1601) tops out the absurdity by making Marston the talentless poet, Crispinus, who literally vomits up bombastic phraseology. Finally, Dekker co-opts Jonson's characters from *Poetaster* for his own *Satiromastix* (1601/2) in which the Jonson figure is made to grovel at the feet of his own satires. The only way these characterizations would have

been possible or have had any currency is if the community had knowledge of who these figures were. The only way such knowledge would be possible is if the community was small enough for everyone to know each other. The smallness of the community might also be why these ludicrous satires seemed worth the effort; it would be unnerving to look like a fool among the specialized contingent of professionals with whom one wanted to work. Perhaps within the community of theater professionals, knowledge passed among the playwrights during their regular collaborations. Certainly, the playwrights must have come together at some point to reconcile character and plot points.

The two points I want to emphasize, however, are first, that the community was certainly small enough to make the kind of rapid responses to plays discussed above possible and second, that these behaviors were considered acceptable. For example, the fact that no legal action ensued for the theft of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Malcontent*, even in Renaissance England's famously litigious society, suggests that theater people shared at least one communal value, specifically, that sometimes plays get stolen. It may even go further than that. It is possible that there was a sense that plays belonged to the community itself. As the player-character Condell says in the *Malcontent* induction:

“Why not Malevole in folio with us, as Jeronimo in decimo-sexto with them?” (100-1).

Why not move the work back and forth and give it a new interpretation?

It was not, however, merely the size of the professional community or the amount of time players spent together that encouraged particular communal values; the enterprise of putting on a play itself required a common understanding of the effort each person had

to make to reach a successful production. Hamlet's now-famous "Advice to the Players" speech ends with this special injunction:

And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it (3.2.40-7)

Consider the image being created here. A clown, straining to laugh at his own joke, bullies a group of audience members, who either have dull spirits or naturally dull wits, into laughter even though they are not particularly amused, by laughing himself. One can almost hear the raw cacophony. In the meantime, something important is happening onstage that no one can follow because of this out-of-place laughter, which sounds perhaps as Ophelia describes Hamlet's madness: "sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh." Pitiful is indeed the word for such a display.

This part of the speech has been interpreted as a jab at the other famous Will in Shakespeare's company, Will Kemp, the clown who had left the troupe recently (Shapiro 23-42) and was embarked on his Nine Days' Wonder, dancing from London to Norwich. A line referencing this dancing miracle from *As You Like It*,<sup>15</sup> a play of the same vintage as *Hamlet*, reinforces the sense that Shakespeare may have been self-consciously drawing attention to Kemp's split with the company in plays written at this moment in time. These lines feel out of place with the rest of the speech which has tremendous comic potential,

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<sup>15</sup> On finding the forest littered with poems dedicated to herself, Rosalind remarks that she was "seven out of the nine days wondering" who had written them (3.2.171).

especially if we understand Hamlet's advice as that of aristocratic amateur being humored by the professional players.<sup>16</sup> But this barb is different; it has the aggressive language of real sting: *set on, barren, villainous, pitiful ambition*.

Although theatrical celebrity existed in the Renaissance, it did not have nearly the significance that it does now.<sup>17</sup> If it had, Shakespeare's company would have done whatever was necessary to keep its star comedian, Kemp. In addition to providing clowning in otherwise serious plays, Kemp would have been responsible for the jigs which ended plays. He was reputedly quite good at these improvised performances, and references in both plays and anti-theatrical texts suggest that popular audiences considered jigs an essential and generally favorite part of the play-going experience (West 201-215).

It is possible, of course, that Hamlet's description of pitiful clowning is just the result of authorial sour grapes; perhaps the playwright is simply annoyed because the player is getting laughs from dialogue with which the playwright had nothing to do. That interpretation, however, would require a level of authorial possessiveness that seems at odds with the playwrighting traditions of collaboration current in the theater of Renaissance England as well as Shakespeare's own lack of interest in publication and the credit that would attend it. Moreover, the objection is not simply to the clown getting extra laughs, but to getting extra laughs at the expense of the story ("some necessary

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<sup>16</sup> See my chapter on *Moderation* for a longer discussion of this idea.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Roach argues that the modern understanding of celebrity comes out of the Restoration. According to Roach, Restoration actor Thomas Betterton's burial among English kings at Westminster Abbey and the eulogy that described him as a "most-apt" force that formed the "Free-born people" of Great Britain denote a marked elevation of the status of the actor. See *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996 (especially Chapter 3, pp 74-118).



question of the play”). It is this behavior, self-aggrandizement at the expense of the play as a whole, that the speech deems to be “villainous” and to show “pitiful ambition.” In some ways, Hamlet’s speech suggests an elision of self in service to the greater good.

The communal feel may have been encouraged, at least in the Chamberlain’s Men, by the very nature of its eventual structure. Andrew Gurr writes that the “Chamberlain’s Men’s relationship with the owner of their playhouse was probably at first similar to the Admiral’s with Henslowe” (44); that is to say, they worked for the theater owner James Burbage who made financial and company decisions and who, having made the largest financial investment in the theater building, also kept the largest part of the profits. James Burbage’s death left his sons Richard and Cuthbert in financial turmoil; the solution to that turmoil turned out to be the extension of ownership rights to other members of the company, known as sharers. After that, the Chamberlain’s / King’s Men always had between eight and twelve sharers, all of whom acted onstage and performed other services like company management (Wells 20). There were sharers in other companies, including the Admiral’s Men. However the sharers of Shakespeare’s company as opposed to those in the Admiral’s appear to have exerted more control over what companies and what plays occupied their theater spaces.

The sharer system in the Chamberlain’s / King’s Men may not have been the Burbage brothers’ first choice. They might have preferred to continue on as venue owners, controlling the productions and taking in the most money. It is telling, however, that, when faced with this financial necessity, their solution was not a loan from outside but an appeal to those within the company to make a deeper investment. It is equally

telling that the company members were willing to take that risk and make that investment, even when the prospect of losing the land and the structure they performed on was imminent. The fact that these men, all well-versed in the theater business, were even able to see the prospect of making group decisions as possible speaks to a belief in shared goals and values within the group, as well as a willingness to sacrifice some part of their egos to joint management.

Perhaps these players had already learned some measure of the necessary humility from their position as servants. Although, of course, players were servants in a mostly nominal way, it must have been necessary at times to attend to the wishes of one's lord, especially if that lord was the King, as became the case for Shakespeare's company. As noted above, Terry Sherwood argues that "obedience was a given" (26), especially in England where the people had long defined themselves by feudal relationships. After the religious upheaval, demands for obedience from the pulpit grew increasingly vehement throughout the 16th century. To fulfill one's vocation as dictated by the social order was to be an obedient servant to the will of God and of his representative on earth (26-28). Such service was noble and preserved the community. There is no reason to suspect that players would not also have felt a similar pull toward service, especially when one remembers that a lord's protection was all that separated them from being considered vagabonds and therefore legally vulnerable.

Wendell Berry argues that Shakespeare's ideals of servitude can be found in *As You Like It*.<sup>18</sup> The play, Berry says, is a meditation on the way in which the selfishness of

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<sup>18</sup> For a longer analysis of this play, please see the chapter on *Disguise*.

people in power leads to the failure of society as a whole. Duke Senior and his entourage are forced into the forest because of their personal failures, specifically, “their failure to be servants either to God or to their subjects” (219), but they are transformed and redeemed there. The exiles “will return from the forest to a domestic world far better than the one [they] fled, for they too have been changed, renewed in their specifically human nature, *their civility and charity*, by their time of adversity in the natural world” (222-3, emphasis mine). Berry’s use of the words *civility* and *charity* is interesting because these are the very words most under consideration in conduct literature, suggesting that Berry sees plays as a kind of conduct literature that offers specific lessons.

These lessons, Berry goes on to argue, are the result of Shakespeare’s own values. Shakespeare deploys Corin, the good shepherd, as a counterpoint to Duke Senior’s bad servitude, evincing Shakespeare’s belief that country values are necessary to an ordered and civilized existence. He also attributes Shakespeare’s nuanced understanding of the way the country life acts as a restorative to the fact that Shakespeare was “a countryman” (212) himself. To Berry’s assessment, I would add that Shakespeare and his fellow players would have had a great deal of exposure to ideals of country civility and charity in their frequent tours outside of London. Berry argues that Duke Senior and his entourage ultimately learn that “[o]utcasts in the forest...cannot survive by selfishness” (219); touring players would likely have learned the same lesson fairly quickly.

Touring was a significant part of an early modern player’s life. According to McMillin and MacLean, it would be “a mistake -- one frequently made -- to assume that

London was a ‘home’ of the adult companies, or that they settled into certain playhouses for what we would call a ‘long run’” (5); players came and went frequently in London. The players with whom these scholars are mostly concerned were the Queen’s Men, a company that would disintegrate by the mid-1590’s, leaving the Chamberlain’s and the Admiral’s Men to overtake the burgeoning London theater scene. London’s full playhouses and proximity to the court (and courtly favor) made it the most attractive place to play, but, according to Barbara Palmer, touring was not simply a refuge from the plague. We should, Palmer says, consider that,

[f]or every Edward Alleyn writing Joan to dye his orange tawny stockings  
a good black and to sow September spinach in the erstwhile parsley bed,  
three other players well may have been eager to bolt, leaving their London  
responsibilities for the appreciable pleasures of provincial great  
households and the freedom of the road (Palmer, “On the Road,” 34).

Even if we were to suppose, however, that the experience of touring was largely a last resort or nostalgic memory for the players of the 1590’s and later, the sense of touring was foundational to the development of the theatrical profession. The players in the Queen’s Men went on to join up with other companies, bringing with them their experiences from touring. Indeed, as McMillin and MacLean argue convincingly, “[f]our of their nine extant plays were turned into six Shakespeare plays in an act of appropriation large enough to make us think it could have occurred from the inside...the longstanding speculation that [Shakespeare] could have begun his career with the Queen’s Men seems to us the most likely possibility” (xv). If Shakespeare did begin his

career on the road, those experiences would have become part of his own understanding of his profession.

A player's experience on tour differed in significant ways from his experience in London. The company's size was reduced; perhaps the plays themselves were scaled back, although as McMillan and MacLean have shown with the Queen's Men, there is no reason to imagine that these performances were of inferior texts or that they were hampered by having fewer actors. Thus one traveled with a more intimate group of friends, spending even more time together traveling, rehearsing, performing, eating and sleeping in close proximity for weeks on end.

During performances in great houses, which Palmer has argued were preferable to performers because they paid well (Palmer, "Early Modern Mobility" 271), players were exposed to an economic system that was not based exclusively on a capitalistic exchange of goods and services. The players were welcomed as guests, according to Palmer:

Players normally were provided with dinner and supper, although the Cliffords often fed them breakfast as well. They ate in the hall -- that is, not in the parlour with the intimate family nor below stairs with inferior servants but with other respectable 'straungers', gentlemen, and visitors. When they arrive, several of the players on occasion either eat at or are accounted to the steward's board, which suggests some conference among senior players, troupe road manager, and household steward. The steward also provides them with the occasional special dish in addition to the regular 'messes' served in the hall -- by way of quality, once can draw the

obvious comparison between the sophisticated fare of an aristocrat's great hall menu and 'pub grub'. The Clifford and Cavendish accounts do not yield specifics on the players accommodation -- that is, which room or rooms they occupied -- except that they were housed indoors in 'a chamber', for which a pound of candles is provided in one Clifford entry. Lighting for the plays is a separate line item not under the charge of the pantry steward. A second...Clifford entry for 26 January 1612-13 provides three bushels -- presumably 180 pounds -- of coal, wood having grown scarce throughout the country, for the players, almost certainly to heat their chamber. Besides the players' room and board, whatever horses they brought to a great house also were accommodated, at a rate worth a shilling a day (Palmer, "On the Road," 28-9).

For a player to arrive at a place where he is fed, housed, provided with light and heat for a number of days, where his horses are stabled and cared for, and then to be also paid for his work must have stood in stark and at times preferable contrast to working in London where he earned a wage or a cut of the house and had to provide for himself out of it.

The reception and care the player received were in keeping with the rules of hospitality as Felicity Heal analyzes them in *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (1990). She writes that "all good men agreed on the essential nature of hospitality":

it was 'Liberal Entertainment of all sorts of Men, at ones House, whether Neighbours or Strangers, with kindness, especially with Meat, drink and Lodgings.'...These notions seem obvious enough: less expected is the

insistence that the neighbour *and* the stranger, the rich *and* the poor, were all to have equal access to the host's generosity. This ideal, based above all on Christian perceptions of beneficence, provided the key paradigm from which most discussions of hospitality took their departure (3-4, emphasis hers).

However, this hospitality was connected with the country as the seat of open entertainment whereas “the town was commonly identified with the breakup of households and the failure of hospitality” (301), a distinction familiar from the pastoral mode of literature. This is also the distinction that Wendell Berry makes in his assessment of Shakespeare’s country values in *As You Like It*, discussed above.

The contrast between city and country values is not in any way novel, but it is important. Modern discussions of *civility*, as noted above, are inescapably linked to the rise of the city. Not only does the word share Latin roots with *civis* (citizen) and *civitas* (city), but according to the scholarly narrative, civility and the rules of etiquette became necessary when people began to move to cities and thus into closer proximity. If Shakespeare and his fellows were influenced by values other than those promulgated by the city, then they must in some measure resist the current scholarly narrative about civility as understood through conduct literature.

Moreover, it becomes clear that players could not have been influenced by the “consciousness of superiority” that Jorge Ardití finds influences the courtier; indeed, it is much more likely that they were conscious of their being servants, to their lord as well as to the public. They spent enough time touring the countryside to see the good in country

values, which were understood to be in conflict with those of city and therefore *civility* as we come to understand it. Moreover, the very nature of the theatrical enterprise required attention to the community and consideration for your fellows. The hyper-competitive atmosphere of court has little to do with the cooperative act of putting on a play. While the court may have indeed been a place of politicized competition and the city a place of a rising capitalistic social structure, the playhouse stood apart from it. The literature the playhouse produced contains not the values of the court and city but the code of conduct of the theater industry which stood on its own.

### **In the Following Chapters**

Throughout this introductory chapter, I have referred repeatedly to the Renaissance theater, the theater industry and the theatrical profession. By “Renaissance,” I mean to indicate both the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. “Theater industry” and “theatrical profession” I use rather interchangeably to apply to the kind of community I have just been discussing. However, going forward in the dissertation, I have found it necessary to narrow my focus even further and have chosen to do so by using Shakespeare as an indicator of theatrical mores. I chose Shakespeare because, obviously, I am concentrating on texts and therefore need to focus on a playwright, but also because he is, in my opinion, a true theater professional, even in contrast to other well-known and respected playwrights.

For example, although I very much admire the work of John Marston and think he wrote some wonderful plays, he seems to have only entered the profession in earnest



when writing satirical verses, his previous occupation, became illegal. Moreover, although he produced many worthy plays, he was in the theater less than ten years, after which time he left to become a minister and indeed later disowned his plays somewhat. For Marston, the theater was a stop on his way to becoming something else, rather than his life's calling. Similarly, Ben Jonson, although obviously a prolific playwright, seemed to put himself largely outside of the theater community.<sup>19</sup> Jonson's plays seem to have been an expedient for a man who was really hoping to be something else, such as a public intellectual. Shakespeare, on the other hand, devoted his life to working in the theater. All of his friends and his fortune were tied up with it. He was not only a playwright but also an actor and a sharer. He knew the industry -- indeed he helped create it. Moreover, his influence on the development of the theater cannot be overstated. Shakespeare is the ultimate theater professional, and his complete plays form a sort of sacred text for the profession. Rightly or wrongly, then, my dissertation will focus on what can be gleaned about the theatrical profession from the work of William Shakespeare with references to other professionals as appropriate.

The next three chapters of my dissertation explore three different elements of conduct -- disguise, moderation and wit. All three elements were central in both courtly and theatrical codes of conduct. By exploring them from the perspective of what they mean in the theater, I hope to illuminate the ways in which they differ from other spheres of society, so as to establish these various codes of conduct as intersecting but not identical.

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<sup>19</sup> A longer discussion of Ben Jonson's career can be found in my chapter on *Wit*.

The second chapter on *Disguise* argues that, while reliant on the manipulation of disguise (e.g. costume), and display (e.g. spectacle), plays often evinced a disapproval of artifice. Unlike the advice courtiers received about managing their appearance so as to manage success in court, characters in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* put themselves and others at serious risk by their insistence on disguise. Caught up in the fiction of playing Ganymede, Rosalind very nearly alienates Orlando while impeding Silvius' success with Phoebe. It is only when she comes clean and shows herself to be Orlando's very very Rosalind that she secures the happiness of all.

The third chapter focuses on the ideal of *Moderation*. Moderation related to keeping one's person in a balanced middle and was a central virtue for courtiers. In this chapter, I will argue that moderation is not a particularly theatrical virtue; actors did not practice the kind of moderation courtiers were advised to learn. A close examination of *Hamlet* reveals a play that is largely critical about the idea of advice-giving such that when we re-examine Hamlet's famous advice to the players, the speech appears as not legitimate commentary on acting but as a window into the mind of a character paralyzed by a courtly upbringing that emphasized moderation. In this direct opposition to an important courtly value, another part of the theatrical code of conduct becomes increasingly clear.

The fourth chapter on *Wit* reinforces the ways in which the theatrical code of conduct strikingly opposes the ones found in courtly conduct literature. It examines Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, showing how the playwright positions wit as a potentially destructive force that must ultimately be resisted. Many courtly conduct books

focused on the need for the courtier to master language and be entertaining or, more specifically, witty. That mastery was a marker of superiority and a potential conduit to social and political advancement. Shakespeare's plays, however, show us a darker side of wit, a cruelty that finds little substantive examination in most conduct books. As a playwright, Shakespeare is well aware that a happy ending is only possible when wit is eschewed.

My conclusion looks beyond the Renaissance to see what happened to the values of the theater. A detailed discussion of the Restoration comedy, George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), begins to show the ways in which alternative values emerged within the theatrical community, in part because of the stronger relationship between the court and the theater during exile in France. At the same time, many of the values that I will ascribe to the Renaissance theater industry reappear in a 1945 Code of Ethics for the Circle Theatre of Los Angeles. How these differing strains coexist is the question my concluding chapter will undertake.

It is, I think, rather self-evident that the theater community today is a somewhat closed confederacy of artists with a shared sense of history and values. That the development of those values began in the Renaissance at the very beginning of the profession, uniting the artists who entered that profession and persisting to the present day, is the subject of the following pages.

## CHAPTER 2

### DISGUISE

In 2007, Chris Matthews, a political pundit from the 24-hour news network MSNBC, appeared on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* to plug his book, *Life's a Campaign: What Politics Has Taught Me About Life, Friendship, Reputation and Success*. It became an interview that Matthews would describe, on-air as it was happening, as “a book interview from hell.” Although Stewart is known for his respectful interviewing, in this situation he is clearly horrified by Matthews’ idea that political maneuvering can somehow lead to personal success. Stewart calls *Life's a Campaign* “a self-hurt book” because it champions “artifice” and “contrivance.” In one exchange, Stewart makes the connection between Matthews’ book and Renaissance conduct literature:

STEWART: There’s nothing in here about “be good, be competent.”

MATTHEWS: That’s called the Bible. It’s been written.

STEWART: This book has been written too. It’s called *The Prince*.

MATTHEWS: I know, but this is better.

Stewart does a double-take here before blurting out, “What?!” It is difficult to tell what Stewart finds more appalling - that Matthews would suggest his book is better than Machiavelli’s or that he would be willing to align his book in any way with Machiavelli’s - but appalled he clearly is.

As Matthews himself unabashedly implies, his book is the equivalent of a modern courtesy book. In this case, the rules derive from the court of American politics, and the audience is made, not of necessarily political aspirants, but “regular” Americans. Still, in a country that cherishes the ideal, at least nominally, that it is possible for a “regular person” to become the leader of the free world, the expansive audience makes sense. Moreover, the structure and purpose of Matthew’s book are the same as courtly books: to lay out the strategies that politicians have used to get ahead so that readers can employ them to get ahead as well.

Stewart and Matthews occupy social positions roughly equivalent to those of actor and courtier, respectively, in the Renaissance. Jon Stewart has worked in entertainment since the mid-1980’s, mostly as a stand-up comic, talk show host and actor. He is now the host of the wildly successful political and journalistic satire *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Chris Matthews has for the past thirty years dwelled on the fringes of the American political landscape, sometimes working within the structure of government and sometimes standing outside it as a commentator, as on his MSNBC show *Hardball*. While both men might be considered to have similar jobs -- commenting on American politics from their cable TV shows -- they obviously identify themselves in very different ways; Stewart insists that he is merely a performer and comedian, while Matthews sees his job as serious political inquiry and, as recently as 2009, was considering a run for Senate.

It is this difference in perspective that led to their overlapping, confused, sputtering exchange during Matthews’ press junket. Matthews is obviously flummoxed

about Stewart's reaction. He sounds genuinely surprised that the interview is going so badly; no doubt he'd expected that he was there not to defend the book against serious interrogation, but simply to promote it, like an actor promotes a movie. If one compares the way Stewart interviews actors (lobbing fluffy questions, allowing them to appear funny) to the way he interviews political figures (engaging in serious conversation about real problems), it is clear that, for Stewart, Matthews falls squarely into the latter category. It is also clear that, for Stewart, there is something about the book's premise that he cannot abide. Finally, he lays it out plainly:

STEWART: This strikes me as artifice. If you live this book, your life will be strategy and if your life is strategy, you'll be unhappy.

Stewart's objection is to the application of political machinations to one's personal life, the book's basic subject. But what is really at issue here is each man's definition of success. Matthews sees it as advancement by worldly standards of wealth, power and prestige. Stewart is clearly more concerned with happiness in one's day-to-day lived experience.

I begin with this anecdote because it illustrates precisely a tension I believe exists at the very center of the intersection of courtesy literature and drama, specifically differing attitudes on the issue of disguise. Courtesy literature was to a large extent about the management of one's outward show through the acquisition of etiquette<sup>1</sup>; this often uncritical concentration on the outward signifiers of manners reveals courtesy literature's lack of concern with the dangers of creating a façade to replace one's actual person. The

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<sup>1</sup> The mere existence of etiquette books suggests a general interest in managing one's social appearance, but for one critical analysis, see Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Renaissance Courtesy Literature*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

theater was also largely concerned with the management of disguise, in the form of both costume and character, but for theater practitioners, the idea that one would want to bring such management into his or her everyday life is deeply disturbing. As a performer himself, Stewart sees Matthews' philosophy as "a recipe for sadness." More than that, he thinks success is happiness, not advancement. For the courtier, this management of self congregates around the idea of *display*; the actorly side of that same coin, however, is *disguise*.

With the convergence in the late 20th century of Stephen Greenblatt's work on self-fashioning and the emergence of performance theory's emphasis on "performance in everyday life," distinctions between the attitude of the professional performer and one who "performs" off-stage, between display and disguise, have been all but erased. The result is a general conflation between *marked* and *mundane* performance.<sup>2</sup> *Marked performance* is that which we would recognize as theater. It is demarcated from the actions of everyday life by a specific playing area, a script (written or improvised), created characters, and a shared understanding that what is occurring is not "real life"; the actions that occur onstage "happen" in the sense that someone does them, but they do not have real world efficacy (e.g. an actor who goes through a coronation scene onstage does not become king). *Mundane performance* is performance in everyday life. It is less simple to define as performance theory has stretched the idea to include almost any act

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<sup>2</sup> For these terms, I am indebted to Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, Communication Department, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

undertaken by any individual from getting married to eating snacks at a reception.<sup>3</sup>

Suffice it to say, however, that mundane performance has the real world efficacy that marked performance lacks: when a man goes through the mundane performance of a coronation, he *does* actually become king.

The problem with conflating marked and mundane performance is the problem Stewart articulates. The management of display becomes a carefully effected disguise, and real life becomes a “strategy” of managing that display. In such a strategy, real life becomes contrived, artificial, insincere. Such a life, the actor Stewart tells us, is destined to “be unhappy.”

Stewart’s actorly perspective is not a modern invention; support for it can be found in the literature of the Renaissance theater. In recent years, though, scholarship has obscured this perspective. Often, plays are read as meditations or instructions on contrivance and as evidence of a highly theatricalized Renaissance culture. While I would agree that Renaissance culture seems to put a high value on performance and performativity, I would argue that Renaissance drama frequently explodes that value. In the following pages, I will attempt to re-inscribe the distinction between marked and mundane performance in order to show the ways in which the Renaissance theater exposes the limits of disguise.

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<sup>3</sup> See J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, eds., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975, for a discussion of the performative utterances of getting married. The “snacking” example is taken specifically from Susan Leigh Foster’s “Introducing Unnatural Acts” in *Decomposition*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 4. Foster’s work is heavily indebted to Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkley: University of California Press, 1984.



## The Scholarly Conversation

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), Stephen Greenblatt he taught us to understand courtly conduct literature as acting texts:

The manuals of court behavior which became popular in the sixteenth century are essentially handbooks for actors, practical guidelines for a society whose members were nearly always on stage (162).

The conceit of the world as a stage was no newer to Shakespeare than it is to us. For Greenblatt, however, world-as-stage is not so much metaphor as actual cultural structure. He extends the metaphor even farther in his metatextual interpretation of Castiglione's work: "[b]ecause of its mastery of its own precepts, Castiglione's work masks the tedious conning of lines and secret rehearsals which underlie the successful performance" (162-3). Here, the argument goes, Castiglione's text "performs" the way Castiglione's courtier is advised to do. Repeated linguistic and critical connections of this kind in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* build a matrix that begins to collapse the theatrical world and the world of the courtier. For example, Greenblatt reads all the figures under discussion in his book as political actors forced to create façades which they carefully manage with their writings. Three years after Greenblatt's book, cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz would write that social theorists needed to begin to take the "drama analogy" more seriously as the line between social theory and humanist study grew less and less sharp (Bial 64-7).

The connection between these two theorists is not insignificant. Greenblatt's ideas in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* had already been deeply influenced by Geertz's earlier

work.<sup>4</sup> According to Greenblatt's formulation of Geertzian theory, human behavior can be understood as a cultural artifact, the result of social, political and historical structures -- "plans, recipes, rules, instructions" (qtd in Greenblatt 3) -- that condition individual responses. For Greenblatt, "[s]elf-fashioning is the Renaissance version of these control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment" (3-4). Greenblatt then goes on to connect literature to this social theorizing by arguing that "[l]iterature functions within the system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself an expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon the codes" (4).

I am essentially in agreement with Greenblatt's assessment of literature's function within a given society; where I disagree with him is in regard to the culture for which it speaks. As I will argue below, Renaissance drama expressed a "code" of behavior familiar to the smaller sub-culture of the theatrical profession. However, for Greenblatt, Renaissance culture is almost exclusively influenced by the court. For example, *Othello's* Iago is the embodiment of not merely Shakespeare's values but of a more widely applicable 16th-century courtly and cultural value, specifically *improvisation*, that is, "the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" (227). Moreover, this improvisation appears as "disinterested empathy" but is, in fact, a form of manipulation (231). Here, Greenblatt starts to move between the

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<sup>4</sup> To clarify, Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973 appeared before Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980. The two men were working in separate disciplines (anthropology and literature, respectively), and there is no evidence that Geertz was influenced by Greenblatt. However, Geertz is speaking to a larger scholarly movement, with roots in Kenneth Burke's Dramatism, that used drama as an analogy for understanding cultural forces. Greenblatt's work is a kind of continuation of Burke's work.

character of Iago and the historical figure of Thomas More, both of whom, he claims, use the same skill of improvisation. In doing so, however, he effectively collapses drama and history, or at least makes one a referent for the other.

When Greenblatt poses the rhetorical question as to why “anyone would submit, even unconsciously, to Iago’s narrative fashioning,” his answer is that “we may recall the pressures on all the figures we have considered in this study” (237). These figures, however, are by and large historical persons -- Thomas More, William Tyndale, Thomas Wyatt, Walter Raleigh -- and are discussed as such. Even the chapter on Edmund Spenser’s *Fairie Queene* is mostly about the way in which Spenser uses the poem to replicate the advice of courtesy literature and thereby tries to advance his place at court; the literature is incidental to the man and his political career.

In the chapter on Shakespeare, however, Greenblatt commits a sort of critical sleight of hand and uses Iago not as a literary construction but as a referent for these other historical figures. It leads him to suggest that Shakespeare was participating in and somehow celebrating the cultural value of improvisation in the figure of Iago. Such an interpretation, however, does not account for the play’s outcome in which Iago’s improvisational skills are undone by Emilia’s honest confession. Ultimately, Iago’s disguise of “disinterested empathy” is ripped off, and he is exposed as a dangerous sociopath. This ending is not merely some lame concession to convention; it is Shakespeare’s way of making sense of the action of the play. His conclusions show us not the usefulness of Iago’s façade but its dangers and eventual failure in the face of its

opposite, honesty. Unlike Greenblatt's Spenser, Shakespeare is giving us the opposite of conduct literature's advice.

Rather than imagining, as Greenblatt does, that Shakespeare's Iago is indicative that the playwright is participating in the same set of cultural norms that motivated More, Raleigh and the others, I would suggest that Shakespeare was writing from a smaller and much more specific culture, that is, the culture of the theater. While most theater professionals were well versed in the delights and uses of disguise, they were also knowledgeable of its dangers and misapplications. It is these dangers to which Shakespeare's work alerts us.

**Actors are not courtiers, and courtiers are not actors.**

Although the metaphorical connections are alluring, to understand what courtiers do as acting is to misunderstand what actors do. The way in which the writers of conduct literature discuss disguise reveals a set of values and uses that differ significantly from its values and uses in plays.

In any discussion of courtly display / disguise, the central book of Renaissance conduct literature is Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*. Despite efforts to position it as proto-performance theory, Castiglione's book mentions the theater only once. Sir Fredericke, one of Castiglione's characters, recalls the behavior of a player who put himself forward: "Therefore was there a noble Stageplayer in olde time that for this respect would alwaies be the first to come forth to play his part" (96). This reference comes in the middle of a much larger discussion about the need for the courtier to put

himself forward before other courtiers in order to be best remembered and most exciting to the king. However, Sir Fredericke's passing remark is the extent of the reference to the stage player.

Perhaps that is because Castiglione himself did not see the naturalized metaphorical connection that modern scholars do. Indeed, this single reference seems to stretch the metaphor too far already. Imagine going to see *Hamlet*, and the actor playing the title role steps forward and says all of his lines at once. Then, having gotten in the first word, he sits back smugly and lets the other actors try to recapture the thunder he has stolen from them. It might constitute a performance, but it could hardly be called a play and certainly not a story. It is possible that Sir Fredericke is referring to Thespis, the first actor who stepped out from the Greek chorus to play his part, but his description cannot be understood as an accurate one for his own or our theater. Herein lies one danger of collapsing the literal theater with the metaphor of the world as stage. Even if the player and the courtier share some similar skills and behaviors, as Jon Stewart and Chris Matthews do, their differing motivations and perspectives seriously change the meaning and deployment of those skills and behaviors.

Nevertheless, Castiglione's place in the discussion of performativity is secured by his being the author who most famously formulated the concept of *sprezzatura*. Thomas Hoby, the first English translator of the work, renders the word at one point as "recklessnesse" (99) in the sense of nonchalance and describes it at another juncture as "a certaine disgracing to cover arte withall" (46). The reason for such disgracing is to make it "seeme whatsoever he doth and saith, to doe it without paine, and (as it were) not

minding it” for “to shew arte, and such bent studie taketh away the grace of every thing.” Thus *sprezzatura* becomes the deeply self-conscious effort to appear effortless, as well as the cornerstone of the behavioral façade created by the courtier in order to win favor among his peers and superiors.

Perhaps the idea of *sprezzatura* dominates discussions of *The Book of the Courtier* in part because it appears early in the First Book; the First Book itself is dominated by the construction of the ideal courtier and the ways in which to display one’s virtues for outward recognition. It would be remiss not to mention, however, that there are three other books. The Second Book concentrates mainly on the ways in which the courtier can ingratiate himself with the king and thus serve as a counselor. The Third Book focuses on the ideal woman of the palace: what virtues she should possess, how she should love and how she should express such love so as to retain her virtuous reputation. The Fourth Book is wildly different in tone and seems almost out of place in the volume as a whole. There is, for the first time, a poetically earnest and extended discourse on love, the relationship between outward beauty and inward goodness, and the extent to which reason must guide the more primal attractions between men and women if they are to be happy.

Nevertheless, the early and unabashed concentration on self-fashioning casts a long shadow over everything that comes after it. Greenblatt characterizes the work on the whole as “portray[ing] a world in which social frictions, sexual combat, and power are all carefully masked by the fiction of an elegant *otium*” (162). The effort in the First Book to conceal the heavy work that goes in to looking as if one leads a life of leisure (*otium*)

colors, for Greenblatt and many other readers, the other three books with an equal measure of cynicism. Thus the desire to be an effective political advisor becomes a bid for power rather than an interest in public service; the interest in feminine virtue becomes the assertion of a sexual double standard that scolds women for acts that are encouraged in men; and the discussion of reason's need to temper passion becomes a cynical attempt by the aging speaker to justify his position at court as a serious contender in the exchanges of courtly love.

Such cynical interpretations are perhaps justified when one considers that Castiglione's arbiters concern themselves first and foremost with traits that are almost exclusively skin-deep. With the exception of noble birth and wit, these traits such as a "comely shape of person and countenance" as well as a "grace" and "hewe" (i.e. becoming color<sup>5</sup>) can be easily apprehended merely by looking at the courtier. The reason that the courtier must have these traits is because it "shall make him at the first sight acceptable and loving unto who so beholdeth him" (33). The reasons he must pursue feats in arms is so that he is "knowne among others for his hardines" (36). To put it another way, the pursuit of a pleasing personage is motivated by the desire to secure external validation; to put it still another way, appearances matter most.

Even the requirement of noble birth is intended as a way of validating external markers. The "noble birth" requirement first meets with the objection that the low-born man can still possess the virtues under discussion, but it is eventually justified by the insistence that "as soone as it is knowne that the one is a Gentleman borne, and the other

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<sup>5</sup> See OED "hue" def. 2 and 3a.

not, the unnoble shall be much lesse esteemed with everie man, than the Gentleman” (34). Here, noble birth acts as a method for securing respect from others. If one’s virtues are in danger of going unknown, Castiglione’s arbiters counsel the ideal courtier to avoid bragging but to nevertheless mention his skills, “least he should bee defrauded of the estimation that belongeth to it, *which is the true rewarde of vertuous travailes*” (37, emphasis mine). With Castiglione, virtue has ceased to be its own reward and has become merely a means of accruing the good opinion of other people.

From this mere outward appearance, Castiglione moves in the Second Book into a catalogue of interpersonal skills such as music, gaming and conversation, all of which, it should be noted, are valued for their ability to please other people. This is also the book in which the courtier learns of the need to place oneself before the king’s very eyes, “for in deede it is meete to set forth to the shew things wel done” (96). It is at this point that Castiglione slips from display and states plainly that there is value in disguise for both courtier and king.

Because to be in a maske bringeth with it a certain libertie and licence, that a man may among other things take upon him the forme of that he hath better skill in, and use bent study and precisenesse about the principall drift of the matter wherein he will shew himselfe, and a certain recklessnessse about that is not of importance, which augmenteth the grace of the thing, as it were to disguise a yong man in an olde mans attire, but so that his garments be not a hindrance to him to show his nimblenesse of person (99).



He goes on to explain that because the onlookers will not be expecting, for example, a nimble display of dancing from one whom they take to be old because of his disguise, the display will be all the more delightful. More to the point, however, a disguise can give the wearer the opportunity to do things that he might not otherwise get to do. Thus disguise, as Castiglione envisions it, is incidentally an opportunity for freedom but really a strategy for gaining reputational capital.

This strategy does not work in the theater, as the original reception of Ben Jonson's *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman* (1609) seems to illustrate. In the play, the young hero, Dauphine, tricks his uncle Morose into marrying Epicoene, a boy whom Dauphine has dressed as a girl. At the end of the play, Dauphine removes Epicoene's peruke (wig) to reveal that she is a he, thereby saving his uncle from a much-regretted marriage while simultaneously making Morose look like a dupe as Dauphine reaps the reputational capital of being a superior manipulator. The play was not well-received. Premiering either in December 1609 or January 1610, *Epicoene* met with immediate controversy as it was thought to contain a scandalous allusion to a possible illicit relationship between the "Prince of Moldavia" and Arbella Stuart, King James I's cousin and a possible claimant to the English throne. Any discussion of Arbella marrying and bearing children was, as Roger Holdsworth states, "touchy" (xvii), and Jonson's clumsy reference to it was enough to get the play banned within a month of two of its first appearance onstage. According to Drummond's record of his conversations with Jonson, it fared no better with the general public: "the play was well named the Silent Woman. ther was a never one man to say plaudite to it" (qtd in Holdsworth xx). Critics suggest that the audience's

lack of appreciation arose from the fact that Jonson did not allow them to share in Dauphine's joke, thereby placing them in the same unenviable position as Uncle Morose and threatening their sense of themselves as intelligent viewers.<sup>6</sup>

I would suggest, however, that the audience's annoyance was the result of Jonson's betrayal of the tacit agreement between audience and playwright. Although Coleridge formulated the idea of poetic faith as "the willing suspension of disbelief" in the early 19th century, the practice was already widely in use during the Renaissance, as Shakespeare's appeal in the prologue of *Henry V* to the audience to use their imaginations suggests. The agreement is this: the audience lets go of a pedantic search for realism in order to participate in the transformative process of the play. Specifically in this situation, the audience agrees that boys, whom they know are boys, are allowed to be plausible women onstage. Jonson's trick here essentially takes advantage of the generous favor that the audience has done him in believing the in the boy-as-woman convention. Even if the audience does not feel foolish, the trick is just not clever. It is bad faith and a violation of theatrical mores.

What is a violation in the theater, however, seems perfectly acceptable in the court; if we can trust Castiglione, the courtly dynamic is precisely the opposite of the theatrical one. Instead of the audience of courtly onlookers being annoyed that a young man has tricked them into thinking that an old man is nimble by disguising himself as

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<sup>6</sup> See J.A. Jackson: "it was a Jonsonian comedy of humours, but somewhere, at some time along the way, things came unraveled, and the audience was not in on the joke. Indeed, by all appearances, the audience, by their own doing, was the joke" ("On forfeit of your selves, think nothing true': Self-Deception in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*." *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 10.1 (May, 2004) 2.1-28). See also Philip Mirabelli "Silence, Wit and Wisdom in *The Silent Woman*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Spring, 1989: "Jonson clearly intended to practice deception on his audience as well, as is evident from the central trick of the plot - Morose marries a man" (310). It should be noted that the play enjoyed great success when revived in the Restoration theater for reasons that will be discussed in the final chapter.

such, Castiglione reports that they will be delighted by the spectacle for its “novelty” and because there is “far greater matter to come of it than they looked for under that attire” (99-100). The delight, however, only does the courtier good if the onlookers are able to give credit for it to the courtier. He must, therefore, reveal himself, at which point the onlookers will praise him for having delighted them. Unlike the revelation of the boy Epicoene, the courtier’s revelation will bring delight.

Perhaps the courtly audience is delighted because the revelation of the young man reinforces their worldview which has been temporarily jeopardized by the disguise, making “delight” a synonym for “relief.” If that is the case, then both audiences are similar in that they share the value of operating by an established code or set of norms, and both are thrown off-balance when those norms are violated. What is different is the actual code. The reception of *Epicoene* demonstrates, then, that disguise must be deployed in different ways onstage and in the court.

*As You Like It* is one of the plays in which Shakespeare is most concerned with the idea of disguise. It is particularly interesting because the disguise is basically unnecessary, a fact which eliminates any idea that the play’s examination of disguise is merely the incidental result of a theatrical convention. Like the figures in Jonson, and indeed Castiglione, the disguised character Rosalind is ultimately revealed. Unlike them, the audience is in on the joke from the beginning. Also unlike them, the disguise proves ultimately ineffective within the world of the play. Therefore *As You Like It*, an analysis of which comprises the rest of this chapter, can be said to show us the limits of disguise.

### “As You Like It”

In the fifth act of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Orlando laments that his brother Oliver’s wedding, scheduled to take place in the forest the following day, only makes him heart-heavier, despite their recent reconciliation and Oliver’s obvious joy at having found Aliena (Celia). Perhaps the ease with which Oliver and Aliena fell into what Rosalind as Ganymede calls their “wrath of love” (5.2.38) and the rapidity with which their relationship progressed to marriage also weighs on him. Orlando’s one opportunity to woo Rosalind (1.1.230-45) was marked by his inability to speak to her. The “what-if’s” -- what if I’d just spoken up? what if I’d declared my love? -- must plague Orlando when he sees how easy it was for his brother to secure the love of his life. Rosalind-Ganymede, hearing his lament, asks, “Why, then, tomorrow I cannot serve your turn for Rosalind?” Orlando answers, “I can no longer live by thinking” and Rosalind-Ganymede responds, “I will weary you then no longer with idle talking” (5.2.46-50).

Many stage Orlandos play this moment as if they are in on the secret that Ganymede is Rosalind. Such stagings assume that Oliver has either worked out that Ganymede is not a man from his swooning at the sight of Orlando’s blood in 4.3 or that Celia, in her wrath of love, has spilled the beans about her and Rosalind’s disguises. In either case, the assumption is that Oliver has told Orlando the secret. Orlando’s reference to being told “greater wonders” than that Ganymede “counterfeited” the swooning makes Rosalind and the audience think he is telling her that he knows, and her reaction, blathering on about the “pair of stairs” Oliver and Celia have made to marriage, seems to be an attempt to distract Orlando as she repairs the façade.

If Orlando knows that Ganymede is Rosalind in disguise, then this scene becomes an attempt on his part to make Rosalind drop the charade, a challenge to her to reveal her own true self and risk real attachment. But even if Orlando is not aware of Rosalind's disguise, this is certainly the moment at which Rosalind begins to understand the limits of the efficacy of disguise. While her disguise as Ganymede has allowed her to flirt with Orlando without consequence, when all is said and done, she finds herself in the very same position as Castiglione's young courtier disguised as an old man: neither can reap the rewards of their efforts unless they are willing to drop their disguises.

Dale G. Priest's analysis of *As You Like It* recognizes Rosalind's affinity with Castiglione's disguised courtier, arguing that her disguise as Ganymede is a strategy. "She acts 'as if' to conceal purpose and feeling for tactical reasons" (278). The disguise conceals her identity and gender but it also acts as a façade so as to conceal her real emotions. Priest reads Rosalind's love-sickness cure as a similar strategy with a threefold purpose: to puncture Orlando's attachment to love conventions, to inject his wooing with real emotion, and to have power over her emotions. The disguise allows her to enact her project, much like the courtier who accrues praise for giving delight to the assembled company via his disguise. It also reveals to us her position as *negotiator*.

Priest argues that Rosalind is the prime "negotiator" of *As You Like It*. He notes that the "root of 'negotiate' is *otium*" (leisure) and that "[*n*]egotium, conversely is 'non-leisure' or business, a Ciceronian ideal antithetical to the Horatian *otium*" (277). *Otium*, which, according to Priest, carries connotations of courtly love, is also the word Greenblatt uses when describing Castiglione's highest ideal. It is perfectly obvious,

however, that *The Courtier* is more about *negotium*, The ideal courtier is to give the appearance of nonchalance so as to conceal ambition and effort as he negotiates his way through complex social and political interactions. Thus *otium* becomes not the opposite but the hallmark of ambition. Castiglione's book perverts the idea; outward leisure (*otium*) becomes the sign of skilled work (*negotium*).

I would agree with Priest that Rosalind's disguise is the outward symbol of her negotiation. Despite her attempts to seem at ease, it is clearly work for her to project a boyish façade, as it is work for the actor who plays her. However, I would also insist that it is largely ineffectual. Shakespeare shows us a disguise that is essentially useless. In the first place, there is no good reason for her even to wear it. Originally, she tells Celia that she will become a man to protect them from assailants during their exile (1.3.106-21). A few lines later, though, she suggests that they take Touchstone with them as "a comfort to [their] travel" (130). Touchstone may not be as valiant or strong as one might look for in a bodyguard, but surely he would be capable of doing what Rosalind is planning, that is, exhibiting "a swashing and a martial outside, / As many other mannish cowards have" (119-20). It begs the question, why not just allow him to play the part?<sup>7</sup>

Priest's answer is that, disguised as Ganymede, Rosalind has the opportunity to tutor Orlando on the proper way to woo her. But if that was her plan, it fails miserably. Orlando shows no evidence of having learned anything about wooing Rosalind. In 3.4, Rosalind laments that Orlando is late to their meeting: "But why did he swear he would

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<sup>7</sup> Scholarly speculation on the necessity of Rosalind's disguise is extensive. Alan Brissenden gives an excellent summary of it in his introduction to his edition of *As You Like It*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. These include the fact that Shakespeare needed to maintain one of the central elements of Lodge's *Rosalynde* (namely, the Ganymede disguise); that it allows audiences to indulge their tastes for staged homoerotic desire; and that it allows Rosalind to come into a fuller realization of herself. This last interpretation will be considered below.

come this morning, and comes not?" (3.4.17-8). He will not appear until 4.1, and Rosalind-Ganymede fills her time by interfering with Phoebe and Silvius. When Orlando finally appears, an hour late, he submits to a lecture from Rosalind-Ganymede about his faithlessness. Then, she instructs him to proceed with wooing: "Come, woo me, woo me, for now I am in a holiday humour and like enough to consent" (4.1.62-3); thus he proceeds along the conventional lines of wooing, eventually insisting that if his real Rosalind would not have him, "Then in my own person I die" (85). Rosalind-Ganymede then launches into her famous speech on the absurdity of great romantic heroes like Troilus and Leander, ending with the pronouncement that "[m]en have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love" (97-8). Having heard this instruction, Orlando still "protest[s] her frown might kill [him]" (100). His conventional expression of love evinces that her pointed lecture missed its mark; Orlando has learned nothing.

When Rosalind-Ganymede suggests that they get married, Orlando easily agrees but takes no ownership of the proceedings. He needs to be prompted throughout the ceremony:

CELIA: Will you, Orlando, have to wife this Rosalind?

ORLANDO: I will.

ROSALIND: Ay, but when?

ORLANDO: Why now, as fast as she can marry us.

ROSALIND: Then you must say, 'I take thee, Rosalind, for wife.'

ORLANDO: I take thee, Rosalind, for wife.

His contributions to the rest of the conversation do not suggest, any more than those that have come before, that he is actually learning anything. He continues to insist that his Rosalind will act in a way different from that being described by Rosalind-Ganymede. Then, having been late to their meeting, he abruptly leaves again to attend the Duke at dinner, promising to be back in two hours.

In 4.3, we find Rosalind in exactly the same position as in 3.4, lamenting Orlando's lateness: "Is it not past two o'clock? And here much Orlando" (4.3.1-2). Although we come to learn that he has been wounded in saving his brother from a lion, his choice to allow himself to miss another appointment still suggests that he is impervious to instruction in matters of love. Rosalind-Ganymede has told him that he who would "break but a part of the thousand part of a minute in the affairs of love, it may be said of him that Cupid hath clapped him o'th'shoulder, but I'll warrant him heart-whole" (4.1.41-4). We might consider his act in saving Oliver's life as both brave and more urgent than meeting with "Rosalind," but we must also regard it as an indication of his values which have remained largely unchanged from the beginning of the play, despite Rosalind-Ganymede's instruction. Even when Orlando meets Rosalind-Ganymede once again in 5.2, he still clings to the conventional expression of love, that his heart has been wounded "with the eyes of a lady" (24). Unfortunately for her plan of instruction, the time for Rosalind's *negotium* has run out; Orlando "can live no longer by thinking" (48), but there is no evidence that all her hard work in tutoring him has had any effect.



Nor has her disguise done much to change her. Scholars have often argued that Rosalind's disguise is a means through which she comes to a fuller realization of herself. For Kent Talbot van den Berg, disguise functions, as does the theater generally, as a method for transformation; disguise allows the characters to "transform themselves by deliberately playing roles and thereby translating the stubbornness of fortune into a variety of personal styles" (888). More than a when-life-hands-you-lemons outlook, for van den Berg, disguise is a manifestation of the choice to deal productively with one's reality by changing oneself to conform to it. Thus disguise, in the sense of changing clothes and personality, is the first step to the changing of self.

James Edward Siemon finds disguise similarly transformative, although in a less deliberately virtuous way. Siemon also makes a distinction between merely changing one's clothes and a more thorough change of personality, arguing that in certain plays we are presented "with a multiple role rather than with a strained use of disguise" (106). The disguise is a means to allow a "subordinate persona" to create a reality independent of the dominant persona which then "impinges on" the latter and changes it (118).<sup>8</sup> For both critics, disguise is instrumental in allowing the characters to act out new personae and thus to change their essential natures. Siemon understands it as the inevitable result of the "psychological principle" that "we are shaped by what we do, and if we play a role, in time the reality of that role will become our reality" (108).

However, for Rosalind, Ganymede really is just a set of clothes. Perhaps the disguise does allow her to act in ways she might not otherwise act, but it does not change

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<sup>8</sup> Siemon's primary example of this double role is Malevole / Altofront, the titular character from John Marston's *The Malcontent* (1604), but he also spends a considerable amount of time discussing the Duke / Friar of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

the way she acts or thinks in essence. In character, Rosalind and Ganymede are very much alike. The most obvious similarity is the way in which both deal with love. In the first act, Rosalind is a witty deviser of sport in love; as Ganymede, she does the same, first in devising Orlando's love-sickness cure and then intervening in the Phoebe-Silvius affair. She delights in mocking other people's love and telling them what to do. In 1.2, Rosalind offers to cheer herself up by "devis[ing] sports" for herself and Celia: "what think you," she asks her cousin, "of falling in love?" Celia defers this sport by introducing the worrisome idea that one might fall in love in earnest (1.2.22-7), and the two girls decide to pick on Fortune instead.

Once in the forest and in man's apparel, however, Rosalind cannot seem to stop herself from sporting with love. Her initial reaction to hearing that Orlando is in the forest is, "Alas the day, what shall I do with my doublet and hose!" (3.2.211-2). Her instincts tell her that she needs to appear to him as Rosalind. But given a moment to think as she eavesdrops on Orlando and Jaques' brittle exchange of wit, she seems to decide to let her wit out to play too. Perhaps Orlando's clever dismissal of Jaques excites her, and she wants to have the same kind of masculine exchange as she has just heard, an exchange which would, of course, be impossible were she to appear as Rosalind. Whatever the reason, she decides to "speak to him like a saucy lackey and under this habit to play the knave" (287-7).

For all the discussion of the playwright's reasons for Rosalind's disguise, the character does not appear to be operating according to any kind of plan. She seems simply to be flying by the seat of her breeches with the singular objective of "securing"

Orlando, both in the sense of being secure about his love and of occupying his time, often by speaking at length. In 4.1, for example, of the 148 lines in her French scene with Orlando (4.1.35-183), 106 of them belong to Rosalind-Ganymede (38 to Orlando, 4 to Celia). Her loquaciousness is probably meant to indicate her essential womanish nature, in keeping with the Renaissance assumption that women have a difficult time keeping their mouths shut.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting, however, that her speeches are full of pronouncements and corrections and, as such, are indications of her desire to control the situation:

Nay, you were better speak first, and when you were gravelled for lack of matter you might take occasion to kiss (67-9).

The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet, in a love cause (86-9).

Say a day without the ever. No, no, Orlando; men are April when they woo, December when they wed (133-5).

Obviously, Rosalind does not want this last statement to be true. She does not want Orlando to ignore her after he has satisfied his sexual whims. She cannot, however, seem to argue earnestly for marital bliss. She is unwilling to reveal so much, and as Ganymede she does not have to. The purpose of the disguise is not to augment her persona, but to hide it.

A similar speech pattern emerges in her interference between Phoebe and Silvius. Of the 46 lines in her French scene with the lovers (3.5.36-81), only 3 lines belong to

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<sup>9</sup> Rosalind herself says, "Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak" (3.2.241-2).

someone else (Phoebe). The rest are witticisms about Phoebe's beauty (or lack thereof) and instructions to Phoebe ("Sell when you can. You are not for all markets" - 3.5.61) and to Silvius ("Shepherd, ply her hard" - 3.5.77-8). Ganymede, like the Rosalind of Act I, enjoys the exercise of her wit.

More than that, her desire to play is a way of avoiding the present pain of reality. When Orlando is late to their arranged meeting in 3.4, Rosalind finds herself in an unaccustomed amount of painful uncertainty, shifting back and forth between anger ("His very hair is of the dissembling colour" - 3.4.6) and love ("I' faith, his hair is of a good colour" - 3.4.10). When offered the opportunity to watch the "pageant" of Phoebe and Silvius, she readily accepts because "[t]he sight of lovers feedeth those in love" (3.4.53). Two lines later, though, she is already planning to be more than a spectator; she will instead be "a busy actor in their play." She cannot possibly know at this point whether her intercession will be necessary. She is driven, perhaps unconsciously, to stop the realness of love's tormenting uncertainty and is desperate to find a way to sport with it once again.

Rosalind-Ganymede's interference, of course, causes the hard-hearted Phoebe to experience the pangs of love for Ganymede that Silvius feels for her. Ultimately Silvius gets his Phoebe, in part because of Rosalind-Ganymede's deception. Yet Phoebe's final line, a declaration to Silvius, "Now thou art mine / Thy faith my fancy to thee doth combine" (5.4.144-5), suggests that it is his constancy and honest professions of love that have engendered her real affection. Perhaps in comparison to the machinations of Rosalind-Ganymede, Silvius' virtues shine that much brighter.

Still, for all her work under the guise of Ganymede, Rosalind is no closer to getting what she wants. Indeed her disguise eventually lands her in a mess: Orlando, Phoebe and Silvius are all in pain and all because of her. Worse than that, as Mario DiGangi has noted, the Ganymede disguise has actually been working against her as she tries to confirm the sincerity of Orlando's love. How, DiGangi asks, is Rosalind to interpret Orlando's chronic lateness:

Has Orlando stood up Rosalind? Or has he merely stood up Ganymede?  
Would he behave more reliably with the actual Rosalind? How can she tell?... Playing multiply gendered roles enables Rosalind to test, observe, and correct the man she wants to marry; yet at the same time, prevents her from determining whether or not he actually loves her (276).

The solution, of course, is to cut the Gordian knot, that is, to put away all the nonsense and take off her disguise. In 5.2, after Orlando glumly rejects her effort at rekindling their male camaraderie and fictional love sport (5.2.19-48), she knows she has only one move left, and it is the riskiest one: she has to reveal herself and be Rosalind alone. Nor can she be the Rosalind of the first act who sees love as sport. She has to be a Rosalind who can love earnestly.

Happily, she now appears to be ready. The very mechanism that forces her reveal indicates a shift from the Rosalind of the previous four acts, who only sports in love. Her hand is forced by Orlando, or rather by her own distress at seeing Orlando's unhappiness. Earlier Rosalinds took delight in mocking love; the Rosalind of Act 5 seems finally to understand that there are real emotions at stake, but *only* because Orlando refuses to

engage with her as Ganymede. Rosalind's transformation comes not when she dons the disguise, but when she doffs it. In the end, she relinquishes control, telling Orlando, "To you I give myself, for I am yours" (5.4.111, 112).

She tells her father the same thing, the removal of her disguise allowing her at last to reunite with her father. Despite Celia's original suggestion that they escape Frederick's court by "seek[ing] my uncle in the forest of Arden" (1.3.106), Rosalind's disguise and her desire to maintain the charade with Orlando have made it impossible for her to speak to Duke Senior. The one time they meet, she is forced to make a cryptic joke to put off his question about her parentage, a situation that would otherwise have been an ideal moment for her to reveal herself as his daughter.

The removal of her disguise removes a layer of artifice between her self and the others with whom she interacts. *Negotium* has not gotten her what she wants. Her dialogue proves as much; in the final scene, the character holds her tongue because she no longer needs to talk. There is no more work to be done.

### **The Infelicity of Marked Performance**

Scholars have, in recent years, delighted in puzzling over the actor's body: its influence on audience interpretation, what happens when a story is imposed on it, whether or not actions performed by it influence the actor's self and so on. This blurring of lines between the fictional and the real worlds also seems to extend, at times, to the actions themselves. In the world of the theater, there is no such confusion. The

uselessness of Rosalind's disguise is a manifestation of a clear truth for theater professionals: in marked performance, one's actions lack real world efficacy.

One important site for this contention is the mock wedding ceremony of 4.1. Celia's initial refusal to "marry" Orlando and Rosalind-Ganymede is interpreted by Alan Brissenden thus: "she knows, as Rosalind does, that a declaration of an intent to marry by two people before a third constitutes a binding contract" (4.1, n116). In this interpretation, Celia must imagine that the Ganymede disguise makes no difference and that the declarations would be binding in the "real world" (the world in which they are not disguised). There are, however, many other ways to interpret Celia's stalling. It is equally likely, for example, that she is jealous of her cousin and wants to keep her to herself for the time being; or that she is annoyed that Rosalind seems to be toying with Orlando; or that she finds the act too impulsive (this moment occurs before she herself has fallen impulsively in love with Oliver); or that she finds the whole proceeding unfeminine. All of these possibilities are interesting and thoroughly playable. There is no need to imagine that Celia is worried about the legalities of this mock ceremony.

Beyond that, I would argue that the playwright is giving us yet another failed attempt by Rosalind to pin down Orlando's feelings with certainty. Like DiGangi's observations, noted above, that Rosalind's disguise only raises uncertainty about Orlando's true feelings, I would suggest that she is left with a similar set of uncertainties after the ceremony: Whom does Orlando think he has married -- Rosalind? Ganymede? some imaginary version of Rosalind? no one? Does his willingness to take part in a mock ceremony suggest an equal willingness to take part in a real one? Or does he just like to

play? It would seem the only real effect that Rosalind can hope to get out of this ceremony is the chance of saying the words ‘Orlando,’ ‘my’ and ‘husband’ in one sentence and of hearing Orlando do as much for Rosalind.

Finally, if the ceremony had any efficacy, there would be no more reason for Rosalind to conceal her identity, assuming her main goal is Orlando. She could simply reveal herself, change her clothes and carry on being Orlando’s wife. There would also be no need for another wedding at the end of the play.

What the playwright is demonstrating, however, is his understanding of the inefficacy of the actions undertaken during marked performance. For theater professionals, actions onstage do not translate into real world events. The actress who plays Juliet does not imagine she has actually married the actor playing Romeo at the end of the second act, no more than she imagines she is actually dead at the end of the play. Her actions are marked off by being in the theater and part of a production. So although she performs the actions of joining hands with Romeo and professes her love to him, she is able to leave the theater that night to rejoin her real-life partner without committing bigamy. The utterances that these characters perform are what J.L. Austin referred to as *infelicities* (14), meaning that they carry no efficacy because they fail to meet the requirement of meaning what is said and then behaving according to the utterance thereafter (requirements  $T^1$  and  $T^2$ ).<sup>10</sup> Such infelicities are *de rigueur* in the theater. As such, *As You Like It*’s mock ceremony does not trouble the theater practitioner. Rosalind’s disguise makes the ceremony infelicitous. That is why within the world of the play, the

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<sup>10</sup> See J.L. Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words*, J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, eds. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975 (pp. 14-24).



playwright gives no indication that anyone considers Rosalind-Ganymede and Orlando actually married.

To return to my original argument, then, such puzzlement within modern scholarship is the result of the collapsing of marked and mundane performance. It is the result of confusing the structured, fictional world of the play with the structuring of the real world as a series of games to be played. Greenblatt is perhaps the father of this blurring in literary studies, but these ideas find voice in the work not only of Clifford Geertz, mentioned above, but also Alfred Schutz and Michel de Certeau. What Greenblatt calls “improvisation,” Schutz calls “recipe knowledge,” that is, the stringing together of information, experience and conjecture in a patchwork in order to negotiate social structures (Carlson 44). For de Certeau, such stringing together becomes more deliberate; individuals deploy “‘tactics,’ the specific instances of behavior improvised by individuals according to the perceived demands of the moment and unknowable in advance” (45).

The concept of “tactics” is particularly interesting in this conversation because it is also the word used in modern theater circles to describe the active part of an actor’s work onstage, the other part being “objectives.” Based on Constantin Stanislavski’s ideas in *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *objectives* are what the character wants while *tactics* are the specific ways he or she goes about getting it. Tactics are always written in actable verbs. So if, for example, a character’s objective is, “I want him to give me the money,” a series of tactics, or ways of going about getting the money, might include “to threaten,” “to flirt” or “to convince.” The actor assigns these tactics based on what it seems the character is trying to do in a given set of exchanges and changes tactics when one starts

to fail, either because the script requires it, or, in an improvisation, because the actor senses from his or her scene partner that the tactic is not working.

This changing of tactics in improvisation brings us back to de Certeau and Greenblatt, both of whom understand tactics in everyday life as a method of improvisation. Thus tactics are the lynchpin that joins the theater to performance theory and social constructivism. Tactics are also the building blocks of strategy, larger systems created to help one achieve stated objectives.

To return to my initial anecdote, then, why would an actor, like Jon Stewart, object to having a life strategy, such as the one laid out in Chris Matthews' book? Any trained actor certainly knows that scripts are broken down into tactics, which, when strung together into a strategy, help the character achieve his or her objective. Perhaps a quick search through Google, Amazon or a library catalog holds the answer. A search for the terms "objectives and tactics" in Google, for instance, gives a first entry about acting theory followed by a series of websites devoted to marketing.<sup>11</sup> Searches among books, both commercial and academic, produce results in business and organizational development<sup>12</sup> as well as military and terrorist operations.<sup>13</sup> Stewart's objection thus begins to make more sense. To run one's life like a military operation or a marketing

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<sup>11</sup> Specifically, "The Ultimate Threesome: Objectives, Strategies and Tactics" (<http://www.cult-branding.com/article/ultimate-threesome.html>); MarketingProfs Daily Fix blog, "Objectives, Strategies, Tactics. (In that Order)" (<http://www.mpdailyfix.com/objectives-strategy-tactics-in-that-order/>); Church of the Customer blog, "Objectives, goals, strategies and tactics" (<http://www.churchofcustomer.com/2009/12/objectives-goals-strategies-tactics.html>). Accessed 5/17/11.

<sup>12</sup> Titles include "Strategic Planning for the Small Business: Situations, Weapons, Objectives and Tactics"; "The 36 Stratagems for Business"; and "Three basic principles of success." Accessed 5/17/11.

<sup>13</sup> Titles include "The Viet Cong in Saigon: tactics and objectives during the Tet offensive"; "The PLO: an Analysis of Objectives and Tactics"; "Stormtroop Tactics: Innovations in the German Army." Accessed 5/17/11.

scheme seems grotesque. Stewart is in the line of those theater professionals, which includes Shakespeare, who understand that it is indeed possible to strategize one's personal interactions, but also that to do so is a deeply unsatisfying way for human beings to interact.

More recently, in the theater, there has even been some resistance to using Stanislavski-inspired objectives and tactics. David Mamet, admittedly an iconoclast, argues that Stanislavski's work was the contribution of a "dilettante" who could afford to spin wild theories about acting instead of a working actor whose only job was to earn a living by telling a playwright's story clearly to a paying audience (8-16). His distaste for Stanislavski's System and especially the American "Method" rests in part on the belief that it is a way of denying the real truth of the scene, a way for the actor to insulate him- or herself from actual feeling by controlling every moment of his or her reactions. Mamet advises that actors should throw away the security blanket of a strategic system of objectives and tactics and risk being caught up in whatever emotion is driving him or her, even if it seems contradictory to the play. He argues that the split second that actors take getting ready for a scene or taking a breath before starting to speak is "where the scene went."

If the actor had simply opened his mouth on cue and spoken *even though* he felt uncertain, the audience would have been treated to the truth of the moment, to a lovely, unexpected, unforeseeable beautiful exchange between the two people onstage. They would in effect have witnessed the true lost art of the actor (21, emphasis his).

I would argue that this lost art Mamet speaks of was very real at the start of the profession in Renaissance England.

I would further argue that Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is an indication of this theatrical value. Rosalind's attempt to control her interactions with Orlando render them essentially empty. They are devoid of the "unexpected, unforeseeable beautiful exchange" that can happen between two people because they are the result of heavy strategizing by her. Like the modern actor's use of objectives and tactics, it is an attempt to deal with the great discomfort of uncertainty. Her disguise is simply the manifestation of that strategy. Taking off the disguise is the manifestation of her willingness to have a beautiful, sincere exchange. Indeed, it is the only way that such exchanges can happen. That is what theater people know is possible when one refuses to manage one's outward show, and it is what politicians and their Renaissance counterparts, courtiers, misunderstand about performance.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **MODERATION**

Hamlet's advice to the players, as the speech at 3.2.1-47 is known, seems to suggest a kinship between Renaissance acting and the advice found in courtesy literature on the virtue of "moderation" -- word and action fitting together perfectly as well as "a temperance" that may give "smoothness" to speech and gesture. There is indeed a close connection between what Hamlet says and what courtesy writers advise, a connection that is irresistible to scholars who want to know what Renaissance acting was actually like. Detailed descriptions of what actors did are few and far between, but courtesy literature abounds with advice about how to deliver rhetorical figures and what to do with your hands, among other things. Thus if courtesy books, particularly the extensive rhetorical handbooks of the period, record what actors were doing, then we have a very good indication indeed of what Renaissance acting was like. Add to that temptation the fact that this acting advice seems to come from Shakespeare through his great character Hamlet, and it would seem to have a rare imprimatur from one of the greatest theater professionals of the period. This last aspect is perhaps even more compelling than it initially appears. Shakespeare gives us so little to go on in terms of his own biography and beliefs -- no notes, no scandals, no prison sentences, no love letters, no sermons -- that we are forced to mine his plays for nuggets of theatrical gold from the master. In looking closely at the speech, however, it becomes clear that, as acting advice it is

extremely deficient. Rather, I would suggest that Hamlet's advice to the players is both a moment of characterization and part of a larger critique of advice-giving that runs throughout the play. Moreover, there are better sources for helping us determine what Renaissance acting was really like, many of which suggest that it was anything but moderate.

### **Hamlet's Advice to the Players and the Virtue of Moderation**

Hamlet's advice to the players seems sound. Although the speech is much longer than what I have reproduced below, the salient or at least useful part for the actor is:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue...Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness...Nor be too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature.

He warns the player that his job is to work somewhere in the middle of passion, taking care to maintain a certain "modesty," sometimes a byword for moderation in the period.

Similarly formulated advice appears in Henry Peacham's *The Complete Gentleman* (1622):

I call with Tully that a good and eloquent style of speaking "where there is a judicious fitting of choice words, apt and grave sentences, unto matter

well disposed, the same being uttered with a comely moderation of the voice, countenance, and gesture” (54).

Peacham’s reference to having derived these principles from Cicero suggests a respectable pedigree for the advice and implies that it is somehow timeless.<sup>1</sup>

Peacham had made a similar rhetorical move earlier in *The Complete Gentleman* when he laments the lack of moderation exercised by English gentlemen, or rather he quotes another man’s lamentation of it:

“Look upon your nobility and gentry nowadays,” saith a wise and grave historian, “and you shall see them bred as if they were made for no other end than pastime and idleness. They observe moderation neither in talk nor apparel; good men and such as are learned are not admitted amongst them; the affairs of their estates they impose on others” (43).

The wise and grave historian whom Peacham quotes is Philippe de Commines, a French diplomat whose *Memoires* were published in 1524 but had been written in 1498.<sup>2</sup>

Peacham neglects to point out that Commines’ opinion was not only from the perspective of a French diplomat with limited contact with the English through his appointment in Calais (at the time, English land) but also that the “nowadays” to which he refers was over 100 years prior to Peacham’s own, perhaps because he expected his audience to take it in the same way as they would a reference to Cicero, as evidence of a certain

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero’s *De Oratore* was a central text for Renaissance rhetoricians. It was very similar to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, a text of which Cicero was aware since he references it in *De Oratore* (II.xxvi. 152, II.xxxviii. 160). See *Cicero: De Oratore*, E.W. Sutton, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959 and *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, George A Kennedy, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> See the Chapter 4, n7 from *The Complete Gentleman, The Truth of Our Times, and The Art of Living in London by Henry Peacham*. Ed. Virgil B. Heltzel. Folger Shakespeare Library Documents of Tudor and Stuart Civilization. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962.

universality of thought on the subject of moderation. In any case, Peacham's use of Commynes' observations to take up the question of moderation in English gentry illustrates the central place that moderation held in a gentleman's character, even throughout the rapidly changing 16th century.

What exactly did it mean to possess moderation? The answer to this question is more complex than it appears at first. The terms *moderation* and *moderate* in the Renaissance were part of a matrix of meaning which included the terms *temperance*, *modesty*, *honesty*, *frugality*, *sobriety* and, on occasion, *comeliness*.<sup>3</sup> For example, Thomas Thomas' definition of *frugalitas* (frugality) from his 1587 *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* reads: "Moderation of liuing, sober rule, thriftines, frugalitie, good and honest behauour."<sup>4</sup> Thomas' emphasis on the morality of the terms within this matrix is typical; moderation helped one to live within the bounds of sobriety, goodness and honesty, and the term *moderate* in the English Renaissance is never free of that connection to morality.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the practice of moderation protected one from concupiscence or other unbridled passions of body or mind.<sup>6</sup> Peacham tells his readers that it is temperance used "as a bridle" that allows men to "curb and break our rank and

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Wilson's *A Christian Dictionary* (1612) particularly defines *comlines* (sic) as "That which hath in it grauity and modesty, and stirreth vppe to godlinesse." Whereas we tend to think of comely as meaning "attractive," early modern dictionaries tend to attach the idea of "fitness" or "appropriateness" to it, such that something is attractive because it is fitting.

<sup>4</sup> Similar definitions of *frugalitas* or *frugality* appear in the *Dictionary of Sir Thomas Elyot* (1538) and Richard Huleot's *Abecedarium Anglico Latinum* (1552).

<sup>5</sup> Courtesy books often made reference to what the Catholic Church had long referred to as the "cardinal virtues" -- temperance, fortitude, justice, prudence. According to St. Augustine, all four of these virtues were the manifestations of "four forms of love" and temperance he defined as "love giving itself entirely to that which is loved" (*Basic Writings* 331). Augustine himself had derived these ideals from Greek philosophy (Rickaby).

<sup>6</sup> John Baret's *An Alveary or Triple Dictionary, in English, Latin, and French* (1574) defines *unbridled* as "rash, fierce: without moderation or measure."



unruly passions” and moderation that would “recall us from our lusts,” thus ensuring that one stayed within the grace of God (144-5).

John C. Bean suggests that this moralistic quality came to the conduct writers of the late 16th - early 17th century through Christian humanists like Erasmus and Thomas More: "Of all their private virtues, they were fondest, perhaps, of temperance...One readily sees the appeal of temperance to the classical mind. Within the context of temperance man is self-sufficient and achieves perfection through the power of reason" (67). In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests what a temperate man should be like: excessive in no desires nor in too much pain should they be denied (3.11.1118<sup>b</sup>-1119<sup>a</sup>). This section of Aristotle's text has a constant undercurrent of judgment against the "self-indulgent" who are excessive in their desires (specifically for food and drink) and thus enslaved to their passions. As Bean suggests, Aristotle is entirely reliant on reason to convince his audience, arguing that desire causes pain and it is absurd to be pained for pleasure. The philosopher also insists that the temperate man would not want more than is moderate or within his means, again a rational if not entirely realistic ideal. But for a culture like that of Renaissance England, in the midst of rapid change yet still deeply invested in the solidity that hierarchy provides, a call for moderation must have felt necessary.

Such calls were supported by the Galenic theory of the humours which contended that a build-up of humoral fluids around the heart and lungs resulted from the over-

indulgence of passions and could have catastrophic physical repercussions.<sup>7</sup> For Renaissance rhetoricians, there was a very close relationship between gesticulation and bodily humours. For example, if one became sad, a fluid would build up near the heart and would need to be expelled through a series of physical gesture such as “tears, sighs, and hand-wringing” (Roach 38). However, the relationship seemed to work in the other direction as well, such that the over-indulgence of a gesture was sometimes an outward indication of inward emotion and also sometimes an *exacerbation* of such emotion. Thus one’s humours could be kept in balance by physical moderation. Moderation, therefore, became a key in both physical and spiritual health. In conduct literature, this advice comes down to prohibiting anything too bold or too cautious, too passionate or too tame; in short, it comes down to advocating moderation.

Courtesy writers, then, were able to utilize a rather natural slippage between the virtue of moderation (temperance, prudence) and its outward manifestations in speech and action. Thomas Elyot’s *The Book named the Governour* (1531) offers a good example of this approach.<sup>8</sup> He defined moderation in *The Governour* as “the limits and bounds which honesty hath appointed in speaking and doing,” going on to illustrate moderation thus: “like as in running passing the goal is accounted but rashness, so running half way is reproved for slowness.” Like Peacham’s reference to unbridled passions, Elyot’s metaphor involves the way one handled his horse, in this case when engaged in the

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<sup>7</sup> One text that connects Galenic philosophy, rhetoric and acting was Thomas Wright’s *The Passions of the Minde*. 1604. Reprint: Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971. Joseph Roach offers a fascinating analysis of the way Renaissance rhetorical texts and acting are connected in *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1993, (pp. 23-57).

<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact the he uses temperance and moderation interchangeably in his *Dictionary* (1538) (he defines *moderatio* as “moderation, temperance”), Elyot also wrote of moderation as “a species of temperance” (*Governour* 210).

quintain or *pavo*, a medieval game of combat which involved “an object, usually a shield, fixed to the top of the pole at which the horseman aimed his lance” (Barker 150), a feat we know more colloquially as “tilting at the ring.”<sup>9</sup> It was possible to be both too fast or too slow; success lay in the moderate place, the place in the middle.

Elyot further illustrates moderation by retelling a story about Plutarch. He recalls that Plutarch was beating a servant for a “grievous offense” when the servant pointed out to him that this beating did not seem to comport with his philosophy on reproving wrath.

Unto whom Plutarch without any change of countenance answered in this form. “Thou embraidst me causelessly with wrath and impatience, but I pray thee what perceivest thou in me that I am angry or out of patience? I suppose (except I be much deceived) thou seest me not stare with mine eyes, or my mouth imposed, or the colour of my face changed, or any other deformity in my person or gesture, or that my words be swift or my voice be louder than modesty requireth, or that I am unstable in my gesture or motion, which be the signs and evident tokens of wrath and impatience” (212).

For Elyot this story encapsulates the ideal of moderation: control of one’s gesturing and speaking such that one is not being ruled by one’s passions (here, wrath and impatience).

Plutarch’s face is not distorted, and he maintains an even speed and tone of voice. Elyot even tells us that he stops in the middle of the beating to move to an intellectual

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<sup>9</sup> Controlled horsemanship was an essential part of chivalric ideal, especially as concerned combat (see Juliet Barker, *The Tournament in England, 1100-1400*. Wolfboro, NH: Boydell Press, 1986). Recurring horse metaphors to describe the passions suggest the affinity Renaissance writers had with chivalric ideals. This affinity may suggest that there was not as strong a break between medieval and Renaissance codes of conduct as the current scholarly narrative suggests.

discussion “without any change of countenance.” The implication is that to do otherwise -- to betray a face contorted with anger or fear, or to shout or speak quickly -- was to violate the virtue of moderation.

Hamlet’s advice to the players most certainly falls within this tradition, and there is no denying that it is delightfully fun, in part because the immoderate overacting of players is roundly criticized. To be sure, there are moments that seem as if they must be in the voice of the playwright. When he speaks of the self-aggrandizing behavior of clowns who

...set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered.

That’s villainous and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it...

it is tempting to imagine, as James Shapiro has suggested, that this is a dig at the clown Will Kemp who had recently left Shakespeare’s company on somewhat unfriendly terms (Shapiro 39-42). Similarly, when Hamlet speaks so eloquently of the purpose of acting:

...whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold a mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of that time his form and pressure...

it is difficult not to read the line as an homage to the craft to which Shakespeare devoted his talents. It is worth noting, however, that these lines are reminiscent of Thomas Elyot’s from *The Book named the Governor*, “First comedies...they be undoubtedly a picture, or as it were a mirror of man’s life” (47), and may be meant to reinforce the idea, which I

will argue below, that Hamlet has been given a courtly education that ultimately paralyzes him.

Yet as general acting advice or even a statement of Shakespeare's views, Hamlet's speech leaves much to be desired. In the first place, it is uncharacteristically insulting for Shakespeare, not just to overactors but to audience as well (so much so that one wonders if the sharper-tongued Ben Jonson might have inspired it). After giving the "trippingly on the tongue" direction, Hamlet launches into his first attack:

O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise.

The line starts off as if to insult only a certain kind of actor, by taking up the part of the poor, suffering groundlings, but then the attack spills onto the groundlings themselves. In the next set of lines, Hamlet manages to come off as a snob and a critic:

Now this be overdone or come tardy off, though it makes the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of (the) which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theater of others. O, there be players that I have seen play and heard others (praise) (and that highly), not to speak it profanely, that neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

Here, Hamlet seems to suggest that one intelligent but judging audience member is better than a theater of ones who are interested in enjoying themselves. It is unlikely that any theater company could stay afloat with such audiences. The fact that Hamlet also find himself in the minority of those who dislike certain bellowing actors also suggests that he might be overly censorious.

The critique of actors and audience in this way is unusual for Shakespeare. In none of Shakespeare's plays do we see players groveling. Even in his epilogues, Shakespeare avoids the obsequies of his contemporary playwrights. In *As You Like It*, for example, Rosalind draws specific attention to her refusal to beg for applause since she is "not furnished like a beggar" (9). Pointing to the epilogue written by Shakespeare for a court performance of *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth*, James Shapiro suggests that Shakespeare saw players and playgoers as "bound in a partnership" and not bound by conventions of "deference and hierarchy" (34, 36). The Player's terse replies to Hamlet, especially when compared with the verbose ones of eager-to-please sycophant Osric from later in the play, support Shapiro's claim and, importantly for this discussion, suggest that the advice to the players is a moment of characterization and not metatheatrical commentary. In other words, we are to take this speech as a way of understanding what Hamlet thinks and who he is. What we have are Hamlet's, not Shakespeare's, views.

My claim is bolstered, I think, if one one looks more closely at what Hamlet is actually advising the players to do. His advice is so contradictory as to be almost useless. One may read the speech in the following manner. First, Hamlet tells the players to speak and act in a temperate and moderate fashion:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.

Having spent about a minute (quite a bit of stage time) on his dislike of robust players and receiving the assurance of the Player that no such acting will be used on his own lines, Hamlet then proceeds to contradict himself, telling the player not to be “too tame.” He releases the player to his own “discretion” and then continues on for another minute, giving his own detailed analysis of what playing is and what it should do. In the end, though, Hamlet’s advice amounts to this: don’t overact, but don’t underact either; trust yourself, but do what I tell you. If the players attempt to follow it, they will find themselves, like Hamlet, unable to act.<sup>10</sup>

It makes perfect sense that Hamlet, whose problem is that he cannot decide how best to act, would give advice that suggests one should not commit himself over-much to any one action. Hamlet’s advice, balanced as it is between extremes, is perhaps the inevitable result of having been trained into the behavioral norms represented in conduct books mentioned above, of which moderation formed such an important part. The play is not, as the 1948 Lawrence Olivier film version infamously intones, the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind. It is the tragedy of a man whose mind was made up for

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<sup>10</sup> A 2010 RSC production of *Hamlet* starring David Tennant shows the players fundamentally ignoring Hamlet. The player politely placates the amateur aristocrat with non-committal replies as the other players snicker in the background.

him long before the start of the play, either by birth or education, such that moderate behavior is his naturalized condition. Ophelia tells us that Hamlet possesses the qualities of the courtier and further characterizes him as the “glass of fashion and the mold of form / Th’ observed of all observers” (3.1.167-8). He is not simply a noble figure at court, but the *most* noble one, the one to whom all eyes turn and on whom all others base their own behavior.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, W.B. Drayton Henderson, in his introduction to Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, analyzes Hamlet’s character as being a direct manifestation of the ideal courtier; from his puns and jests to his customary suits of black, Henderson argues, he is exactly the model Castiglione has drawn (xiv-xv).

The intersection of interpretations like Henderson’s with Hamlet’s advice to the players is a contributing factor to the tendency of scholars to see plays as reflectors of conduct literature. After all, if Shakespeare has drawn his main character from Castiglione’s book, then a stronger argument can be made that theater people paid a considerable amount of deferential attention to courtesy literature. However, *Hamlet* is not so much deferring to the wisdom of courtesy literature as offering a meditation on advice-giving, of which Hamlet’s advice to the players forms a part. Speeches meant to correct behavior abound: Laertes to Ophelia regarding Hamlet, Polonius to Ophelia regarding Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude to Hamlet regarding his mourning for his father, and Hamlet to Gertrude regarding her “incestuous” relationship with Claudius.

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<sup>11</sup> Although it was common for Renaissance courtesy books to focus attention on the examples of ancient figures (as Castiglione does with Caesar and Alexander pp. 69-70) or other important figures (as Della Casa does with a well-known bishop named Giovanni Matteo Gibretti pp 27-9), nobility seemed to have been considered the *de facto* model of behavior, as Ophelia implies here. Courtesy books were ostensibly directed at training nobility; Erasmus’ *De civilitate morum puerilium*, for example, is dedicated to the noble young man he teaches. Thomas Elyot’s *Book Named the Governor* further argues that “by the noble example of their lives, and the fruit thereof coming, the public weal that shall happen to be under their governance, shall not fail to be accounted happy” (95).



Much of this advice has deleterious effects. For example, Ophelia's rejection of Hamlet, based on her brother's and father's advice, only confirms to Hamlet that women are unfaithful by nature and contributes to his anger at his mother and his descent into "madness." Similarly, Claudius and Gertrude's admonition to Hamlet to mourn more moderately fails to take into account how deeply disturbed Hamlet is by the events of the past two months. Their advice falls on deaf ears because it fails to recognize the ways in which the individual, in this case Hamlet, may not adhere to behavioral norms. Thus the play seems to be telling us that one should view these kinds of pat behavioral codes with suspicion.

Perhaps the most famous advice speech in the play, and one that should certainly be investigated with suspicion, is Polonius' to Laertes, which is often quoted out of context as a pattern for a successful life.

Give thy thoughts no tongue,  
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.  
Be thou familiar but by no means vulgar.  
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel,  
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment  
Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage. Beware  
Of entrance to a quarrel, but, being in,  
Bear 't that th' opposed may beware of thee.  
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice.

Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.  
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not expressed in fancy (rich, not gaudy),  
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,  
And they in France of the best rank and station  
(Are) of a most select and generous chief in that.  
Neither a borrower nor a lender (be,)  
For (loan) oft loses both itself and friend,  
And borrowing (dulls) the edge of husbandry.  
This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day  
Thou canst not then be false to any man (1.3.65-87).

Although this may be the most famous formulation of these ideas now, they were by no means original to Polonius. Most conduct books contain these admonitions on choosing friends correctly, dressing with moderation, and holding on to one's money.<sup>12</sup> Indeed John Lyly's very popular *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) contains a speech very similar to Polonius' and predates it by at least twenty-two years.

In *Euphues*, Eubulus, a kindly old man and stranger to the eponymous hero of the book, laments that Euphues, who seems to have so much promise, also seems so content to waste it on learning the exercise of wit and not the value of wisdom. Deciding that his

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<sup>12</sup> Examples can be found in the books under discussion here, among others. Dressing moderately: *The Complete Gentleman* by Henry Peacham (Hetzel 150). Choosing friends: *Book named the Governour* Book II, Chapter XIV; *The Complete Gentleman* (Hetzel 50-1, 146). Holding onto money: *The Complete Gentleman* (Hetzel 146); *The Art of Living in London* by Henry Peacham (Hetzel 245);

education must have been neglected, Eubulus detains Euphues one day in the street to give him this advice:

Descend into thine own conscience and consider with thyself the great difference between staring and stark blind, wit and wisdom, love and lust. Be merry but with modesty, be sober but not too sullen, be valiant but not too venturous. Let thy attire be comely but not costly, thy diet wholesome but not excessive. Use pastime as the word importeth - to pass the time in honest recreation. Mistrust no man without cause, neither be thou credulous without proof. Be not light to follow every man's opinion, nor obstinate to stand in thine own conceit. Serve God, love God, fear God, and God will so bless thee as either heart can wish or thy friends desire. And so I end my counsel, beseeching thee to begin to follow it (94).

The parallels between Eubulus' and Polonius' speeches are fairly self-evident. Eubulus' "be valiant but not too venturous" becomes Polonius' "Beware / Of entrance to a quarrel, but, being in, / Bear 't that th' opposed may beware of thee." Eubulus' "Let thy attire be comely but not costly" becomes Polonius' "Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, / But not expressed in fancy (rich, not gaudy)." Eubulus' "Mistrust no man without cause, neither be thou credulous without proof" becomes Polonius' "Give every man they ear, but few thy voice. / Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment."

These comparisons, though making the similarities of the speeches apparent, also reveal differences of emphasis. Eubulus emphasizes the necessity for valor by citing it first and only qualifying it with restraint from too "venturous" behavior, while Polonius

advises restraint unless provoked, after which Laertes should exercise not simply valor but intimidation. Eubulus advises that clothes be attractive but not costly while costliness is the measure by which Polonius first asks Laertes' to consider his clothing and is only secondarily interested in what they actually look like (that is, not gaudy).

These slight changes from Lyly's 1578 text to Shakespeare's 1600 play indicate a social change which it is worth considering. While overall both speeches seem to be offering useful and moral admonitions, Polonius' advice is just a shade more cynical and self-interested than Eubulus'. One of the reasons that Eubulus tells the reader that he feels the need to intervene in Euphues' behavior is because he knows that "so rare a wit would in time either breed an intolerable trouble, or bring an incomparable treasure to the commonweal" (91). Although himself in the employ of the state, Polonius expresses no such concern for the commonweal. Moreover, Eubulus tells Euphues, "Serve God, love God, fear God, and God will so bless thee as either heart can wish or thy friends desire" while Polonius' parting admonition to Laertes is "This above all: to thine own self be true, / And it must follow, as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man." We see a shift here from the centrality of God to the centrality of self.

Although the idea of the "self" is an admittedly difficult concept in early modern studies, Terry Sherwood argues in his book *The Self in Early-Modern Literature* (2007) that "responsible contribution to common good stabilized and sustained the self" (8) and that the "homilies of obedience and disobedience which were intently political in their orientation, skew the spirituality of obedience toward hard-edged worldly applications" (30). Polonius' advice to Laertes is an example of such hard-edged worldly

applications. His admonitions are firmly rooted in the realities of commerce and social maneuvering, for example, managing money both to entertain friends and to dress well which will then impress others. Conversely, Eubulus' counsel begins in conscience and returns over and over again to the exercise of more standard Christian virtues - sobriety, valor, wholesomeness, honesty, trust. So while these two old men appear to be passing down the same time-tested wisdom, their almost imperceptible differences in emphasis reveal Polonius' advice as symptomatic of a trend toward the erasure of older virtues.

What I want to suggest, then, is that *Hamlet* is a play deeply concerned with the perils of conventional social conduct, especially as it was changing during this period, a change that is exemplified by the difference that the twenty years between *Euphues* and *Hamlet* has on advice to young men. Hamlet's advice to the players is part of the larger examination of these behavioral norms rather than some sort of rubric for Elizabethan acting. Instead, *Hamlet* is a tragedy of manners wherein Hamlet's action is defined and limited by principles promulgated by conduct books.

That this should be the case for the character Hamlet, however, is no reason to suggest that actors shared the same principles or held them in equal regard. If anything, it suggests that Hamlet's manners are under as much scrutiny as Claudius' or anyone else's in this play. If that is the case, then it seems reasonable to assume that the theater was offering another understanding of the world, and therefore we can set aside the idea that actors adhered strictly or even consciously to gestures and rhetorical conceits found in conduct books. In other words, I want to suggest that any such coherence between what actors did and what these manuals suggested was more incidental than conscious. Setting

aside this idea leaves us free to consider what was actually important to actors and what motivated them; it further helps to illuminate the values and codes of conduct that were emerging in the theater industry.

### **Immoderate Actors**

The desire to use Hamlet's advice to the players as an indication of what actors did is an attempt to answer a persistent, vexing and endlessly intriguing question: what was Renaissance acting really like? Hamlet's advice seems to answer that question by connecting what players should do with what is laid out with some clarity by conduct books. Thus one has only to consult, for example, Bulwer's *Chirologia* and *Chironomia*<sup>13</sup> to have an understanding of what gestures actors might have made or Wilson's *Art of Rhetoric* to see how the rhetorical structure of the text encouraged specific interpretations. As I have tried to suggest above, however, such a one-to-one connection is unsatisfying upon close examination. It can, in addition, lead to a host of other assumptions about what acting is, what actors do and what motivates them.

That is not to say that gestural and rhetorical manuals are not useful in this conversation or might not, in fact, contain the very gestures and delivery choices that Renaissance actors made. It is very likely that they do, and scholars like B.L. Joseph and Joseph Roach have made convincing arguments that these texts were highly influential in society at large and in the theater more specifically. However, these texts did not so much

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<sup>13</sup> John Bulwer was a physician who concentrated his life's work on the idea of the body and communication, particularly with regard to gesture. His two gestural manuals, *Chirologia* and *Chironomia*, formed the basis for an early sign language. See Bulwer, John. *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand and Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*. Ed. James W. Cleary. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974.

create and give meaning to gestures or rhetorical moves as record the ones that were in general use. It is only logical to assume that players would also have used such gestures and rhetorical moves since they were part of the general population and shared social and educational norms with the rest of society.

Where recourse to these texts becomes problematic is in the assumption that the correlation shown between these texts and the theater is the result of causation, that the texts occasioned the acting choices rather than simply shared elements or that actors and rhetoricians were governed by the same set of motivations. Difficulty also arises because much of the evidence that we have from the Renaissance was recorded by men who would have been well versed in conduct literature, and these men noticed and recorded from the theater what was most readily apparent to their tastes; their reactions were passed down and then reinforced by modern scholars as truthful observations rather than interpretations.

For example, Joseph Roach interprets the observations of a playgoer who saw a 1610 performance of *Othello* in Oxford as evidence that the actor and classical rhetorician Quintilian used the same techniques. Roach first quotes the playgoer:

“Indeed, Desdemona, killed by her husband, in her death moved us especially when, as she lay in her bed, her face alone implores the pity of the audience.” It seems the boy actor was opened up, facing his audience, to maximize the visual effect of his *pathos* - and, like Quintilian, he kept at least one eye on the judge (46, emphasis his).

No doubt the deathlike stare of the boy actor did rouse the pity of the audience and was done for such effect, but it is too big a leap to assume that what the actor was doing was similar to what Quintilian was doing when he “kept at least one eye on the judge” during an oration. For one thing, there is no evidence that the boy actor adjusted his stare in response to the audience’s reaction; indeed to do so would have destroyed the effect. Unlike Quintilian, the boy actor’s primary responsibility was to play the truth of the moment (Desdemona is dead) and not to attempt to draw sympathy from the audience. While the playgoer believes that what he is responding to is the boy actor’s imploring look, he is mistaken. The boy actor is simply playing his part truthfully, and the playgoer is reacting to the fine rendering of a well-written play.

There is a well-known anecdote in the theater on the necessity of playing the truth of the moment which has been variously attributed to the Lunts and other acting duos. Katie Goodman attributes it to Abbott and Costello in her book *Improvisation of the Spirit*:

[O]ne night Costello (from Abbott and) came running out on stage genuinely thirsty and asked for a glass of water before he could start the scene. The audience laughed. The next night he decided to work it into the scene and came running out asking for a glass of water, and no one laughed. He was confounded why it didn't work, and Abbott said, “Last night you asked for a glass of water. Tonight you asked for a laugh” (209).

Like so many tales of life upon the wicked stage, it does not matter who the characters in the story are, or even if it ever happened, because it demonstrates a fundamental



theatrical truth: the only way to move your audience is to do what the script asks you to do as truthfully as possible, rather than trying to manipulate the audience's emotions by what David Mamet scornfully calls "helping the play" (*True and False* 64-6). In the case of the boy actor playing Desdemona, any pathos he generates is the incidental result of his doing what is required of him in an effective staging of a well-written play.<sup>14</sup> In this case, it is not imploring the audience's pity, but playing a dead woman, which incidentally rouses the audience's pity.

This confusion becomes more complex when considering star actors like Richard Burbage, partially because his acting probably did adhere more closely to the suggestions of rhetorical manuals for various reasons. Burbage, the lead actor in Shakespeare's companies, was considered one of the best that the Elizabethan stage had to offer. B.L. Joseph suggests that his reputation rested in the fact that his "'whole function' -- voice, face, attitude, gesture -- expresses what he feels" (3). Joseph calls this kind of acting "being identified," that is, identical with the character being played and thus what the actor Burbage was feeling would be identical with what the character was feeling.<sup>15</sup> Burbage's elegist seems to support the claim:

Oft have I seen him leap into the grave,  
Suiting the person which he seem'd to have  
Of a sad lover with so true an eye,  
That there I would have sworn he meant to die (qtd in Joseph 3).

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<sup>14</sup> I emphasize that the play must be "well-written" because a badly written play does need some "help" from the actors to render it good.

<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps important and at least interesting to note that Joseph was writing in 1964, when Method acting was at the height of its influence. My concluding chapter offers a longer discussion of Method.

Burbage's ability to "suit the person" down to the very look in his eye is, for Joseph, evidence that Burbage became one with his character and that his technique for doing so was like the orator's who followed Cicero's advice to fit judicious words to comely and moderate action. If that is the case, it follows that examining rhetorical handbooks would indeed be a good way to determine how Burbage achieved his success in impersonation and what exactly he was doing when he acted.

This idea continues to make sense when we consider that Burbage's elegist also remembers him for playing "young Hamlet, old Hieronymo. / King Lear, the griev'd Moor and more besides." In playing these kinds of lead parts, it is likely that Burbage did employ the techniques advocated in conduct books since they would have been appropriate to his characters, all of whom could be considered heroic leads. Moreover, most of these characters are nobles and as such would have had the kind of courtly manners that the education found in conduct books codifies. Thus recourse to the kinds of behaviors advocated by conduct books and rhetorical manuals would have been appropriate. The assumption that follows, then, is that Burbage's effectiveness *derives* from adherence to rules of rhetorical decorum. In fact, it is the other way around. Burbage's adherence to playing the character truthfully leads him to seek out the rhetorical decorum appropriate to his character and readily found in manuals.

The second part of his elegy reveals a seldom-discussed dynamic within the theater that also helped solidify Burbage's performances as effective. It reads:

Oft have I seen him play this part in jest,  
So lively that spectators and the rest

Of his sad crew, whilst he but seem'd to bleed,  
Amaz'd, thought even then he died indeed.

Again for Joseph, this is simply more evidence that Burbage was so identified with his character that those watching him believed him to be the character indeed. But the elegy also reveals the vital role that Burbage's fellow actors ("the rest of his sad crew") played in his success. The elegist implies that Burbage's acting was so good that even his fellow actors were swept away, much like audience members. It is more likely, however, that they were *also* acting and that it was their suspension of disbelief, their fine acting, that helped the audience to be swept away by Burbage's feigned death.

An actor like Burbage who played lead parts has something of an easier time being recognized as "great" than the rest of his sad crew, what we might today call character actors and journeyman actors. In the first place, as a lead, Burbage would have had a tremendous amount of stage time, allowing him to make a solid impression on the audience. In addition, the parts he played allowed him to portray social perfection. When Burbage plays Hamlet, he is immediately recognized by the audience as "the glass of fashion and the mold of form" (3.1.167) in part because, regardless of what he actually does, Ophelia tells the audience that that is who he is and the other characters treat him as if he is. The other actors, whose characters were not meant to portray social perfection, would have to be accordingly less perfect in rhetorical decorum. Again, this is why Hamlet's advice to the players is so suspect. His injunction against certain movements does not take into account an actor who might need to make them for reasons of characterization. B.L. Joseph suggests that Quintilian would have approval of Hamlet's

advice when he writes that the rhetorician “actually augments [Hamlet’s] account of defective speakers with the statement: ‘Solet esse et pigra et trepida et secanti similis’ - ‘There are others, again, whose hands are sluggish or tremulous or inclined to slash the air’” (21). What if, however, the actor playing Polonius decides to characterize him as aging and thus performs courtly gestures with tremulous hands? According to Quintilian, or rather Joseph’s understanding of Quintilian, he would be considered “defective,” and that is true in the sense that Polonius would now be a “defective” courtier. Yet might it not be very effective to see the once powerful courtier losing his skills? Thus the choice to have tremulous hands is an effective *acting* choice, if a poor rhetorical one. The actor playing Polonius would violate rhetorical decorum in order to fulfill his obligation to the theater, that is, the obligation to play his character truthfully and to tell the story of the play.

Theories of Renaissance acting that rely on information found in conduct books and courtesy manuals inevitably privilege rhetorical decorum over the demands of the theater, obscuring what I call the theatrical code of conduct. One tenet of that code, then as now, is to play one’s part so as to serve the story, even if that entails violating a pervasive social norm like moderation. In fact, however, there is much evidence to suggest that Renaissance actors, even leads, were not particularly driven to act with moderation in the first place.

To begin with, charges of “overacting” were legion in the period. Antitheatricalist writers describe actors and acting as being immoderate, both on and off the stage. These accusations begin in the earliest of tracts, Northbrooke’s *Treatise Against Dicing* (1577), in which the author contends that “by the gestures of interlude players all honesty is

defaced and defiled” (Pollard 6). “Honesty,” of course, was the element of early modern conduct that circumscribed moderation (Elyot 210); since honesty was defaced and defiled, the implication is that there could be no true moderation in the gesture of these interlude players. Anthony Munday, writing in *A Second and Third Blast of Retreat from Plays and Theaters* (1580) with the authority of a sometime member of the profession, describes boy players as having been brought up to learn “unnatural and unseemly gestures” and notes that, as regards any given adult actor, “how much he exceeds in his gesture, he delights himself in this part” (Pollard 79-80). The picture painted by these tracts is one of unnatural, unseemly and overblown gesturing which obviously does not comport with the Ciceronian ideal of comeliness and moderation.

Of course, antitheatricalists had reason to exaggerate the immodesty and dishonesty of players, but even those who were sympathetic to the theater often noted the tendency of actors to toss moderation overboard. Thomas Heywood in his *Apology for Actors* (1612), although clearly engaged in a political campaign to justify the profession of acting and align it with Cicero’s rhetorical advice rather than “over-acting, tricks and toiling too much in the antic habit of humours” (227-8), cannot help noting that boy company players frequently break the bounds of “discretion and government” (247), both watchwords for moderation, by their inordinate railing, a charge Ben Jonson also regularly endured.<sup>16</sup> The author (probably Thomas Middleton) of *The Puritane Widdow* (1606-7) describes the behavior of “stalking-stamping Player” during a conjuring scene “that will raise a tempest with his tongue, and thunder with his heels” (sig. F2) while John Marston’s players in *Histriomastix* (1599) are accused of “rend[ing] and tear[ing] a

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<sup>16</sup> The roman a clef Jonson figures in the Poetamachia plays are often accused of railing, and Jonson defends himself against the charge in the prologue to *Volpone* (9-10).

Cat / Upon a stage” (sig. G1). Recalling that Plutarch’s sense of moderation required an imperturbable countenance and a calm and even voice, these vivid images suggest the very opposite of moderation.

It could perhaps be argued that accusations of immoderation were simply the quickest route to slandering one’s enemies in the period, rather than an indication of actual immoderation, but not even the beloved tragedian Edward Alleyn escapes the accusation. E.S., the author of *The Discovery of the Knights of the Post* (1597) alludes to Alleyn, whose most famous role was Tamburlaine, when he gives the stage direction “with that S. bent his brows and fetched his stations up and down the room with such furious gesture as if he had been playing Tamburlaine on a stage” (qtd in Harrison 48). Such a characterization is significant because Alleyn is generally considered an early celebrity and a great actor. Thomas Nashe, whom Harrison describes as “always an accurate mirror of current opinion,” writes that “Not Roscius not AEsop...could ever perform more in action than famous Ned Allen” (46) and also that he “was able to make ill matter good” (qtd in Cerasano 54). Yet his Tamburlaine is described above as stalking up and down the room with “furious gesture.” This apparent disconnect between Alleyn being a great actor and E.S.’s description of his acting as consisting of “furious gesture” has led to conclusions that Alleyn’s acting began to seem old-fashioned and histrionic by the late 1590’s (Cerasano 55). However, the only reason there seems to be a disconnect at all is because Alleyn’s acting appears at odds with Hamlet’s advice to the players. However, if we understand Hamlet’s advice in the way I have argued above, not as legitimate acting advice but as an indication of Hamlet’s character and education, then there is no reason to suppose that either E.S. or Nashe is incorrect in his assessment of

Alleyn's acting or that their assessments are at odds with one another. Rather than assume that E.S. is overly fastidious or that Alleyn's acting began to seem old-fashioned, we can begin to imagine that Alleyn's gestures were, in fact, "furious," and that such furiousness was *not* unwelcome in the role of Tamburlaine.

It further appears that Burbage was not to be outdone by Alleyn in the arena of passionate acting, and that, in some quarters at least, his name was a byword for immoderation. When Lady Coke and her husband engaged in "great wars," she apparently "declaimed bitterly against him, and so carried herself, that divers said Burbage could not have acted better" (qtd in Nungezer 75). Dr. Forman in his *Book of Plays* (1611) describes a performance of *Macbeth*:

And he [Macbeth] turning about to sit down again saw the ghost of Banquo, which fronted him so, that he fell into a great passion of fear and fury, uttering many words about his murder, by which, when they heard that Banquo was murdered they suspected Macbeth (qtd in Salgado 32).

Here the actor playing Macbeth (presumably Burbage) violates rhetorical decorum as he furiously "utters many words," a clear departure from the moderation of speech rhetorical guides required. In a poem about the passions to which love can drive the lover,<sup>17</sup> the poet uses a version of Hamlet as an embodiment of the mad-love passion:

Puts off his clothes; his shirt he only wears,  
Much like mad-Hamlet; thus as passion tears (25).

Given that this "mad-Hamlet" behavior is the culmination a series of actions on the part of the poem's mad lover that involves drinking ink and shouting at actors, it seems

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<sup>17</sup> *Daiphantus, or the Passions of Love* (1604) by Anthony Scoloker, quoted in Salgado, *Eyewitnesses of Shakespeare: First Hand Accounts of Performances 1590-1890*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1975.

reasonable to assume that when Burbage played “mad-Hamlet” his actions were even more intense than the erratic acts already described. It also suggests the actor’s willingness to break rules of rhetorical decorum in service of the play.

Even the use of the word “passion” to denote what an actor was doing indicates the force of emotion on display. For example, Marston’s acting troupe in *Histriomastix*, the ones later admonished for rending and tearing the cat upon the stage, prepares for its performance almost exclusively by watching the playwright run through the script, pausing on occasion to say “This is a passion, note you the passion?” (sig C1). If we remember that moderation was the virtue that was to keep the unbridled passions in check, then it would appear that moderation is actually at odds with acting (that is, performing a passion).

It is worth pausing on Marston’s career for a moment, as he is one of the figures who transitions from university amateur to theatrical professional most completely, and his respect for actors appears to have grown with his professionalism. *Histriomastix* (1599) was Marston’s earliest play, and it betrays a sort of snobbish prejudice against acting troupes. Sir Oliver Owlet’s players are not only foolish overactors; they are a danger to the state and must be unceremoniously banished from it by the end of the play. Compare their fate to Shakespeare’s hapless troupe from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595); even with the presence of the obviously ham-fisted Bottom, the duke Theseus generously reasons that the “best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them” (5.1.224-5). By one of his last plays *Parasitaster, or The Fawn* (1606), Marston seems to have learned something of this generosity and more. He tells his reader in a note appended to the letter called “To my equall Reader” that



writing down a comedy to be read is a hopeless endeavor since so much of the life of the play consists in the acting (sig. A2v). What may have appeared like shameless overacting to the young scholar, deeply invested in social norms like moderation, came to be recognized by the more mature professional as meeting the demands of the profession and the play itself.

The preceding pages have not so much worked to positively answer the question, “What was Renaissance acting like?” as to undo some misleading assumptions about what can be gleaned about Renaissance acting from conduct literature. One additional influence that recourse to conduct books has had on the discussion of Renaissance acting is the tendency to concentrate on the technical aspects of it (gesture and voice). Information on technical aspects is, of course, attractive since it seems to suggest historical truth which can be discerned, described and quantified. But since most modern readers tend to understand acting as an emotional event, even the most historically accurate account of what actors actually did (how they stood, what they wore, what they did with their hands, how loud they were and so on) would be, I think, ultimately unsatisfying. Going forward, then, this chapter will take up questions about the emotional motivation behind Renaissance acting.

### **Acting and Sympathy**

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, moderation was desirable for several reasons. There were motivations of personal health since an imbalance of humours brought on by a lack of moderation could seriously damage one’s well-being. There were also motivations of spiritual health; moderation helped keep desires in check and thus

allowed for God's grace. These motivations, it is worth noting, are self-centered, in the literal sense. By these lights, one observed moderation because with it accrued a personal benefit.

In addition, however, moderation could be motivated less selfishly by the desire not to impose on or disgust one's companions. The quotation in *The Complete Gentleman* from Philippe de Commines, mentioned above, points to this underlying motivation; part of his complaint against the gentleman of "nowadays" is that, when they violate moderation in talk, "the affairs of their estates they impose on others" (Peacham 43). Commines' complaint feels somewhat old-fashioned, but in fact, it expresses the element of manners that persists most strongly in conduct books right through Emily Post's 1922 *Etiquette*, namely, the insistence that one should conduct oneself so as not to impose on others or make them feel uncomfortable. In *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias identifies this element as the hallmark of civility and locates the impetus for the development of civility in its Latin root, *civitas*, meaning town or city. With the rise of the city, Elias says, people began to live in closer proximity to each other than previously; as such, they learned to moderate their behavior so as not to bother other people (70-4). According to Elias, the seminal text for the rise of civility in England and France was Erasmus' *De civilitate morum puerilium (On Good Manners for Boys)* which was written in 1530, translated into English in 1532, and went through no fewer than thirty editions in the six years between its appearance and Erasmus' death, finally accumulating 130 editions in all (Elias 54).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The popularity and influence of *De civilitate* is confirmed by translator Brian McGregor who notes that at least twelve editions were published in 1530 and that the treatise was translated into "English, German, French, Czech, *nederlandsch*, Swedish, Dutch and Finnish," all before 1670. The text was also rewritten as a catechism entitled *Leges morales (Moral laws)* (Erasmus 272).

Although *De civilitate* is not entirely free from what can seem like selfish concerns, even the more selfish behaviors are tempered by at least a nod at concern for others. For example, on the subject of fine dress, Erasmus advises:

Let others admire while you yourself appear unaware that you are well turned out. The greater a man's wealth, the more agreeable is his modesty. To those of lesser means one should allow the consolation of modest self-pride. But a rich man, by flaunting the magnificence of his dress, brings home to others their own wretchedness and incites envy against himself (279).

The passage slips easily between concern for others and concern for self. The first sentence seems to encourage a kind of false modesty (“what, this old thing?”), but the second corrects it somewhat by suggesting that one who is wealthy has enough blessings that he can afford to be modest. The third sentence ties lack of means to greater pride when one knows one is well turned out, but Erasmus' direction is more for the wealthy man who should make allowances for that pride and not hold it against the poorer. The final sentence encapsulates Erasmus' views for this section by suggesting two reasons for not flaunting one's dress, the first out of concern for others in not making them feel their own “wretchedness” and the second a more selfish concern for self-preservation. While it is obvious that this passage encourages some falseness, it also draws attention to concern for the feelings of others. Moreover, for Erasmus, this passage represents a fairly unique moment of being conscious of oneself as a performer in *De civilitate*.

More often than not, Erasmus gives reasons for behavior that find their motivation in the desire not to disturb or disgust others. In Erasmus' configuration, the other is not an adversary whom one is trying to trick but a companion for whose feelings one is concerned. For example, one should turn away while blowing one's nose and "be scrupulous in blessing another when he sneezes" (275). If one is seized by a fit of laughter, "it is good manners to explain the reason for your laughter to others...lest someone suspect that he is being laughed at" (276). If one should spit, one should grind "any disgusting matter" into the ground "lest it nauseate someone." If one has been invited to dinner, "it is bad manners to be sad at a banquet or to sadden anyone else" (281). During dinner, one should always be cognizant of others and not take the best piece of meat or use the communal cup without wiping one's mouth (282-3), and when snuffing out the candles at the end of the feast, "immediately dip the wick in sand or stamp it with your shoe to prevent any distasteful smell assailing the nostrils" (286). When conversing, one should try to avoid disgusting subjects altogether by "polite circumlocution" (287), but if "something should come up that might physically upset a listener, for example, if someone should mention vomiting or a latrine or a stench, he should preface it by saying 'by your leave'." In just this handful of examples, it is evident that proper behavior proceeds from a constant attention to the physical and emotional sensibilities of others. The same might be said of other courtesy authors; the nascent motivation behind moderation might have originated for men like Elyot and Peacham in the desire not to upset another with furious gesture and speech. However, the inevitable concentration on controlling one's body and voice resulted in texts that seem overly

interested in perfecting one's person as an end in itself and for oneself. Conversely, Erasmus' admonitions are almost always tied back to a focus on the other. This may in part have been because of a belief that proper behavior to other men was bestowed "not on a mere man...but on God" (286). Erasmus would thus have identified consideration for others as one's Christian duty. In our more secularized, modern world, the idea can be better understood by the term *sympathy*.<sup>19</sup>

Erasmus tells the young boy to whom he directs his treatise that whenever he meets someone along the road who "should be respected because of his age, or is heavy with honours, or is worthy of respect for any other reason, a boy should step out of the way, respectfully bare his head, and even make a bow." Given Erasmus' insistence in other places in the text that one should act generously even to those of lesser fortune as in the abovementioned case of fine apparel, it seems reasonable that when a boy meets with anyone in the street, "even the heathen magistrate," he should show them this same respect. All persons are "worthy" since all persons proceed from God; moreover, this worthiness is shared by everyone, making us sympathetic with one another. Erasmus goes on: "By no means should [a boy] think along these lines: what have I to do with a stranger, with someone who has never done me a good turn?"

This question, which according to Erasmus one should never ask, is precisely the question Hamlet does ask after seeing the player perform:

What's Hecuba to him, or he to (Hecuba)

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<sup>19</sup> *Sympathy* is a somewhat anachronistic term. The OED records its first usage that comports with the meaning being used here (3c) as occurring in 1600 and then sparingly after that. The first English dictionary to record the meaning of the word is Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* which appeared in 1656. Nevertheless, I use the term as it communicates my meaning to the modern reader most fully and succinctly.

That he should weep for her? (2.2.586-7)

Hamlet's consternation at the actor's ability to feel for Hecuba rests partially on his sense that Hecuba, or at least the actor's relationship to her, is entirely fictional whereas his own father and his relationship to his father are real; hence to weep for Hecuba is to weep "for nothing" (584). But Hamlet's phrasing of the question suggests that he sees his obligations to others by degrees of caring and consideration. The closer one is by blood or affection, the more one is obliged to extend care and consideration to the other. Hamlet's attitude seems normal since it comports with our own modern sense of emotional ties; we care more about our parents, siblings, children and friends than we do about other people's parents, siblings, children and friends. Erasmus seems to be suggesting, however, that even strangers to whom one has not been obligated by biology or "a good turn" are owed consideration; for Erasmus, celestial ties are as pressing as terrestrial ones.

The player who weeps for Hecuba has a (perhaps overdeveloped) sympathetic sensibility. Actors who spend their days embodying fictional creations cannot avoid such sympathetic impulses, in part because when they look across the stage at one another, they are seeing not just a character, but a fellow and friend. These sympathetic sensibilities are on display in lifelong Renaissance actor Nathan Field's letter to Reverend Sutton (1616). In this letter, included in discussions of pro-theatricalists tracts of the period, Field does not make the intellectual arguments that one finds in *The Defence of Poesy* or *Apology for Actors*. Instead, Field's appeals are emotional and demand that Sutton show consideration for his fellow man, even if they are actors.

Field's history is well known. He was born in 1587 to John Field, a controversial Puritan reformer, who died in the following year. In 1600, at the age of 13, Nathan Field was "taken up" and became part of the Chapel Royal. Although it was legal for children to be impressed in this way for the purposes of singing, the irate father of one of Field's fellow boy actors argued in court that the boys were employed "only in plays and interludes" (qtd in Brinkley 19). Field continued to play in various configurations of acting companies before moving on to the King's Men sometime around 1617 (although possibly the year before). Records show a close relationship with several playwrights including Jonson, Marston, Chapman, Beaumont and Fletcher. Field became a playwright himself writing *Woman is a Weathercock* (1611) and *Amends for Ladies* (written around 1611 but not published until 1618). He died sometime between May 1619 and August 1620.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Field's entire life, from the age of 13, was spent in the theater; the theater was a part of his schooling, his sense of how the world worked and his identity.

In 1616, Field wrote his "Letter to Reverend Mr. Sutton," a minister who had apparently preached vehement anti-theatrical sentiments often from the pulpit. In it, Field mounts what editor Tanya Pollard calls an "impeccably rigorous" argument (Pollard 275), bolstered by his obvious familiarity with the scripture and his insistence that he wished to "die the death of the righteous" and "meet my savior in the clouds." Although, as Pollard says, Field's letter is notable for a number of reasons including the clarity of its arguments and its explicit defense of actors (rather than the theater in general), one of Field's arguments is particularly relevant for this discussion, namely Field's insistence that Sutton's condemnation of players is at base uncharitable and thus unchristian. Field

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<sup>20</sup> See Williams, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. See also *Nathan Field, The Actor Playwright* by Roberta Florence Brinkley, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928, pp.1-44, for a detailed biography.

argues that God placed him in the profession of player (276), implying that God would not have done so if it were sinful. He scolds Sutton for his “extraordinary violence” against players in his sermons, chiding him with the remembrance that “Christ never sought the strayed sheep in that manner.”

Field’s argument relies on the parts of the Bible that deal with Christian gentleness and self-sacrifice. In the case of the strayed sheep, he writes that Christ “never cursed it with acclamation or sent a barking dog to fetch it home, but gently brought it upon his own shoulders.” Field then speaks of the widow who “never searched for her lost groat with spleen and impatience, but gently swept her house and found it.”<sup>21</sup> He also speaks of “the death and passion of Christ who suffered for all men’s sins not excepting the player” (277). Field’s recourse to the language and examples of gentleness, Christian suffering and charity no doubt reflect his own values, values inculcated by a life in the theatrical profession which not only relied heavily on generosity from several quarters including the crown and the general audience but also were most satisfactory when the actors were able to, for example, weep for Hecuba. What Field is asking Sutton to do is to imagine the basic humanity of the actors who happen to be his parishioners, a skill at which Field, as an actor searching for humanity in the pages of a script, would have been highly adept.

What is interesting is that Field’s sense of Christian charity harkens back to Erasmus’ sense of the purpose of cultivating good manners in *De civilitate*. Toward the end of the handbook, Erasmus writes a sort of golden rule of manners:

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<sup>21</sup> Both examples can be found in Luke 15: 1-10, although Field may have embellished them slightly with the addition of the word “gently.”



The essence of good manners consists in freely pardoning the shortcomings of others although nowhere falling short yourself: in holding a companion no less dear because his standards are less exacting...But if a companion makes a mistake through ignorance in a matter that seems of some consequence, then the polite thing to do is to advise him courteously of it in private (289).

If Sutton was barking condemnation at his actors-congregants, Erasmus would seem to be accusing him, at best, of very bad manners and, more broadly, of a basic lack of Christian charity.

Brian McGregor's introduction to his translation of *De civilitate* notes that the handbook was in some measure inspired by the same thing that inspired Field's letter. McGregor quotes from a letter Erasmus wrote in 1530 on the effects of the Reformation in Erasmus' beloved Basel, effects which eventually drove him from the town. "I have seen them return from hearing the sermon,' Erasmus wrote, "as if inspired by an evil spirit, the faces of all showing a curious wrath, and there was no one except one old man who saluted me properly when I passed in the company of some distinguished persons." When we consider his admonition in *De civilitate* to greet everyone one meets with respect since they all proceed from God, it becomes clear that for Erasmus, the group who ignores him fails to recognize in him their basic and common humanity. McGregor characterizes Erasmus' reaction thus:

There are few more poignant expressions of the values inherent in the *humanitas erasmiana* than these words, and it is these values, with their acceptance of human limitations (especially in theological matters) and

their insistence on human standards (for which English “civility” is a rather etiolated equivalent), which Erasmus sets forth within the framework of *De civilitate* (270).

Like Field’s experience of Sutton’s sermon, Erasmus notes a distinct lack of charitable impulse as the result of the reformers’ hearing a sermon; both men attempt to counterbalance it by an emphasis on charity.

That is not to say that Erasmus would have approved of the lack of moderation actors sometimes employed in their profession. He was, of course, also a rhetorician, and he shared the rhetorician’s preference for controlled gesturing and speech, even touching on it in *De civilitate*. “It is ungentlemanly,” Erasmus says, “to toss the arms about, to gesticulate with the fingers, to reel about, in short, to converse not with the tongue but with the entire body.” He then goes on to say that speech “should not be precipitate and outstrip its meaning, but slow and distinct” (287).

Elias’ sense that *De civilitate* is a seminal work in the discussion of the development of manners, then, becomes even more important when we apply it to specifically to the virtue of moderation and its development in the Renaissance. In Erasmus’ *De civilitate*, the rhetorician’s sense of moderation of speech and voice is joined with a sense of sympathy for others. Later in the 16th century, however, these two elements seem to split from each other. Rhetorical manuals devise ever more refined systems of communication and, along with courtesy manuals for courtiers, supply personal and “self-centered” motivations. For actors, the sense of sympathy becomes ever more developed and applied to characters and stories, even as moderation of voice and gesture becomes secondary to it. This is why we can find kinship between Nathan Field’s

ideals and Erasmus', but also a critique of later advice-giving manuals in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The theater shared concerns with courtesy literature, but its values and solutions were its own.

## CHAPTER 4

### WIT

It will not be radical to suggest that *wit* is a central technique in comedy. Comedy scholar Andrew Stott identifies wit as the defining characteristic of Restoration comedy, although he traces that preference back to concepts found in Renaissance courtesy literature, noting that Castiglione “considers spontaneous displays of wit as perfect examples of the courtly ideal of *sprezzatura*” (Stott 56). For a playwright, wit is a useful technique for getting the audience to laugh, an undeniable expectation of comedy. Yet laughter theories make it clear that laughter is inherently malicious and divisive. The earliest of these theories, for example, Thomas Hobbes’ 1650 formulation of the “superiority theory,” contends that “the Passion of Laughter proceedeth from a *sudden conception* of some *Ability* in himself that laugheth. Also Men laugh at the *Infirmities* of others, by Comparison wherewith their own Abilities are set off and illustrated” (Chapter IX, #13, emphasis his). We laugh at the sudden realization that we are better (i.e. less absurd, less infirm, more intelligent and so on) than someone else.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the idea that wit would be divisive makes sense; there must always be an object at which the wit is directed and that object must be held out for ridicule and thus separated from the rest of

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<sup>1</sup> Other laughter theories include: the incongruity theory, which asserts that we laugh when our expectations are defied (thus we are the object of ridicule); and Bakhtin’s theory of laughter as a method of debasement necessary for grotesque regeneration from *Rabalais and His World* (1965, trans. to English 1968). Even the more recent and more generous theories of Berys Gaut, which suggest that jokes open up an imaginative space in which we are able to try on repugnant attitudes, presupposes that the laughter is an indication of a repugnant attitude. The important point is that all theories of laughter begin in the accepted premise that laughter is a sign of a kind of malice.

the group. A rather distressing question thus arises: how can comedy, the genre of union, be built on the back of wit, which is inherently divisive?

Scholar Alexander Leggatt convincingly answers this question for the theater with assertion that comedy is a “problem-solving story” in which “laughter is not a solution, it is a sign of the problem” and that “the function of comedy is to make the audience *stop laughing*” (3-4, emphasis mine). He notes that there is a tendency in modern comedies to end not with a solution but “with a fresh disaster.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, he contends that such tendencies violate the conventional expectations for comedy. Thus for playwrights, wit is incredibly useful as a technique for creating laughter, but according to Leggatt, that technique must ultimately be eschewed in order to enact the union that the genre demands. Therefore, in the theater, wit could be understood as essentially antithetical to unity, a truth which Shakespeare’s plays illustrate clearly.

Stott’s suggestion that the foundation of the Restoration preference for wit can be traced to Castiglione demonstrates that the theater, at least in that period, shares an affinity for wit with the court. It was a skill equally, if not more, important for courtiers; indeed it appears to have been an uncontested necessity. One would be hard-pressed to find a courtly conduct book outside the genre of heraldry that did not recommend and lay out the rules for the deployment of wit. Unlike the theater of the Renaissance, though, moral distinctions between good and bad wit were murky at best.

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<sup>2</sup> Leggatt’s examples include *The Government Inspector* in which the real government inspector shows up at the end of the play and “the trouble is just beginning” and *The Man Who Came To Dinner* in which “the eccentric Sheldon Whiteside, who has wrought havoc in the lives of the Middle American family in whose home he is stranded by a broken ankle, walks out the door to universal relief, slips on the front step, and breaks his ankle again” (4).

In the following pages, I will examine the complex and polyvalent term *wit*, the ways in which courtesy literature defined and recommended it, and the ways in which Shakespeare resisted wit's charms, most extensively in one of the plays most concerned with its deployment, *Much Ado About Nothing*. In the end of that play, Shakespeare illustrates the laugh-stopping function that Leggatt suggests is essential to comedy, despite the temptation to make one last joke, a temptation many future playwrights find almost impossible to resist.

On that last point, it should be noted before moving on that Shakespeare's deployment of wit and wit-stoppage did not win out in the grander narrative about wit's use and value. That distinction belongs to Ben Jonson, for reasons that will be discussed below. In fact, in 1819, William Hazlitt wrote:

The fault then, of Shakespeare's comic Muse is, in my opinion, that it is too good-natured and magnanimous...it does not take the highest pleasure in making human nature look as mean, as ridiculous, and contemptible as possible. It is in this respect, chiefly, that it differs from the comedy of a later, and (what is called) a more refined period (64).

Hazlitt refers, of course, to the Restoration which he considered "the golden period of our comedy" (67), and Restoration writers had far more in common with Jonson than Shakespeare. Indeed, John Dryden once commented on the "malicious pleasure" the audience takes in seeing some "oddness" or fault corrected onstage; he then says that such theatrical situations were "the peculiar genius and talent of Ben Jonson" (qtd in Spingarn lx). As such, Jonsonian theatrical values exercise a disproportionate influence

over our critical understanding of Renaissance comedy and especially the deployment of wit. The following pages will attempt to rebalance that understanding by an extensive exploration of the “good-natured” work of Shakespeare. First, however, it may be necessary to define what the term *wit* actually meant in the Renaissance.

### **Defining Wit**

*Wit* was a complicated idea in the Renaissance. It connoted, among other things, intellect, the five senses, sparkling conversation, inventiveness, sharpness of mind, and cunning.<sup>3</sup> Early modern dictionaries further complicate the meaning of wit in the period by linking it with other words like *ingenium*, which at least one dictionary defined as “nature, inclination, or disposition of a thing: also wit, wisdom, will, or property, fancy, invention, cunning.”<sup>4</sup> *Ingenium* was a combination of the Latin *in* and *genus* (meaning kind, family or ancestry) suggesting that wit was something that was inborn, a talent. Thus *wit* did the job that language is supposed to do and came to stand in for something that is essentially ineffable and difficult to pin down, specifically, an undefinable talent for making brilliant use of language.

Small wonder that a quality considered at its heart to be innate and inborn should come to reside at the center of the courtly character, as described in courtesy literature. Although courtesy literature’s mere existence would seem to suggest that the qualities of courtiership could in fact be taught, nevertheless most courtesy books insisted that a true gentleman was born, not made. Undeniably, though, courtesy literature attempted to

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<sup>3</sup> *OED* entry - *wit*, n. 2a, 3b, 3c, 5a, 5b, 7, 8a, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Thomas’s 1587 *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae*.

define, if not teach, what was to be considered proper court behavior, including substantial discussions on the nature and practice of wit.

Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528, trans. to English 1561) is a good example of the way wit was described and discussed in courtesy literature. Here, wit is just one of the many natural attributes that the ideal courtier should possess:

The Courtier therefore, besides nobleness of birth, I will have him to be fortunate in this behalfe [of ease of comely demeanour], and *by nature to have not only a wit*, and a comely shape of person and countenance, but also a certain grace, and (as they say), a hewe, that shall make him at the first sight acceptable and loving unto who so beholdeth him (33, emphasis mine).

Here wit is clearly listed among what are, on the whole, gifts of nature. Further exploration of wit complicates that naturalism, however, as it largely takes the form of a debate between two of Castiglione's arbiters, Sir Fredericke and Count Lewis, about whether or not foreign words should be used when speaking or writing and whether the use of those words will help keep out pretenders to courtiership, a deep concern for Castiglione's characters.

Sir Fredericke argues that foreign words will help set the bar of learning high enough to keep out any stray "malapert assheads" who will have to work harder to understand what is being written or said (51). Count Lewis counters that "the principall matter and necessarie for a Courtier to speake, and write well, I believe is knowledge"



and that knowledge can be best expressed by whatever words are in common use among the people (56). Lewis continues,

The good use of speech therefore I beleeeve, ariseth of men that have witte, and with learning and practise have gotten a good judgement, and with it consent and agree to receive the wordes that they thinke good, which are known by a certaine naturall judgement, and not by art or any manner rule (59).

Without a hint of irony, Lewis characterizes “learning and practise” as most like “naturall judgement” and fails to see their more obvious connection to “art” or a manner of “rule.” More sanguine than Sir Fredericke about the necessity of gate-keeping, Count Lewis is content to rely on the impression that real wit (here, knowledge), able to be honed but truly a gift of nature, will only reside in the worthy soul so that writing need not be artificially complicated by the use of difficult wording, as Sir Fredericke has proposed.

It is important to note how easily the idea of quickness of mind slips in to a discussion about rhetorical qualities in Castiglione’s text. The slippage is natural, of course; how else would one communicate one’s quick intellect but through the control of language? However, it is exactly this idea that language can be controlled that begins to belie in courtesy literature the supposed “innateness” at the center of wit. Moreover, we are already moving into etiquette, the outward signifiers of a virtue (in this case, rhetoric) as opposed to being concerned with the virtue itself (in this case, wit). This slippery movement is one of the things that makes wit so difficult to pin down: by wit do we mean the ineffable talent itself or the way it presents itself in the clever rhetoric of witticisms?

This movement from virtue to etiquette is invisible in most courtesy books and for most virtues. In the case of wit, this movement elides the serious question of whether or not wit should be deployed in all circumstances. Because wit was so firmly entrenched in the figure of the successful courtier, courtesy books were written with the underlying assumption that wit *should* be deployed and concerned themselves more acutely with exploring methods of display for one's wit, not with whether or not such deployment was virtuous or vicious.

Perhaps because wit was so difficult to define, the kind of specificity that Count Lewis and Sir Fredericke exhibit regarding the use of foreign words was common. In fact, books on rhetoric emerged as a very specific kind of courtesy manual. Thomas Wilson's *The Art of Rhetoric* (1560) was one such popular book. Its purpose, according to Wilson, was to set out the ways "to dispose and order matters of our own invention...in speaking as in writing" so that "those that have good wits by nature shall better increase them by art, and the blunt shall also be whetted through art" (49). When Wilson turns his attention to wit in the sense of inventive jests meant to provoke laughter, his rhetorical specificity and record of jests is impressive and entertaining:

We shall delight the hearers when they look for one answer and we make them a clean contrary, as though we would not seem to understand what they would have... "When is best to dine?", quod one to Diogenes. "Marry," quod he, "for a rich man, when he list, for a poor man, when he can" (168).

Sometimes it is well liked when by changing the letter, or taking away some part of the word, or adding sometimes a syllable, we make another meaning... “What carry you, master parson,” quod a gentleman to a priest that had his woman on horseback behind him, “have you got your mail behind you?” “No sir,” quod the priest, “it is my female” (170-1).

Sometimes it is delightful when a man’s word is taken and not his meaning. As when one had said to another (whose help he must needs have), “I am sorry sir to put you to pains,” the other answered, “I will ease you, sir, of that sorrow, for I will take no pains for you at all” (171).<sup>5</sup>

Most courtesy books also included examples of poor wit. Very often, poor wit was based on the violation of rhetorical rules or some other kind of disgust, somewhat undefined but clear to the writer. For example, in *Galateo* (1558, trans. to English 1576), Giovanni Della Casa describes poor wit thus:

You will find that some people are ready to cap every word with one - or indeed several - of those senseless rhymes which are called jingles. Others will change the syllables of words in an inept and stupid fashion, or say something or answer you in an unexpected way without any subtlety or elegance, such as:

‘Where is he?’ ‘On his feet.’

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<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare uses a very similar joke, in fact, in *Much Ado About Nothing*. When Beatrice comes to fetch Benedick for dinner, he thanks her for her pains. She retorts that if it had been painful, she would not have come (2.3.253-4). The re-use of this standard joke does seem to mitigate the idea that wit was somehow the result of *ingenium* or the inspiration of the moment, rather than a set of tricks and tools that some people used more effectively than others.

‘He greased their palms with alms.’

‘Where am I to go?’ ‘To blazes.’

‘I want to shave.’ ‘Then set your face against it.’

‘Go and call Barbieri.’ ‘What shall I call him?’<sup>6</sup>

You can easily see that these repartees are cheap and trashy (66-7).

Somewhat typically, however, Della Casa’s disgust is difficult to understand. One attribute of wit, was that it was delightful in its unexpectedness, but these unexpected responses seem to Della Casa to lack elegance and subtlety. Perhaps they were too common to be unexpected (although they must have been fresh at some point). Perhaps he finds them annoying because they do not cleverly catch him in a logical flaw but merely obstruct the answering of a plainly-put question. But what would be more elegant or more subtle? He does not tell us.

Moreover, in comparing Wilson’s examples to those that Della Casa finds so objectionable, it seems unlikely that these two authorities would have agreed on what constituted good or poor wit. Della Casa, for example, distinguishes wit as being “like the nibble of a sheep rather than like the bite of a dog, for if it were like the bite of a dog it would not be witty but insulting” (65), a hair most English courtesy manuals did not attempt to split. Wilson, on the other hand, encourages the reader to single out personal attributes for ridicule:

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<sup>6</sup> Or as this joke has been reformulated for the 20th century, “Call me a cab.” “Ok, you’re a cab.”

Sometimes we jest at a man's body that is not well proportioned and laugh at his countenance if either it be not comely by nature or else he, through folly, cannot well see it (165).

It is not a problem, however, if the object the reader desires to ridicule is not obviously deformed or unattractive. Wilson has other suggestions:

Now when we would abash a man for some words that he hath spoken, and can take none advantage of his person or making of his body, we either hold him dolt at the first and make him believe that he is no wiser than a goose, or else we confute wholly his sayings with some pleasant jest, or else we extenuate and diminish his doings by some pretty means, or else we cast the like in his dish and with some other device dash him out of countenance, or last of all we laugh him to scorn outright, and sometimes speak almost never a word but only in countenance show ourselves pleasant (ibid).

Wilson justifies this use of wit as a necessary diversion for "the dullness of man's nature" (164).

Despite the fact that Wilson and Della Casa would seem to come down on different sides regarding appropriate objects of wit, nevertheless they share a fundamentally adversarial tone. Della Casa might not have approved of Wilson's suggestions to ridicule a man's person, but he has certainly spent large portions of his book pointing out defects in the way other people speak and joke. Ironically to modern readers, courtesy literature almost always touched on the bad form of making fun of

others in an unwarranted fashion, even as it gave instruction on how to do so. This bad form, however, was distinguished from wit; it was a quality called detraction.

*Detraction* is essentially malicious wit, not unlike the kind Wilson advocates and also that one expects to find in a comedy. Many courtesy books included specific injunctions against mere detraction, but as Wilson's text shows us, what constituted wit in one situation was often deemed detraction in another. Detraction was always what one's enemies did, and it often had little to do with what was actually said and more to do with who said what about whom.

Thomas Elyot in *The Book named the Governour* (1531) gives a good example of the way this relationship between wit and detraction worked in much courtesy literature. He deplores detraction as a "monster" (234) since "well many good wits have been drowned, as also virtue and painful study unrewarded, and many zelatours or favourers of the public weal, have been discouraged" (235) by the detraction of malicious persons. How is one to spot detractors? According to Elyot, "they imagine some vice or default, be it never so little, whereby they may minish [another man's] credence, & craftily omitting to speak any thing of his rigour in Justice, will note and touch some thing of his manners, wherein shall either seem to be lightness, or lack of gravity, or too much sourness or lack of Civility" (234).

That kind of detraction, however, is not only the kind that Wilson encourages, as the aforementioned quotations show; it is also *exactly* what courtesy literature in general did. Courtesy literature defined rigid rules of conduct and excoriated those who deviated from it. Castiglione's arbiters want to discount courtiers for the inclusion or exclusion of

foreign words in their discourse, a slight fault by any standard; Della Casa considers all punning cheap and trashy; and Elyot himself has just spent 200 pages outlining what behavior is and is not acceptable. At no point does it register with Elyot or any of these other writers that their entire work could be considered “detraction” from a certain perspective.

Indeed, although he would obviously disagree, it could be argued that Elyot engages in very pointed detraction in his book. When, for example, he condemns the dark side of the virtue magnanimity as the vice ambition, he writes, “Ambition is covetous of treasure, therewith to maintain their ostentation and vainglory, which ambitious persons, do call their honour, whereby they be procured to find unjust means by their authority, to provide for such substance” (198). What would constitute covetousness or “unjust means” is left to the imagination. The sense is that an ambitious person would be anyone Elyot (clearly the stand-in for a reasonable man) felt was ambitious, and that even if that person claimed to be interested not in vainglory but in honor, Elyot would have to label him a liar.

Elyot anticipates my objection, however, and protests in the introductory apology to the book that those who accuse him of being a detractor for picking out particular vices and implying particular persons, are themselves detractors of him, and that he is “now driven through the malignity of this present time, all disposed to malicious detraction” (3) to make this very apology. Why is Elyot’s labeling of certain persons as ambitious any different than others labeling him as malicious? Because Elyot said so. In other words,

the same comment that was hailed as a great witticism in the mouth of a friend could be called slanderous detraction in the mouth of an enemy, and round and round we go.

The dual-sided nature of wit, however, makes it impossible for courtiers *not* to participate in detraction, since wit, as noted above, always has an object of scorn, and its exercise is always a requirement of being a courtier. It also renders the distinction in courtesy literature between good and bad wit, in a moral sense, functionally useless. So what seems like immoral cruelty from, for example, Wilson (such as making fun of a deformity) is actually amoral; questions of “good” and “bad” simply do not enter into the exercise of wit in most courtesy literature. Indeed, as Frank Whigham observes specifically in reference to Puttenham’s *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), rhetorical manuals eventually came to expound a “thoroughly developed rhetoric of combat” in which “members of the set of ‘dissembling’ devices are ‘souldiers to the figure *allegoria* and fight vnder the banner of dissimulation’ (191)” (139). Words are now acknowledged to be weapons. For Whigham, that means that courtiers become inevitably concerned with the preservation of self at all costs, even to the extent that real friendship and love, both of which might require self-sacrifice, are impossible. (137-8).<sup>7</sup>

This kind of deployment of wit is reminiscent of Ben Jonson’s appraisal of Shakespeare’s skill in 1641:

*I remember* the Players have often mentioned it as an honour to  
*Shakespeare*, that in his writing (whatsoever he penn’d) hee never blotted

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<sup>7</sup> See Frank Whigham’s *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* for an excellent discussion of how the economy of wit functioned among Renaissance courtiers. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.



out line, My answer hath beene, would he had blotted a thousand (*Timber* 28, emphasis his).<sup>8</sup>

Jonson's joke is clever in the way that Wilson's jokes are, but is it fair? Does his immediate assertion that he "lov'd the man, and doe honour his memory (on this side Idolatry)" make amends for what we might call a potshot? Jonson obviously thought so, and his attitude has been tremendously influential, as the following pages will examine.

### **The Central Figure of Ben Jonson**

Although Ben Jonson's literary output does not tend to receive the kind of critical or popular attention that Shakespeare's does, Jonson's literary criticism has been surprisingly robust. In his narrative of 17th century criticism, Spingarn says that "Jacobean criticism does not deal adequately with the fundamental problems of its own age or of the literary period which it succeeded" (xxi), but nevertheless he insists that the "results of [Jonson's] studies were grafted onto English criticism through his influence over his younger contemporaries and through the wide attention paid to his critical work after the Restoration" (xviii). In other words, 17th century critical attitudes, including those attitudes toward wit and comedy which are of interest in this chapter, were indebted in part to Jonson's sensibilities, which were always more those of the social and literary critic than those of the playwright. The reason that Hazlitt sees Shakespeare's comedies as defective is because his sense of English comedy is rooted in the earliest formulations

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<sup>8</sup> Jonson may be thinking of the prefatory letter "To the great Variety of Readers" written by actors John Hemming and Henry Condell included in the first folio of Shakespeare's plays, published in 1623: "His mind and hand went together: And what he thought, he vttered with that easinesse, that wee haue scarce receiued from him a blot in his papers."

of literary criticism from the 17th century, which are rooted in Jonson, whose plays employed and celebrated malicious, abusive and corrective wit.<sup>9</sup>

In many ways, Jonson's playwrighting career was enacted in opposition to the rest of the English Renaissance theatrical world. Jonson's plays, particularly the prologues and inductions, frequently include rants about the audience's lack of taste, the actors' lack of talent or fellow playwrights' bad writing. In the prologue to *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), for example, he sets his play up as a model for what "other plays should be" (Prologue 14) and spurns the "ill customs of the age" (l. 5) such as vast passages of time ("To make a child, now swaddled, to proceed / Man, and then shoot up, in one beard and weed, / Past threescore years" -- 7-9), representational props ("three rusty swords" -- 9) and sound effects ("tempestuous drum / Rumbles to tell you when the storm doth come" -- 19-20). He even makes a fairly clear jab at Shakespeare's *Henry V* when he promises that no "Chorus wafts you o'er the seas" (15) in his play. In 1605's *Volpone*, he is still distancing himself from other playwrights in his opening letter "To the Most Noble and Most Equal Sisters, The Two Famous Universities." Here he argues that "the too much license of Poetasters, in this time, hath much deformed their mistress; that every day, their manifold and manifest ignorance doth stick unnatural reproaches on her" (12-15). That Jonson sees universities as the "mistress" of the theater speaks to his tendency to attach to academics before the practicalities of the theater, another divide

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<sup>9</sup> In fairness to Hazlitt, however, it should be noted that he himself did not like Ben Jonson's style. He considers Jonson's talent to be of a "repulsive and unamiable kind" (73) and Jonson's wit to be "cross-grained, mean, and mechanical" (75). Hazlitt also writes: "Squalid poverty, sheer ignorance, bare-faced impudence, or idiot imbecility, are his dramatic common-places--things that provoke pity and disgust, instead of laughter" (75).

between himself and other theater professionals, like Shakespeare, who did not attend university.

*Poetaster* was, of course, the name of the 1601 play which contains Jonson's most virulent attack upon his fellow playwrights, John Marston and Thomas Dekker, the last official shot he fired in the "war of the poets." Jonson's well-publicized disgust with John Marston may have begun with a real or imagined caricature of Jonson in Marston's *Histriomastix*, but seemed to crystallize around a difference in literary styles; Marston's use of neologisms seemed decadent to Jonson while Jonson's lack of generosity toward the failings of his characters and the varied constituencies of the theater made him an easy target for Marston who only had to paint him as a strident pedant. Throughout his career, Jonson maintains the position from *Every Man In* that his plays are the way "other plays should be." His famous critique of Shakespeare, noted above, put him in opposition not just to his fellow playwright but to other theatrical professionals, in this instance, the "Players" who praise Shakespeare while he critiques him.

Jonson goes on in that passage to describe Shakespeare as one that "flow'd with that faculty" of wit "that sometimes it was necessary he should be stop'd...His wit was in his owne power; would the rule of it had beene so too" (*Timber* 28-9). As I will discuss later, Shakespeare *did* stop the flow of wit, but the idea of stoppage was applied to the characters, not the playwright. Jonson's sense of critical distance, however, causes him to engage with plays, even his own, almost exclusively in metatextual ways. He cannot see that the characters might have a kind of life beyond the authorial hand. In the letter that

prefaces *Volpone*, mentioned above, he elucidates what he considers “the offices and function of a Poet”:

He that is said to be able to inform young men to all good disciplines, inflame grown men to all great virtues, keep old men in their best and supreme state, or as they decline to childhood, recover them to their first strength; that comes forth the interpreter and arbiter of nature, a teacher of things divine, no less than human, a master of manners; and can alone (or with a few) effect the business of mankind (22-28).

He sees plays as vehicles for dispensing literary and social criticism, not for explorations of human passions, and the poet’s function as that of public intellectual, rather than entertainer. In this way, his similarity to courtesy writers is obvious: both Jonson and authors of courtesy literature believed their purpose was to teach behavior and to correct “mistakes” when they surface, as Jonson does with Shakespeare.

One such laughable mistake that Jonson finds in Shakespeare and which serves as an example of the latter’s unchecked wit is an exchange between Caesar and another character. In it, the other character says, “Caesar, thou dost me wrong” and Caesar replies, “Caesar did never wrong but with just cause”<sup>10</sup>; this speech, Jonson insists, was “ridiculous” (*Timber* 19-20). Jonson’s objection is to the apparent illogicality of the line: if Caesar has “just cause,” his actions could not, by definition, be “wrong.” Jonson attributes Shakespeare’s not catching this lapse of logic to the fact that his wit flowed out

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<sup>10</sup> This line, found at 3.1.47-8, is a source of some debate. The first folio line reads, “Know, *Caesar* doth not wrong, nor without cause / Will he be satisfied.” Some editions such as the Norton Shakespeare (Greenblatt et al. eds., New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997) amend the line to reflect Jonson’s memory of it and cite *Timber; or Discoveries* as the source of the emendation (see the textual notes on p. 1589). It is possible that in performance the actor did say the line as Jonson remembers it, or it possible that Jonson misheard the line.

in an unstoppable way, rather than in a measured and considered way as, one assumes, Jonson's did. But Jonson's inability to imagine this line as anything other than a playwright's illogical misstep confirms his own pedantic mindset and his critical distance from more humanizing techniques of theater.

If Jonson's assessment of Shakespeare, who was obviously a more successful writer than he, seems irritatingly smug, the pages that follow it in *Timber* make amends somewhat. The section which follows his critique of Shakespeare is a record of the various manifestations of wit he has observed in men. Although *Timber* is clearly in the literary critical vein of Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*, Jonson occasionally lapses into the kinds of categorizing or advice-giving modes that are prevalent in conduct literature. For example, he advises that "diverse studies at diverse houres" will "delight" and "refresh" the scholar (35), as he might if he were penning a "schoolmaster" text. Later, he advises his reader:

If his wit will not arrive suddainly at the dignitie of the Ancients, let him not yet fall out with it, quarrel, or be over hastily Angry, offer to turn it away from Study in a humor; but come to it again upon better cogitation, try another time with labour... There is no Statute *Law* of the Kingdome bids you bee a Poet against your will or the first Quarter. If it come in a year or two, it is well. (53, emphasis his).

One cannot but think that this is advice Jonson as a young writer might have wished to read. In his quarrel with Marston and Dekker, he was frequently accused of smelling of the inkhorn, that is, laboring too much over his plays. The underlying implication, of

course, was that he lacked the spark of wit that would have made his writing come more easily, which may explain why Jonson took such offense to it in others. It may also explain why he took every opportunity for exercising his wit that presented itself.<sup>11</sup>

What makes this passage even more poignant, however, is that it follows a paragraph in which Jonson argues that truly excellent poetry must be driven by *ingenium*, that inborn spark of genius. Although this is the very quality that Jonson insists Shakespeare should have checked, he describes it as a “devine Instinct” that “utters somewhat above a mortall mouth” and then “gets a loft and flies away” (52). Jonson’s metaphor makes wit a god-like spirit that raises the poet above common understanding, perhaps above Jonson’s. In light of this description of *ingenium*, it is difficult not to reread the passage about Shakespeare as an attempt by Jonson to discount a power he does not actually understand or to make it pedestrian through pedantry.

To return to the main point, however, Jonson’s ideas about the appropriate use of wit were oppositional to Shakespeare’s but shared an affinity with courtesy writers’. Because of Jonson’s deep influence on literary criticism and the tendency of later playwrights to share his sensibilities, his sense of wit was the one to survive. When William Hazlitt observes in 1819 that Shakespeare was “disabled as a writer of comedy by his lack of ill nature” (Leggatt 139), he is recognizing Shakespeare’s unwillingness to adhere to Jonsonian (and thus, courtly) values of wit. In Shakespeare’s plays, the merit of wit, which includes all the valences of intellect, ability with language, as well as witticisms themselves, is still under consideration. In spite of Jonson’s sense that

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<sup>11</sup> Restoration playwrights will follow his example, as will be discussed in the final chapter.

Shakespeare was ruled by his wit rather than ruler of it, analysis of Shakespeare's work reveals that, although strongly familiar with the conventions of wit as recorded in courtesy literature, his plays repudiate courtesy literature's uncritical valorizing of wit. That is not to suggest that Shakespeare was consciously devising an alternative code of conduct to that of courtesy literature. On the contrary, I believe Shakespeare was simply writing what seemed necessary and apt for his plays. Nevertheless, the fact remains, as I hope to show, that the successful character is the one that is willing to give up some reputational capital by resisting the deployment of wit. In that way, then, Shakespeare's work opposes the expectations of courtesy literature.

### **Resisting wit's charms**

At the end of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598), wit threatens the ultimate happiness of Shakespeare's most self-consciously witty pair. Once Hero is reborn and Claudio is forgiven, all that remains is for Beatrice and Benedick to make the final leap into matrimony. The process has been underway since their private realizations in 2.3 and 3.1, and it was strengthened by their declarations to each other 4.1 and 5.2. The last step requires public acknowledgement of their feelings and, not surprisingly, proves the most difficult.

Both lovers are used to controlling their public image by the exercise of their wit, or "practical reasons" as Carl Dennis calls it. He argues, "The desire of Benedick and Beatrice to keep their practical reasons dominant is perfectly understandable; for they are experts in the exercise of their cleverness and rank amateurs in the exercise of their

emotions” (225), and because the clever exercise of wit requires judgment, they are necessarily judgmental and presume that others will be as well.

At first denying their mutual affection, Beatrice and Benedick are forced into public admission by the embarrassing discovery of their attempts at love letters. Benedick interprets this as “A miracle!” continuing,

BENEDICK: Come, I will have thee, but by this light I take thee for pity.

BEATRICE: I would not deny you, but by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption (5.4.97-101).

Dennis interprets this exchange as a shift in wit representative “not of an insult ingeniously clever but an insult transparently a lie” (231), such that wit itself has been transformed. I would argue, however, that Benedick’s next line (“Peace! I will stop your mouth” [5.4.102]) suggests that these lines are not actually a shift in wit at all, that they are a continuation of the old ways of wit combat that characterize Beatrice and Benedick’s earliest encounters and that Benedick rightly intuits that a slide back into these old habits will make it impossible for he and Beatrice to ever really be married. We already know that they are “too wise to woo peaceably” (5.3.72) (and *wisdom* was often the proverbial counterpart to *wit*). Thus he simply stops the wit from issuing forth and, in doing so, converts the witty word into the action of a kiss, a physical manifestation of union that stands opposed to divisive verbal expression of the kind courtesy books, as noted above, tended to encourage.



Earlier in the play, the impossibility of being both married and witty is expressed, first when Beatrice is called too “curst” (2.1.20, glossed as “talkative”) to get a husband, and then again when Leonato insists that if Beatrice and Benedick were ever to marry, they would “talk themselves mad” (2.1.344-5) within a week. While the idea that a talkative woman would be unmarriageable has been understood in recent years as part of a system of chauvinistic oppression, in this instance at least Benedick also comes in for the same accusation: he talks too much to ever be married. *Much Ado* encourages us to understand that a flowing wit is indicative of singlehood or, at the very least, is resistant to coupledness.

*Much Ado About Nothing* has been preparing us for the ambivalent nature of wit from the beginning of the play, and suspicion about language in general and wit in particular swirls throughout the action. After Hero is accused, Beatrice laments, “He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it” (4.2.335-6), regretting the social change that has allowed words to replace deeds of honor. It has been suggested that it is this social change that has occasioned the rise of courtesy literature, including rhetoric manuals (Whigham 2-6) which naturally privilege language and, perhaps inevitably, the kind of sophism that angers Beatrice.

Claudio and the Prince have just dishonored Hero using one such sophistic arrangement of words. They do not ask their question of her plainly; instead, they set up a linguistic trap in which it is impossible that she should be able to continue to call herself a maiden.

CLAUDIO:

What man was he talked with you yesternight

Out at your window, betwixt twelve and one?

Now, if you are a maid, answer to this.

HERO:

I talked with no man at that hour, my lord.

PRINCE:

Why, then, you are no maiden (4.1.88-92).

Either she can admit she “talked” with a man the night before and thus confirm that she’s no longer a maid; or she can deny it, and since the Prince and Claudio know it to be a lie, she will thus “prove” she is “no maiden.” Either way, she cannot win. Claudio’s sophistry continues, “But fare thee well, most foul, most fair. Farewell, / Thou pure impiety and impious purity” (11. 108-9). Citing the same passage, William G. McCollum notes that from here “Claudio’s speeches rely more and more on the verbal tricks recorded in the rhetorical texts of the time” and that this particular speech is of the “idiom that Shakespeare will overtly ridicule at the turn of the century” (4). Indeed, Claudio’s speech sounds very much like devolved euphuism. Shakespeare’s use of this sad recourse to rhetorical manuals to characterize Claudio as weak or cruel reinforces the idea that his plays espoused values that were opposed to or alternate from courtesy literature.

Even when everyone professes friendship, language feels untrustworthy. When Claudio first broaches the subject of Hero, the Prince responds, “Amen, if you love her, for the lady is very well worthy.”

CLAUDIO: You speak this to fetch me in, my lord.

PRINCE: By my troth, I speak my thought.

CLAUDIO: And in faith, my lord, I spoke mine, (ll. 217-221)

It is not enough for these witty “gallants,” as Benedick will call them (3.2.15), to say honestly what they think in order to be believed. They must first confirm it with repetition and then use an oath to indicate real sincerity.

What these exchanges show is the danger of wit in incompetent hands; they have so twisted language for the sake of appearing wise that it fails to retain meaning. The play’s outcome in which the “shallow fools” (5.1.243), Dogberry and his men, bring a plot to light that the Prince and Claudio never even suspect despite Don John’s known propensity for villainy, proves just how incompetent the Prince and Claudio are in the exercise of their wits (in the sense of intellect). Their appalling conversation just preceding this revelation, however, would be sufficient proof in itself. First, they pay Leonato’s lament (“Thou hast killed my child” [88]) no heed, each refusing at different points to interact with him at all (87, 120), though it registers that Hero is dead. A few moments later, in the course of raillery on Benedick’s lack of wit, the Prince refers to Hero as the “old man’s daughter” (190), as if he barely knows her. This insensitivity might pass as lost in the translation to a modern sensibility if it were not for the fact that Benedick resists it, too.

He refuses to be goaded into partaking of their wit or furnishing them with entertainment. He has come to issue a challenge to Claudio, which he does, but then

cannot leave without a more general rebuke about the preceding jesting, starting with Claudio:

BENEDICK: ... I will leave you now to your gossip-like humor. You break jests as braggarts do their blades, which, God be thanked, hurt not. -- My lord, for your many courtesies, I thank you. I must discontinue your company. Your brother the Bastard is fled from Messina. You have among you killed a sweet and innocent lady. For my Lord Lackbeard there, he and I shall meet, and till then peace be with him.

[*Benedick exits.*]

PRINCE: He is in earnest.

CLAUDIO: In most profound earnest, and, I'll warrant you, for the love of Beatrice.

PRINCE: And hath challenged thee?

CLAUDIO: Most sincerely (5.1.197-210).

Given the respect they seem to evince for Benedick's company and his wit, this is the moment in which the Prince and Claudio might re-examine their conduct (and in fact, this is exactly what screenwriter / director Kenneth Branagh chooses to have them do in his 1993 film, thereby mitigating their callousness). In the actual play, they decide that Benedick is in the wrong and resort to their weak raillery, once again, with this exchange:

PRINCE: What a pretty thing man is when he goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit!

CLAUDIO: He is then a giant to an ape; but then is an ape a doctor to such a man (211- 4).

The exchange is a repetition of Benedick's earlier witticisms on marriage and romance from the first scene of the play, only much inferior. There are attempts at polished rhetorical figures, but they simply fall flat. The sentiments are typical, and their expression reveals nothing novel about the condition of the man in love.

Benedick's unwillingness to go along with the shallow jests of the Prince and Claudio is, as they rightly assess, the result of his love for Beatrice. It has made him both "earnest" and "sincere," attitudes, the play tells us, that are opposed to wit. For Benedick, something is now more important than scoring his next bit of cultural capital. What marks Benedick's wit as superior in this play is not just the exercise of it but the appropriate resistance to it, a resistance that the play shows us in other, perhaps unlikely sources, such as Hero.

Hero is one of those Shakespearean heroines who comes in for much abuse for her milquetoast character. That she takes back so unworthy a suitor as Claudio has proven himself seems to negate the possibility that she has any personal agency or common sense. But in the scene in which she and Ursula trick Beatrice (3.1), Hero displays a remarkable understanding of the ungenerous, selfish and even dangerous nature of wit, saying that Beatrice's wit "Values itself so highly that to her / All matter else seems weak" and that "She cannot love...she is so self-endear'd" (ll. 55-58). These are dangerous faults of character. Hero then goes on to give examples of Beatrice's ungenerous caricatures of various men:

If fair faced

She would swear the gentleman should be her sister;

If black, why, Nature, drawing of an antic,

Made a foul blot; if tall, a lance ill-headed...

And never gives to truth and virtue that

Which simpleness and merit purchaseth (64-7, 73-4).

Either Hero is quoting Beatrice's wit directly, or she is personally capable of more wit than she generally avails herself of, meaning that she actively resists wit, perhaps because she sees it as opposed to truth, virtue and love. Hero then suggests the more deadly possibilities of wit, first by saying that Beatrice could "press [her] to death with wit" (81) and that "an ill word may empoison liking" (91).

Beatrice's reaction is one of complete surprise. "Can this be true?" she asks. "Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much? (113-4). She just thought she was being entertaining. The reason Beatrice misinterprets the way her wit is received is because, to her, wit is so clearly just a trick of language, a game. That Benedick understands wit in this same way is what makes him a proper partner for her. Indeed, within the realm of wit, they are extremely careful not to go too far, as their wit combat from the top of the play indicates.

Beatrice and Benedick's first exchange continues the "merry war" (1.1.60) we are informed they wage whenever they meet. An analysis of their jibes through the rhetorical standards of courtesy literature might reveal varying levels of witty competence; Della Casa, for example, would almost certainly disapprove of Beatrice's "parroting"

Benedick's previous line. Nevertheless, the play insists that these two characters are wits and as such, we may take what they say as witty. What I find more interesting, once we accept their uncontested status as wits, is an analysis of the way they collaborate in this contest and the opportunities for wit that they let pass.

The opening shot is Beatrice's "I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick, nobody marks you" (111). This is an important point. Beatrice is not merely saying that he is being ignored by his betters, nor that his lack of audience renders him a babbling fool talking to no one, nor is she merely suggesting that he only talks when he is sure he can be performing, although all of these are certainly part of the jab. But perhaps even more to the point, Beatrice is reminding Benedick that he is missing his opportunity to earn more reputational capital. The implicit and galling accusation, which is the real point of the jab, is that he is a base social climber. Benedick responds in kind, suggesting that Beatrice engages in mere detraction.

BENEDICK: What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

BEATRICE: Is it possible disdain should die while she have such meet food to feed it as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain if you come in her presence.

BENEDICK: Then is courtesy a turncoat.

The accusation that Beatrice is disdainful parallels her accusation of Benedick that he is socially ambitious, both characteristics that were antithetical to courtesy and both regularly, almost uncritically repudiated by courtesy literature. Thus Shakespeare starts Beatrice and Benedick in a fairly conventional exchange, suggesting that they are both

well-versed in courtesy book techniques. This is just the opening salvo, however; having established their authority as witty characters, Shakespeare quickly moves them beyond this mundane debate.

Benedick changes tack in the middle of the line, leaving this rather bloodless exchange of form for more personal territory. It is clear from the text<sup>12</sup> that Beatrice and Benedick had some sort of romance in which, as McCollum puts it, “Beatrice felt she had been deceived into uncovering too much affection for him” (172)<sup>13</sup> and that he appears to have jilted her. He reminds her that he remains uncommitted:

BENEDICK: But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted;  
and I would I could find it in my heart that I had not such a hard heart, for  
truly I love none.

It is telling that Beatrice does not take the easy witticism here (something like “True, you love none truly but all falsely”). Perhaps to do so would expose her still-smarting wound, or perhaps she simply feels that it would be untrue or hopes that it is untrue. Instead she implies that she was never interested in the first place.

BEATRICE: A dear happiness to women. They would else have been  
troubled by a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood I am of  
your humor for that. I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man  
swear he loves me.

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<sup>12</sup> See *Much Ado* 1.1.73-5 Beatrice says that Benedick quickly changes his new sworn brothers, implying faithlessness; 1.1.188 Beatrice is possessed by an avenging “fury”; 2.1.271-281 Beatrice admits that Benedick lent her his heart, but then took it back again.

<sup>13</sup> McCollum goes on to assert that “[i]n the nineteenth century such a motivation would bring on a suicide; in Shakespeare's play, it deepens the wit” (172), connecting wit to much darker impulses than is generally noted, especially by McCollum himself who sees wit as a generally positive force in *Much Ado*.



Again, Benedick does not take the overt spinster joke (“Don’t worry, it’ll never happen”) that she has left wide open for him. Perhaps he too finds this joke untenable because he knows it to be untrue, or perhaps the fact that he avoids it suggests that he senses it is too cruel, especially from a former admirer. Instead he gives a sort of mock benediction:

BENEDICK: God keep your Ladyship still in that mind, so some gentleman or other shall 'scape a predestinate scratched face.

The jibe is almost banal, a recourse to a customary source of wit (woman as cat), which allows Benedick to pull the conversation back from the precipice of personal cruelty. From here, follows a rapid-fire exchange of witticisms, each one building on an element in the line before it, the “parrot”-ing Benedick refers to:

BEATRICE: Scratching could not make it worse an 'twere such a face as yours were.

BENEDICK: Well, you are a rare parrot-teacher.

BEATRICE: A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours.

BENEDICK: I would my horse had the speed of your tongue and so good a continuer, but keep your way, i' God's name, I have done.

BEATRICE: You always end with a jade's trick. I know you of old.

Beatrice’s emotions in this moment are complex, but it seems reasonable to suggest that disappointment figures strongly in to them. Benedick’s dropping out of the wit competition, his “jade’s trick,” is unworthy of the wit Beatrice knows him to possess. The consequence of Beatrice’s disappointment should be an inevitable distrust of Benedick and his words, but these two continue to engage, perhaps hopeful that the other will

eventually fulfill the role that he or she envisions for the other. They recognize each other as equals in wit; this is why Benedick seeks Beatrice out at the masked dance and why Beatrice can give such an instant analysis of Benedick's position in Don Pedro's court (she has clearly given it some thought). Their equality lies not simply in the ability to parry and thrust on equal footing, but in their understanding of the illusory quality of wit, on the fact that they both know that wit is essentially a trick. Since they each know that the other "gets" it, they can trust from the other what they and the play have deemed as essentially untrustworthy, easily manipulated language.

Benedick's first conversation with Claudio about Hero shows just how much of a trick Benedick considers wit. When Claudio asks for his opinion about Hero, Benedick has to reply with his own question, "Do you question me as an honest man should do, for my simple true judgment? Or would you have me speak after my custom, as being a professed tyrant to their sex?" (1.1.161-65). In other words, is Claudio sincere or does he speak "in sport" (ll. 173)? Is he looking for an honest opinion or for some entertainment? Benedick is perfectly capable of delivering either, but first he must ascertain exactly what Claudio wants. If it is entertainment, he has a ready set of "customary" jests which he can easily dust off and adapt to the situation. This understanding of wit as a mere set of tools to be fitted to the situation at hand gives the lie to the received courtly ideal of wit as an inspiration of the moment, although the very existence of rhetorical manuals and courtesy books already called that claim into question.

Benedick, although he most often gives the appearance of not having to work for his wit, knows that his rhetorical skills are the result of work. If they were "natural," he

would have no conscious idea that he was at liberty *not* to choose them; they would simply pop out in the moment of inspiration. Shakespeare's Benedick admits, as Castiglione's Count Lewis cannot, that this idea of inspired wit is essentially illusory.

Some courtesy literature did openly acknowledge the illusory quality of wit, but did not generally allow it to taint the necessity of wit to the ideal courtier. For example, Della Casa, in *Galateo*, writes that “[s]allies of wit are nothing but tricks of illusion” (66). For Della Casa, however, that means that “since illusion requires delicacy and skill, it can only be effected by astute people who have a ready inspiration.” Della Casa's discomfort with misused wit arises from the clumsy deployment of illusion, and his solution is that the wit must be an inspiration that comes upon a person already well-versed in wit, but that wit was an illusion created by deploying the right tools was not under debate.

Shakespeare, as a playwright who must regularly construct such witticisms, also understood the illusory quality of wit. Because the characters and not the playwright himself use the witticism, the playwright is deeply aware of how little wit is the result of inspiration and how much the result of toil. In that sense, playwrights shared common ground with courtesy writers on the subject of wit. Where these writers diverge, however, is in the question of whether a witticism should be deployed at all. For the playwright who must get his characters to a successful conclusion in a way that seems consistent with the rest of the character's behavior, the need to occasionally let a joke go, that is, to stop the wit, is very much alive. The question I believe Shakespeare takes up is not simply, “Is this witticism funny?” since getting an audience to laugh is fairly easy, but rather “Is this witticism good?”

Benedick suggests as much. When he warns Claudio and the Prince,

Nay, mock not, mock not. The body of your discourse is sometimes  
guarded with fragments and the guards are but slightly basted on either.  
Ere you flout old ends any further, examine your conscience  
(1.1.279-283).

he is calling their attention to the necessity of charitable wit, that is, the charity to let the occasional opportunity go. For Benedick, all witticisms are to some extent “old ends” and their application is a matter of conscience, the mental faculty that guides moral behavior. His essential warning is: be careful, I temper my mockery of your worn jests out of conscience and concern for you, so see that you do the same.

The Prince and Claudio, as noted above, are not quite witty enough to understand the underlying principles of wit, as Benedick and Beatrice do, so they take any opportunity presented to them, even that presented by an inferior. For example, when Dogberry comes to report his discovery of Borachio and Conrade’s offenses, the Prince parodies the constable’s malaprop-laden speech patterns.

PRINCE: First, I ask thee what they have done; thirdly, I ask thee what's  
their offence; sixth and lastly, why they are committed; and to conclude,  
what you lay to their charge (5.1.230-233).

In mocking Dogberry, the Prince mocks a person whose serious sense of duty (admittedly with a sense of self-importance) leads him to take an unpleasant and potentially dangerous civic position in service to his own prince. Dogberry may be tiresome and silly, but surely a true servant-citizen deserves a more charitable response from the

Prince, who must see the value of such persons in his own realm. Even Leonato, harried on the morning of his daughter's wedding, lets Dogberry and Verges babble for fifty lines, answers their request and remembers to offer them wine, charity both spiritual and material (3.5.1-51). The Prince allows Dogberry to get out only five lines (5.1.225-9) before his rather ungenerous response.

It is telling that after his effective policing is revealed and the Prince and Claudio have been properly chastised by Leonato, Dogberry is allowed to give a parting speech, equal in nonsense to the rest of his lines and ending, "and if a merry meeting may be wished, God prohibit it" (5.1.340-1). It is even more telling that, in this moment, no one says "Amen." No one takes the succulently easy joke that Dogberry leaves out because it is essentially uncharitable and ungenerous, essentially not a good joke. As a playwright concerned with leaving his audience in good spirits and with bringing the play to a conclusion of union, Shakespeare lets lie what would be a malicious jibe in this situation.

Shakespeare ends *Much Ado* with a final repudiation of wit:

BENEDICK: I will tell thee what, prince; a college of wit-crackers cannot flout me out of my humor. Dost thou think I care for a satire or an epigram? No. If a man will be beaten with brains, he shall wear nothing handsome about him (5.4.104-108).

In other words, wit makes even those things which are "handsome" and pleasing, those things that make life more enjoyable, seem silly, and it is, therefore, essentially unfair and leads to an emptier existence. Benedick's ultimate conclusion that "man is a giddy thing" (112) is not particularly profound, but it does recommend generosity in dealing

with each other's foibles, since all men share this universal fault of giddiness. That generosity does not extend to more serious faults, however. The penultimate line of the play promises that tomorrow Benedick will devise "brave punishments" (ll. 132) for the villainous Don John. Despite its rather grim nature, that promise is still in keeping with the general privileging of union over wit. Don John's malice combined with Borachio's cunning was used to break up the play's unions among Leonato's household and the Prince's entourage. In the end, such wit is repudiated. The effect is a conclusion in which not only the marriage union prevails but community unity does too.

*Much Ado About Nothing* was not Shakespeare's only meditation on wit. Later works find him returning to it in more explicit and often darker ways. It is possible, for instance, to read Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1601-2) as Shakespeare's exploration of various kinds of wit, one that explicitly explores wit's connection to malice. In reference to Menelaus' situation, that of ancient cuckold sacrificed to Helen and Paris' lust, the clown Thersites notes that even malice could not make his position more appalling:

--to what form but that he is should *wit larded with malice and malice farced with wit* turn him to? To an ass, were nothing; he is both ass and ox. To an ox, were nothing; he is both ox and ass. To be a dog, a mule, a cat, a fitchew, a toad, a lizard, an owl, a puttock, or a herring with a roe, I would not care; but to be Menelaus! (5.1.56-62, emphasis mine).

The conceit here is of an objectified wit basted over with malice and an objectified malice stuffed (“farced”) with wit, rather like turkeys. And like turkeys, it is possible to enjoy each element without the other (turkeys need not be stuffed or basted to be delicious), but certainly combining the two, to follow the conceit, heightens the pleasure each can give. At the same time, Thersites’ implication is, when used together, wit and malice create a more distressing effect on the object of scorn than either did by itself. The alternatives which Thersites imagines as preferable to being Menelaus -- ox, ass, dog, mules, stinking polecat and so on -- illustrate the kind of malicious slanders that would be possible if one were to combine wit and malice.

Thersites’ speech comes late in the play, after we have seen the characters work their versions of wit on each other. Earlier in the play, Ulysses has called attention to the danger of a slanderous wit, reporting that Achilles has decided not to fight for Greece in part because the “scurril jests” (1.3.148) which he and Patroclus enjoy while ridiculing the leaders of Greece has devalued their military operations so greatly in Achilles’ eyes that he sees no value in the fight. Ulysses describes a scene in which Patroclus “pageants” (151) Agamemnon and Nestor for a lounging Achilles until the latter cannot take so much laughter and calls out, “O! enough, Patroclus, / Or give me ribs of steel! I shall split all / In pleasure of my spleen” (176-178). The spleen was considered the “seat of laughter and mirth” (*OED* 1.c), although connotations of the spleen as the “seat of melancholy and morose feelings” (1.b), “caprice” (4.b), “hot or proud temper” (5) and “violent ill-nature and ill-humour” (6) were also current. Ulysses’ evocation of spleen here reinforces his distrust of such wit. The “all” that Ulysses fears Achilles will split is

Greece; although the immediate danger is to Achilles' own person, the destruction of that person would be, Ulysses argues, the destruction of Greece.

As a consummate politician, however, Ulysses is able to slide easily between the personal and the political, framing the danger of wit above as a political liability to Agamemnon's court, while later using his own wit to appeal to Achilles' personal desire for long-lasting glory, suggesting a possible virtuous use of wit. The end result, however, is an Achilles who sets upon an unarmed Hector with a small army of followers; Hector dies and Achilles has the credit, but in Shakespeare's play, such credit is highly mitigated by the dishonorable method by which it was attained. Achilles, driven by Ulysses' cunning, sacrifices his love for Polyxena and his own personal sense of honor. Shakespeare's play leaves us with the impression that wit is an essentially destructive force.

Yet never is the destructive nature of wit so clear as in Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604). Iago, one of the literature's greatest villains, is also one of its most charming because he is one of its most witty. His speeches are so well written, his tenor so boldly unrepentant, his intellect so quick, his ability to shift attitudes so facile that he becomes as fun as he is horrifying. Despite his undeniable malice -- or indeed because of it -- Iago's wit is vastly superior to those around him. He has wit in the sense of *ingenium*, his quick mind able to turn chance occurrences to meet his needs. For example, Iago's initial plan to undo Othello is to rile up Brabantio whom he expects will ruin Othello with the Senate. But war with Cyprus intervenes and Othello is too necessary to Venice's safety for the Senate to cast him off. Undaunted, Iago adjusts to the new situation, shifting





annoyed with Cassio's inability to follow his metaphor as, almost with a sigh it seems, he dumbs it down to a two-word reply. Even if Cassio might be forgiven for not being able to switch between talk of war and talk of marriage as quickly as Iago, it is difficult to forgive his follow-up question: "To who?" Later in the play, we learn that Cassio acted as a go-between for Othello and Desdemona when they were courting (3.3.105-112). The fact that he cannot even guess at whom Othello might have married seems to suggest very weak brains indeed.

Iago's language skills are on display once again when, goaded by Desdemona to write her praise, he falls to extempore versifying. The subject is, not coincidentally, the intersection of beauty and wit in a woman. After dismissing a few of his verses as "old fond paradoxes" (2.1.153), that is, not ingenious but standard or customary jests, she challenges him to speak in praise of "one that in the authority of her merit did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself?" (160-2). The meaning of this phrase is glossed as "demand the approval even of entirely malicious people" (n161-2). Iago produces ten lines of neat, clean rhymes in praise of a truly superior Renaissance woman -- never proud, never loud, never vengeful, always mild, wise and discreet -- but then ends with a couplet that capsizes the image he has drawn:

IAGO:           *She was a wight, if ever such (wight) were --*

DESDEMONA:       To do what?

IAGO:           *To suckle fools and chronicle small beer.*

Desdemona calls this a “most lame and impotent conclusion!” (173-5). What Desdemona proves here is that she does not actually understand the nature of malice and how malice turns wit to detraction.

More than that, she cannot stop her own giddy wit at Iago’s expense. Having pushed him in to this display, she pronounces him “lame” and “impotent.” These words did not yet have their sexual connotations, but they are still poorly chosen. Iago already feels passed over in favor of a young, foppish imbecile; these words meaning, respectively, “maimed, halting” (OED 2a) and “physically weak...decrepit” (OED 2) carry a sting. Her instruction to Emilia which follows, not to learn from Iago, may seem to him a confirmation of his declining powers, first in the military and now at home.

Desdemona then turns her high spirits on Cassio and asks him to agree that Iago is “a most profane and liberal counselor” (2.1.178-9). Cassio, who was not even able to figure out that Othello wed the woman he himself had been helping Othello to woo, has the gall to agree that Desdemona “may relish [Iago] more in a soldier than in a scholar” (ll. 180-1); in other words, Cassio agrees that Iago is not adept with language, as a scholar (like himself) would be. Neither one of them seems to realize that Iago’s lame and impotent conclusion was a conscious and brilliant use of language, a puncturing of the Renaissance ideal of womanhood with the reality of her life’s toil. Rather than showing *his* lack of intelligence, their failure to realize the ingenuity of his conclusion marks them as less intelligent than he is and perhaps seals their fates.

Iago’s virtuosic display of wit is, of course, Act III, sc. 3, sometimes called the “education scene,” in which, by a series of linguistic traps, he is able to lead Othello from

perfect trust of his wife to deep suspicion. Iago's technique is simplicity itself; he will begin with a few well chosen words so as to plant the seeds of jealousy and follow it with hesitations in speech to make Othello think he is hiding something. Importantly, Iago will not come out and accuse Desdemona and Cassio of infidelity here but will only suggest that Othello be vigilant. For example, watching Cassio exit, he begins:

IAGO: Ha. I like not that.

OTHELLO: What dost thou say?

IAGO: Nothing, my lord; or if -- I know not what.

OTHELLO: Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?

IAGO: Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it

That he would steal away so *guiltylike*,

Seeing your coming (ll. 37-43, emphasis mine).

Here Iago introduces the idea that Cassio has something to be guilty about, which of course he does; this scene takes place after Cassio's drunken brawling and dismissal from service. It would be just as easy for Othello to put this guilty slinking down to embarrassment over his drunkenness, but later, when Othello has decided that he has slept with Desdemona, it will become part of the proof of their affair.

Iago's hesitation -- "or if--I know not what" -- is also calculated to arouse suspicion. Othello knows the technique but fails to recognize it as such in Iago, saying,

And for I know thou 'rt full of love and honesty

And weigh'st thy words before thou giv'st them breath,

Therefore, these stops of thine fright me the more.

For such things in a false, disloyal knave  
Are tricks of custom; but in a man that's just,  
They're close dilations working from the heart  
That passion cannot rule (ll. 136-43).

Othello's mistake here is the same as Cassio and Desdemona's above: they all underestimate Iago's wit. The common description of Iago as "honest" is not simply ironic. *Honest* was often used as a patronizing epithet for an inferior (*OED* 1c), in this case, an inferior mind. Othello's failure to recognize Iago's wit here is a reiteration of his failure to value him as a lieutenant as well as his failure to judge Cassio properly in all situations.

Later in the play, Lodovico, the counselor from Venice, will ask of Othello, "Are his wits safe?" (4.1.304). Obviously, the answer is no, they are not. Iago's wit has intervened to turn his. Othello experiences a linguistic and logical breakdown: "To confess and be hanged for his labor. First to be hanged, then to confess...Pish! Noses, ears and lips --is't possible? Confess -- handkerchief -- O devil!" (46-52). So turned are his wits that even when Iago makes the harrowing suggestion that Othello should commit the close killing of strangulation in the marriage bed, a moment at which any sane individual would reassess his friend's advice, Othello's only response is "Good, good. The justice of it pleases" (228).

The play presents several opportunities for the characters to resist wit, both Iago's and their own. They fail to do so, and tragedy ensues. *Othello* is Shakespeare's strongest condemnation of wit. Iago's final line, "From this point forth I never will speak

word” (5.2. 336), seems to suggest the only way wit can be stopped. If that is the case, then Shakespeare is presenting us with a very bleak picture of a society in which wit and its inevitable malice run amok.

Courtesy literature’s insistence on wit as an essential part of the courtier’s character creates the possibility of developing such a society. Shakespeare’s plays suggest a solution to this danger that requires an alternate valuing of wit, reveals it as an unsatisfying illusion, and demands its eventual repudiation. In that way, as I have suggested in previous chapters, the theater helped create an alternative code of conduct to those offered by the court.

As noted above, however, the attitude that Shakespeare represents was eventually supplanted by the Jonsonian / courtly attitude toward wit. Berglund’s “libertine language,” identified above as part of Iago’s repertoire, is given full license to flourish on the Restoration stage, in part because some of that drama was written by the very libertines who occupied Charles II’s exiled court. In the concluding chapter which follows, I will examine more fully what happened within the theater to wit and the other theatrical values that have been under consideration in this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 5

### AFTER THE RENAISSANCE

The values I have been ascribing to the Renaissance theater -- communality, self-sacrifice, sympathy, sincerity, willingness to risk -- may seem counter-intuitive when one looks at the theater today or even in the periods which just succeeded the Renaissance. In the Restoration, of course, the demand for plays that celebrated wit above everything else was almost maniacal. As the industry grew and expanded, there soon came the rise of celebrity culture which came to dominate the 19th-century English and American stages (initial American resistance to the theater had opened up the former colonies as performance destinations for British actors, tying them closely together <sup>1</sup>). At the same time, there was the rise of acting systems, some of which seemed very close indeed to the rhetorical systems of Renaissance courtesy books, and whose very purpose seems to have been to mitigate risk for the actor. Similarly, experimental theater arose, emphasizing intellectual and political goals and making it more than simply telling the story. These changes, it is assumed, were the inevitable result of industry expansion, a narrative that is undeniably true.

The following, however, is also true. In 2009, the *LA Stage Times* reported the unearthing of a theatrical Code of Ethics written in 1945. It was found among the papers of a longtime theater actress named Kathleen Freeman, and it had apparently been part of

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion of colonial American theater, see Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson*. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press, 2003; and Jeffrey H. Richards *Theater Enough: American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage, 1607-1789*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991.

the informal contract she asked the members of her fledgling company, the Circle Theatre, to sign. These rules espouse some of the very tenets that have been under discussion in this dissertation, for example:

I shall forego the gratification of my ego for the demands of the play.

and

I shall never “put on an act” while viewing other artists’ work as a member of an audience, nor shall I make caustic criticism from jealousy or for the sake of being smart.

These rules, 17 in all, demand attention to each other and the needs of the theatrical enterprise, and Freeman learned them from a life spent among performers. According to the article, Freeman was the daughter of vaudevillians and her “childhood experience of touring with her parents inspired this Code of Ethics.” Freeman also worked in the theater her entire life and was described by those who knew her as a “consummate stage performer.” When it reemerged in 2009, her Code of Ethics was greeted by many fellow actors as essential reading for every green room. Even Equity Councillor Jane A. Johnston is quoted as saying, “I wish I had been told some of ‘the rules’ when I was a young actress instead of having to pick them up as I went along.”

As Johnston’s comment suggests, the rules of the theater are rarely written down. They are instead picked up along the way by a process somewhere between trial-and-error and osmosis. Yet they are instantly recognized as essential and truthful expressions of theatrical values. From looking at Freeman’s Code of Ethics, it is clear that many of the points I have been trying to make about the behavioral values written into



Shakespeare's plays persisted: specifically, the need to sacrifice one's ego and any tendency toward self-aggrandizement for the good of the play; the need to sacrifice the witty remark for the good of the collaboration; and the value of sincere attention to the work of your fellows.

Of course, the fact that Freeman felt she had to write these rules down suggests that there were those who needed instruction in proper behavior for the profession. This need arose in part because, certainly by 1945 if not before, the theater had become deeply fractured. Moreover, new pressures arose from outside of the original theater community that had caused changes in the industry and its values. In this concluding chapter, I will attempt to trace the appearance of alternative values and interests as they arose in the periods following the Renaissance, from the Restoration to the present day, as well as to identify the ways in which those Renaissance values persisted and, more recently, have reappeared in the modern theater. The following pages will provide a wide historical overview with occasional stops at key texts and will intertwine that narrative line with explorations of acting techniques and theatrical mores. In the end, I hope to make sense of this sweeping historical narrative and why it matters.

### **New Influences, New Attitudes**

In the previous chapter, I argued that Shakespeare shows us the importance of eschewing wit for the sake of the happy ending. By the time George Etherege wrote the Restoration comedy *The Man of Mode* (1676), this practice was no longer considered

essential. Malicious wit had become an unabashed personal asset for characters as well as an expectation for the play itself.

In Etherege's play, the word *malice* and its variants (*malicious* and *maliciously*) appear twelve times, very often in close proximity to a discussion about or display of *wit*. The first of these wit-malice verbal conjunctions occurs only a few minutes into the play. Rakish hero Dorimant has been told that a woman new to town has her eye on him. The woman turns out to be Harriet, the play's heroine who will become his object of affection. In getting the particulars on Harriet, Dorimant asks his friend Medley, "Has she wit?" and Medley responds, "More than is usual in her sex, and as much malice." Dorimant's response, "Flesh and blood cannot hear this and not long to know her," (1.1.62-64) indicates clearly that wit and malice add to Harriet's already substantial attractions of wealth and beauty. The rest of the scene is occupied by Dorimant's explaining how he will divest himself of his now-tiresome lover, Mrs. Loveit, in a particularly cruel manner. Medley finds his plan both cunning and entertaining and offers to help execute it, but Dorimant says he has already enlisted his new lover, Bellinda, who also happens to be Mrs. Loveit's best friend. He assures Medley that she will be able to manage it "with a little more malice than you can" (1.1.89).

The connection between *wit* and *malice* was noticed, though not celebrated, in several religious tracts of the mid-17th century, and often the two terms are linked to a

third, *power*.<sup>2</sup> In these tracts, wit and malice are always tools of the devil, used by mankind to do evil.<sup>3</sup> One of these tracts by Scottish minister, William Annand, entitled *Mysterium pietatis or The mysterie of godlinesse* (1671) connects malice and mischief with Jews, noting that Jews “are better studied in *malice and mischief*, then other men, for which each Visier, and Basha of state in Turkey, keeps a Jew of his privy Council, by whose *malice, wit, experience, intelligence*, it's thought most of that mischief is contrived” (11, emphasis mine). The equation of the Jew and the Turkish infidel with these qualities is shorthand for Annand’s audience: malice and mischief, especially as combined with wit, are the tools of those who killed Jesus, a connection Annand actually makes just prior to the statement quoted above. Interestingly, however, Annand’s text offers another layer of interpretation to these qualities. He suggests that these reputed national traits arose as a result of the Jewish Diaspora. Jews, his argument goes, have been dispersed throughout the world and have no homeland of their own; in their division from one another and from their land, these qualities arose, suggesting the root and nourishment of wit and malice is division.

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<sup>2</sup> I have been unable as yet to locate the source of the triad, either in collections of proverbs or in biblical materials. However, variations on this triad are abundant. For example, *malice, power* and *policy* appear in Henry Burton’s *For God, and the King. The summe of two sermons preached on the fifth of November last in St. Matthewes Friday-streete. 1636* (1636), John Deacon’s *A summarie ansvere to al the material points in any of Master Darel his bookes* (1601), Thomas Hall’s *A practical and polemical commentary* (1658) and Edward Reynold’s *An explication of the hundreth and tenth Psalme* (1632). At times, *wiles, cunning* and *subtlety* are also sometimes used in place of *wit* or *policy*, as in Dickson’s *Therapeutica sacra* (1664), Thomas Edwards’ *The first and second part of Gangraena* (1646) and Arthur Hildersam’s *CLII lectures vpon Psalme LI* (1635).

<sup>3</sup> See John Toombs’s *Christs commination against scandalizers* (1641) on “scandalizers” who inflict pain on others “according to the divers degrees of their malice, wit and power” (358); Gerard Winstanley’s *The mysterie of God, concerning the whole creation, mankinde* (1649) in “the multitude of temptations which the Beast, through her wit, malice, and power, casts upon the Saints, like a flood of water to drown them. And to overthrow the work of God” (39); and David Dickson’s *A brief explication of the first fifty Psalms* (1655) notes that David, when yoked in the fight against an adversary, can rely on God “as his high Tower, whence he might look downe, and despise all the wit, malice, and power of his enemies” (38-9)

This hypothesis is intriguing when we consider that much Restoration comedy was written by English men who had spent their lives divided from their homeland in the exiled court of Charles II. Furthermore, Michael Neill has argued that the audience of the Caroline theater was tremendously attached to wit in part because Caroline drama came to reflect the taste of the court (341-2). That is, greater attachment to the court means greater attachment to wit. If that was true of the Caroline theater, how much truer of Restoration drama, whose premier playwrights were direct friends of the king, a person whose entire existence is predicated on being special and therefore separate from everyone else. That the king would enjoy entertainment that trades on comic techniques of separation is hardly surprising. Perhaps, too, this attraction to wit arose in the exiled court, as in William Annand's *Jewish Diaspora*, as a result of being separated from its homeland. Thus the main influence on these playwrights was not theatrical in origin but expressly courtly; their lives were spent in the court, not the theater. Here, then, is an early step in the slow process of outside influences changing the theater.

These differing values become apparent when comparing the end of Etherege's play with the end of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. At the end of *The Man of Mode*, Dorimant is confronted with his former lovers while standing next to his professed new one, and he has the opportunity to expose both Mrs. Loveit and Bellinda to the world's censure and to entertain his witty new love, Harriet. But he does not take it. The Dorimant of Act I is obsessed with scoring witty points against everyone he encounters in society from the orange woman on up; he would not have scrupled to goad Mrs. Loveit into a public display of weakness, nor to reveal Bellinda as an unfaithful friend and

scandalous woman. By Act V, that is not what he does. Instead, he allows Mrs. Loveit to believe that in Harriet he seeks “a wife - to repair the ruins of my estate that needs it,” the knowledge of which makes Mrs. Loveit’s grief “hang lighter on [her] soul” (5.2.252-3). With this discreet lie, he also buries Bellinda’s conduct which she interprets as a sign that he is “tender of [her] honor” (5.2.250). Dorimant’s malicious wit, his desire to separate and hold another out for ridicule, has disappeared and in its place has been left the desire to be coupled, a feeling he describes to Harriet by saying, “this day my soul has quite given up her liberty” (5.2.326).

Lest such a display of sentiment and sincerity nauseate his audience members, however, Etherege gives them a last laugh. To the changed Dorimant’s heartfelt confession, Harriet responds, “This is more dismal than the country” (5.2.327). The jibe casts doubt on the possible future happiness of the couple. In Alexander Leggatt’s terms, it presents a fresh disaster in order to distance the play from any expression of sincerity (4). Comedy historian Andrew Stott characterizes the 17th-century’s comedic temperament as “ironic, dramatically individualistic and largely agnostic” (55); in other words, the audience was suspicious of the possibility of real union and skeptical of professions of fidelity. Harriet’s final joke dissipates any sentiment Dorimant has created so as to satisfy that knowing worldview, while the play is still able to adhere to generic conventions of a promised marriage.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the end of *Much Ado About Nothing* shows us a resistance to wit in the end which the playwright upholds. Benedick not only stops Beatrice from renewing their wit combat by kissing her, but he himself refuses to respond

in kind to the Prince's jab at Benedick, "the married man."<sup>4</sup> His understanding of the connection between wit and malice makes him abstain from the one to prevent the other from spoiling his marriage. Harriet has no such scruples, nor does the playwright who created her. In many ways, Etherege's attitude toward wit mirrors courtesy literature's insistence that there is no such thing as a bad time to show off one's wit. For that reason, Frank Whigham's arguments about the way wit is used to acquire reputational capital have more force in regard to Restoration plays.<sup>5</sup> Certainly Dorimant is initially only concerned with scoring points by unleashing his wit on others, and in the end, Harriet, his equal, is still playing that game. Again, however, this is a Restoration, not a Renaissance drama. If we look backward and interpret Renaissance drama through a Restoration lens, we run the risk of ascribing to Renaissance drama the attitudes of the Restoration, leading to potential misinterpretations of those earlier texts.

Looking forward, though, Restoration influence is deep and far-reaching. The attitudes Etherege celebrates became the hallmarks of theater throughout the Restoration, and Etherege's artistic line can be traced beyond Congreve and Sheridan to the 19th-century's Dion Boucicault and Anna Cora Mowatt. The exaltation of wit reaches its pinnacle, perhaps, in the plays of Oscar Wilde. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, almost every line is an example of comic inversion via wordplay. The trivial things like eating muffins are taken seriously ("Jack, you are at the muffins again! I wish you wouldn't. There are only two left." -- 2.353) while the serious things like christenings are

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<sup>4</sup> For a longer discussion of this moment, see my previous chapter on *Wit*.

<sup>5</sup> For a longer discussion of reputational capital, please see the *Introduction* to this dissertation.

trivialized (“Oh I might trot around about five” -- 2.125). Wilde’s epigrammatic virtuosity is in full swing as well, giving us famous lines like,

The truth is rarely pure and never simple (1.85).

and

All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does.

That is his (1.229)

That last line, which belongs to Algernon, is followed by Jack’s annoyed response, “Is that clever?” Throughout the scene, in fact, Jack has been continually annoyed with Algernon’s cleverness, telling him no fewer than four times that he is talking “nonsense.” Algernon’s riposte to Jack in this case is, “It is perfectly phrased!” The arrangement of the words is the essential element, not the meaning that the words might carry. As Gwendolyn states in a speech which is sometimes considered Wilde’s artistic and life philosophy: “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing” (3.18).

This elevation of style extends not just to perfect phraseology but to an encapsulating aesthetic. Wilde’s plays, and indeed his own life before prison, were also the epitome of what Andrew Stott calls *camp*, the celebration of the aesthetic as a way of life. Stott, relying on Susan Sontag’s definition, renders the Wildean aesthetic as “Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (58), a conundrum at the heart of my earlier discussion on disguise. Of course, the whole denouement of *The Importance of Being Earnest* rests on the fact that Jack’s name really was Ernest his whole life and that he has been telling the truth all along, not only about his name but about having a disreputable brother who lives in town

(Algernon turns out to be his brother). Thus, the play celebrates style but ends with a reassertion of sincerity (that is, the importance of being earnest).

Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous to argue that Wilde and Shakespeare are giving us the same kind of resolution in their plays with regard to disguise. In *As You Like It*, the characters are forced to drop their façades and reenter the lives they are supposed to be leading; in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the facts of life transform to fit the carefully-crafted fictions already established by the characters. By the time Wilde made such a theatrical triumph with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Shakespeare's kind of theater was almost unrecognizable. Gone was the spartan stage of the Globe, and in its place were lavish sets and costumes, much more similar to court masques than to a Renaissance stage play. Gone too was the Renaissance distrust of artifice. Substance really had given way to show, but, for Wilde, this is a fine thing: the aesthetic experience is celebrated and understood as one of the highest aims of life.

The willingness of the theater to embrace artifice also found its way into acting itself. The result is a process of steadily gaining more and more control over performance by way of the development of a more standardized "craft." It was perhaps inevitable that as the theater became more prominent and interesting to intellectuals, as it did in the 18th century, it would become more interested in itself. One of the reasons our knowledge of Renaissance acting is so imperfect is because Renaissance actors did not think it was useful to record what they did; perhaps they could not imagine that anyone would care, or perhaps they did not feel it could be passed on in writing. In any case, we are left now to piece it together from stray eyewitness accounts and casual references, many of which, as



I have argued in a previous chapter, do not suggest any kind of rigid control. By the time David Garrick appeared in the stage in 1740, there was enough of a concern with and knowledge of acting styles that his style drew favorable comparisons. Usually, Garrick's style of acting is described as "natural" and "easy-going" in comparison to the bombastic acting that was the norm of the day. Such comparisons are reminiscent of Renaissance discussions of overacting found in anti-theatrical texts.<sup>6</sup> We cannot know for certain if we would find Garrick's acting naturalistic (I suspect we would not). Nevertheless, from this point, ideas about acting begin to crop up more and more regularly, and the superiority of one style over another becomes an important question. Indeed, one of the bloodiest events in American theater history, the Astor Place Riots of May 1849, began with a dispute about acting style between the great British actor William Charles Macready and the American tragedian Edwin Forrest and ended with thirty dead theater patrons and about a hundred others wounded.<sup>7</sup> What is particularly interesting about the 19th century theater, however, is how closely British and American theater were allied. The life of Junius Brutus Booth, Sr. is a sort of study in the easy slippage between the two.<sup>8</sup> Booth was one of England's greatest Shakespearean actors until he came to America and became one of her greatest Shakespearean actors, later bringing his American-born sons Junius Jr., Edwin and John Wilkes into the family business as well. Thus did celebrity

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<sup>6</sup> For a longer discussion, see my earlier chapter on *Moderation*.

<sup>7</sup> Macready felt that Forrest acted too much from instinct; Forrest was appalled by a "mincing" step Macready inserted into his portrayal of Hamlet. See Richard Moody, *Astor Place Riots*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958, for a full description of the event.

<sup>8</sup> For an interesting history of the Booth family, see Nora Titone, *My Thoughts Be Bloody: The Bitter Rivalry Between Edwin and John Wilkes Booth That Led to an American Tragedy*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

become associated with acting styles and thus grew an interest in a progressively more developed, codified and therefore controlled way of acting.

Perhaps no acting style is as much maligned as the Delsarte system, known variously as the Delsarte System of Oratory, the Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression, the Delsarte System of Aesthetic Gymnastics, or simply as Delsarte. It was the single most influential acting system of the 19th century (William Charles Macready, for example, was trained by Delsarte) and had its heyday between 1870 and approximately 1920. François Delsarte began his career as a singer but was forced into early retirement due to vocal trouble, a result of poor training. He then began to make a scientific study of acting, based on observation of his fellow human beings' natural reactions in gesture and voice as well as extensive study of human anatomy. If Delsarte's own narrative can be believed, he was driven to do so by his failure to learn how to deliver a particular line ("Ah! how are you, papa Dugrand?") and his inability to imitate his instructors without a great deal of awkwardness.<sup>9</sup> He then set about to create a fairly rigid code of gesture and vocal production as an infallible guide for future actors. Genevieve Stebbins, one of his 19th-century American proponents, argues that "he determined to save others from his fate by seeking and formulating the laws of an art hitherto left to the caprice of mediocrity, or the inspiration of genius" (4). Delsarte's codified system resembles nothing so much as rhetorical manuals such as Bulwer's *Chirologia* and *Chironomia* (both 1644) which became the foundation of Bulwer's later work with the deaf. The underlying principle of Delsarte's system is that there are natural gestures that

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<sup>9</sup> For more about Delsarte and his system, please see *The Essential Delsarte*, John W. Zorn, ed., N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1968 and Genevieve Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression*, Edgar S. Werner, 1886.

communicate meaning; he has discovered what they are and recorded them. All the actor must then do is train his body and voice to reproduce them properly.

Delsarte is an interesting figure because he was a new breed in the theater. Prior to Delsarte, actors learned their craft on the stage, often apprenticing under more experienced professionals or simply by trial and error. David Garrick did do some specific teaching of his own techniques, but he was still primarily an actor, playwright and producer. Delsarte, on the other hand, was primarily a researcher and teacher, not an actor or theater professional. He introduced the idea of acting as a site of study external to the profession itself. *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1871 wrote of him, “He teaches the actor, or, to speak more properly, the man, to know himself, to manage artistically that inimitable instrument which is man himself, all of whose parts contribute to a harmonious unity” (qtd in Zorn 19). This is heady stuff for a profession that had been considered disreputable for the last couple hundred years. Delsarte’s proponents argued vigorously that his system of acting would not make the actor “mechanical and elocutionary” (Stebbins 6) as it was sometimes accused of doing even in its own time. It was meant to open the world of acting up to a wider range of talents and to answer the basic question, “how [is one to perform a scene] if one’s personal experiences do not include the experience one is called upon to portray?”

Constantin Stanislavski, whose system of acting became dominant (not to say hegemonic) in the early and mid-20th century, answered that question in a way that has come down to us as the “magic as if.” The actor remembers from his personal life an experience that was similar to the scene he is supposed to portray, and he acts *as if* he

were in that situation again. In that way, he is able to reproduce the correct emotion for the scene imbuing it with his own presumably realistic emotions. Stanislavski first elucidated his System in *An Actor Prepares* (1936). It was almost a direct response to the Delsarte system and, in that text, Stanislavski describes the difference between the two schools:

He [the Delsarte actor] lives his part as a preparation for perfecting an external form. Once that is determined to his satisfaction he reproduces that form through the aid of mechanically trained muscles. Therefore, in this other school, living your role is not the chief moment of creation as it is with us, but one of the preparatory stages for further artistic work (20).

In the System, however, “*you must live your part every moment that you are playing it, and every time*” (20, emphasis his) and “the very best that can happen is to have the actor completely carried away by the play” (14). The rest of the System consists of a series of exercises and principles meant to allow the actor to infuse his performance with real emotion. If Delsarte acting looked at external forms and tried to master one’s physical and vocal responses, the System directed that outward observation inside, so that the actor came to master his own emotions from which the physical would naturally follow.

In the United States, Stanislavski’s System was transformed by the Group Theatre into what we now call The Method, a school whose influence has been so widespread as to make its tenets the default assumptions for the acting process in modern discourse. Although Stanislavski would come to abandon many of the techniques that he propounds in *An Actor Prepares*, the Group Theatre was characterized by “almost religious

dedication to the Stanislavski system of acting” (Rice 142). The Method went a step further than the System, however. It peeled off the idea of creating a character and argued that the only way truth was to be fully realized onstage was if the actor actually became the character. If he was able to do that, then all his responses would be perfect. The Group Theatre was an incubator for several legendary acting teachers including Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, all of whom went on to teach the Method and to develop their own techniques for “becoming” the character. These schools, especially Strasberg’s Actors Studio, gained notoriety in part because famous and exciting actors of the 1950’s and early 1960’s such as James Dean, Marilyn Monroe and especially Marlon Brando were all a part of the school. The acting that seemed to come out of the Method schools was exciting and fresh in comparison to the rather bland niceness of that period’s other stars.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Brando’s Method-based Fletcher Christian from *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962) seems to us now far more contrived than Johnny Depp’s Captain Jack Sparrow and considerably less truthful.<sup>11</sup>

With this last statement, I do not mean to make a claim that Depp is a better actor than Brando; rather, I think it is necessary to pause for moment in this overview of acting styles to point out how often claims of or the search for naturalism or un-naturalism in acting appear in the discussion. From the time of David Garrick right through to our own,

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Elmer Rice says, “The fact is that many of the Group’s best actors were already well established when they joined the organization and only a few of the neophytes ever rose above mediocrity” (143). Rice’s comment suggests that the Method’s success as an academic program is disproportionate to its actual value as acting technique.

<sup>11</sup> Johnny Depp espouses no particular acting school; instead he picks and chooses what is useful to him from a myriad of different schools. During an interview on *Inside the Actors’ Studio*, he explained his process: “Generally when I’m reading the screenplay, I begin to get flashes, flashes of things, images...and then you sort of throw it all away...you allow yourself the pleasant surprise of what’s going to happen when you’re in there.” Although Depp has Method training, when he speaks of his process, it is the reliance on images which float up that defines his process.

naturalism onstage is seen as a desirable quality, and therefore preferred styles are almost always referred to as being more natural than the ones that come before it. At the same time, one could not say that Depp's portrayal of a heavily-eyelined, vaguely effeminate pirate with the drunken staggers was a feat of naturalism. What made the work of Garrick, Delsarte, Stanislavski, Brando and Depp interesting, however, was not naturalism but novelty which makes their work exciting to watch. Claims of naturalism are a red herring in part because the theater does not reproduce reality; plays may offer a version of reality, but even the most "naturalistic" piece presents, at the very least, a heightened reality.<sup>12</sup> This trend seems to me further evidence that, despite Hamlet's advice to the players, there is no reason to suppose that there was any more naturalism in Renaissance drama than subsequent eras have been capable of producing, and that Hamlet's advice is as much a misinterpretation of acting as such observations about reality on the stage have ever been.

One important theater figure who worked hard to make sure that theater did not reproduce reality was Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's work is part of this trend toward the management of the theatrical experience, although he would likely insist that it is at odds with Stanislavski's System. In some ways Brecht's work harkened back to the Delsarte system and anticipated later gestural training methods such as Anne Bogart's

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<sup>12</sup> There is an old costumer's adage that one hour on the stage is worth eight hours in real life. Costumers thus need to make the costume robust enough to withstand the physical stress the actor puts on the clothes. In other words, you can expect the actor to pack in eight real hours of moving, talking, emoting, sweating and so on for every hour he is on the stage because he is not in reality but in a heightened reality.

Viewpoints.<sup>13</sup> To highlight the socio-political context of the character, Brecht developed the idea of the *Gestus*, which was “a combination of physical gesture and social attitude” (Eddershaw 280). One thing it was decidedly not was Stanislavski’s system of emotionalized acting.

In contrast to the Stanislavskian system, which implied that the actor should find a consistency of character, a ‘through-line’ that made all the actions seem coherent, Brecht insisted that the actors should emphasize the contrasts, the contradictory behavior of the character... This ‘contradictory’ approach is, therefore, significant in showing the spectator that humans are alterable, their behavior is not fixed or inevitable.

The actor was not supposed to become the character and live in the truth of that character’s existence; he was not to *be* the character but to *show* it. Brecht wanted his audience fully cognizant and aware enough to understand his political statements; he worried that the System’s emphasis on emotion short-circuited the audience’s ability to think critically. Moreover, Brecht objected to the “intent to ‘deceive,’ and to lure the audience into an emotional proximity with the characters portrayed” (279). In this way, Brecht seems to find affinity with the contemporary playwright David Mamet who argues that “[t]he attempt to manipulate another’s feelings is blackmail. It is objectionable and

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<sup>13</sup> Viewpoints is a physical vocabulary for the stage that helps actors make physical choices, rather than emotional ones, about how they will behave onstage. The seven classic Viewpoints are gesture, tempo/time, duration, repetition, kinesthetic response, topography and spatial relationships. It was developed by Anne Bogart and is used extensively by her own SITI Company (formerly the Saratoga International Theater Institute) as well as the Actors Theatre of Louisville. See Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. New York: Theater Communications Group, 2005.

creates hatred and hypocrisy” (*True and False* 77); for this reason, among others, Mamet is also highly critical of The Method.

These acting schools and systems very deeply resemble the kinds of codified instruction found in the courtesy literature that has been under discussion throughout this dissertation; those schools with codified gesturing show an especially deep kinship with rhetorical manuals. It is not inconceivable therefore that scholars who wrote about the Renaissance theater in later periods were influenced by what was happening in their contemporary theaters. It is easy to see how the awareness of acting systems in later periods could make one assume that there must have been a similar one in the Renaissance as well. Therefore, looking at courtesy literature as a record of acting would make logical sense. Such scholarship, however, imposes anachronistic ideas on the Renaissance theater, which was, after all, still finding its legs and doing its best to stay afloat. There may have been Renaissance acting training, but we do not have a clear idea of what it was, and given the way that training changes over the centuries, there is no reason to suspect that it was anything like any of the kinds that came after it.

Thus far, then, we have journeyed through a post-Renaissance theater that has ceased to question the merits of wit but rather to embrace it for use in crowd-pleasing comedy; that has embraced artifice in its sets and stories; and that has attempted to mitigate risk through heavily proscriptive acting systems. These fractured systems in particular speak to a fight for the theater’s very soul. Should the theater provide escapism through verisimilitude, or should it make it impossible for the audience to escape in order to achieve nobler political ends? The debate is unresolved, and one’s position on the



purpose of the theater is often determined by where one stages his plays. A community theater, for example, might favor the former ideal while a university drama department the latter, and so on through the various kinds of venues in which theater is created.

Yet throughout this dissertation I have on occasion referred to modern theater practices as evidence of a continuing theatrical code of conduct. I would argue that while outside pressures of economics and politics affected the industry, its core values remained intact. Moreover, in recent years, a considerable amount of commentary has arisen in the theater that questions the intellectualism that gives rise to questions of verisimilitude, among others, and its propensity for lavishness which make it a slave to patronage (or, as it is called now, arts funding). This commentary often seems to seek to reestablish and revive the values that were present at the start of the industry in Renaissance England.

### **What Remains the Same**

#### **Community and the Sympathetic Impulse**

Community remains an essential element in the modern theater. Despite their other theoretical divides, Stanislavski, Brecht and the Group Theatre all emphasized the importance of the community over celebrity, and the process of working with that community was often the real reward of being an actor with those companies, an ideal which Jerzy Grotowski has taken to its extreme.<sup>14</sup> They share this attention to community even with more mainstream organizations like Kathleen Freeman's Circle Theatre.

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<sup>14</sup> Jerzy Grotowski is known for his ongoing theatrical processes in which his small company works together on a piece for months, without any real thought of performance for the public. See *At Work With Grotowski on Physical Action* by longtime Grotowski collaborator Thomas Richards, New York: Routledge, 1995, and *The Theatre of Grotowski* by Jennifer Kumiega, New York: Methuen, 1985.

Looking again at her 1945 Code of Ethics, we find, in addition to the 17 rules of conduct, a paragraph that can be described as an attitudinal manifesto on contribution to the community:

I understand that membership in the Circle Theatre entitles me to the privileges of working, when I am so assigned, in any of the phases of a production, including: props, lights, sound, construction, house management, box office, publicity and stage managing -- as well as acting. I realize it is possible I may not be cast in a part for many months, but I will not allow this to dampen my enthusiasm or desire to work, since I realize without my willingness to do all other phases of theatre work, there would be no theatre for me to act in.

The demand being made of the company member is that s/he be willing to do whatever is necessary for this community, the theater, to succeed. These examples suggest that the ideal of community, so important in the Renaissance theater, still persists. In the late 20th and early 21st century, however, what also emerges is a sense that the theater community is under attack from outside forces that must be in some way repelled. Interestingly, those forces often seem to come in the form of academic and financial influences. Thus the contemporary theater is redefining itself as antagonistic to these forces and using the ideal of community to do so.

Interesting evidence for this antagonism can be found in one of the longest running Broadway shows in history, *A Chorus Line*. The conceit of *A Chorus Line* is that the characters are dancer-singers-actors at a Broadway audition, and the director, instead

of just wanting to see if they have dancing skills, wants to get to know what motivates them as human beings. Thus the show strings together a number of otherwise set-piece-like monologues and songs. One of the more popular songs in the musical is Diana Morales's "Nothing."

"Nothing" tells of the story of Diana's experience in acting class at the High School of the Performing Arts. It is clearly a very devolved Method class led by one Mr. Karp in which the students are directed to "be a table, be a sportscar, ice cream cone." Diana cannot feel anything except that "this bullshit was absurd." To make matters worse, Mr. Karp repeatedly singles her out for ridicule; after one exercise goes awry, even the class calls her "nothing," and, Diana tells us,

Karp allowed it  
Which really made me burn.  
They were so helpful, they called me hopeless.  
Until I really didn't know where else to turn.

Diana eventually finds strength within and realizes that "this man is nothing, this course is nothing," whereupon she finds a "better class."

The real sting of the this song is in the last verse:

Six months later I heard that Karp had died  
So I dug right down to the bottom of my soul  
And cried...  
'Cause I felt...nothing.

In workshops of the show, where only theater people were present, the cast members were “cut” from the final chorus line depending on how well the dancer had done on a given day, a practice continued during Broadway previews which were obviously open to the public. Audiences could sometimes react vehemently when a favorite character like Diana was “cut” from the final chorus line. Actress Marsha Mason is credited with the production’s decision to settle on a now-canonical list of accepted dancers by telling them “you can’t just kill off people’s hope” (Viagas 239). Diana is part of the final chorus line because to cut her would be to cut “hope.”<sup>15</sup>

Part of the reason that Diana is so beloved is because she survived and triumphed over her brutal high school acting class. Karp’s failure to create a community (in fact, to encourage the opposite) makes him a villain to theater people. The real villainy, though, is his destruction of the sympathetic impulse in Diana, rendering her unable to cry at the death of a fellow human being. Diana is an actress; the assumption of her fellow actors is that she is capable of deep feeling. Karp’s behavior has attacked the very heart of what actors do, and Karp is a representative of theater school. Thus *A Chorus Line* sets itself up as antagonistic to theater schools, or at least the ones that employ the Karps of the world.

*A Chorus Line* was the longest-running show in Broadway history until it was surpassed in 1997 by Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Cats*. *Cats*, based on T.S Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, too is a show primarily for dancer-singer-actors and is,

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<sup>15</sup> There is a nod to this practice of shifting the cut dancers in the final script. At the end, when the director is making his cuts, Diana is at first called onto the line, but then told to step back. The dancers who have been called on to the line are the cut dancers. This “mistake” is meant to retain some of the uncertainty and excitement of the original production. That they chose to create this uncertainty with Diana suggest just how much of a crowd favorite the character was.

in fact, structurally very similar to *A Chorus Line*; but here, instead of telling their own stories, the actors tell stories about being cats and going to cat heaven. The musical was obviously a huge commercial success, but it also became something of an industry byword for the destruction of decent Broadway dancing opportunities. Forbidden Broadway, an ever-changing lampoon on Broadway's foibles, highlighted the relationship between the two shows by using the tune of "One," the signature song from *A Chorus Line*, with lyrics about *Cats*:

*Cats!* (Hiss) What humiliation when the long run record brakes.

*Cats!* (Hiss) What a degradation every dollar it makes.

Once *Chorus Line* topped the hit list of Broadway shows

But *Cats* is so goddamn witless the public goes!

*Cats* proves that mediocre often passes for the best.

When it outruns all the rest, you'll go... so...

Ouch! Oh! what a situation!

Let's unite and warn the nation

Let's stop... Please stop... Let's stop...

*Caaaats!*

*Cats*' displacement of *A Chorus Line* as the longest-running Broadway musical was a symbolic displacement of the theater and theater people in pursuit of bigger box-office returns, no matter how idiotic the material.

A more recent example of the distrust of academic and financial influences on theater comes from the widely popular treatment of theater in the Canadian TV show

*Slings and Arrows* (2003-2006). The intellectual villain here is the director Darren Nichols (played by Don McKellar) who serves as the foil and chief nemesis to the heroic theater genius Geoffrey Tennant (played by Paul Gross). In all three seasons, Geoffrey must fight to preserve the integrity of theater at the New Burbage Theatre Festival, a thinly veiled version of the Stratford Theatre Festival. Darren Nichols' aesthetic for *Hamlet*, for example, is described as a "post-modern, pseudo-Brechtian, leather-clad, schoolboy buggery of a production design" (Season 1, ep. 4). These are code words for what amounts to a theater trope: an ill-informed production design based on a desire to be thought as daring as Brecht coupled with a failure to understand what Brecht was actually trying to do; it is a theater with the outward trappings of Brecht but none of his actual thought processes. In the second season, Darren proves his penchant for misplaced intellectualism by beginning his rehearsal process for *Romeo and Juliet* with an examination of "the signifiers with regard to gender in this text":

Rest assured that I am not interested in answering questions that we are not qualified...to answer. I am interested in asking questions for which there is no specific answer. OK? We will be doing a series of exercises throughout the process that will help us deconstruct the signifiers in the play. The first is a simple commutation test, if you will. Its meaning will be immediately apparent to anyone with even passing familiarity with Roland Barthes (Season 2, ep. 4).

Two of his actors, one of whom is going to play Juliet, look utterly confused. She whispers, "What's happening?" to which the other responds, "I have no idea." The

characterization here is clear: this man is capable only of mystifying and deeply un-theatrical visions. Geoffrey diagnoses Darren's "problem" in the first season: "You hate the theater." Darren's reply is, "I don't hate the theater; I pity it" (ep. 4). Neither position, *Slings and Arrows* repeatedly shows, is capable of producing good work.

Geoffrey's other nemesis in the show is Richard Smith-Jones, the General Manager (played by Mark McKinney). In the first season, after it has been discovered that Richard has tried to sabotage *Hamlet* by sowing doubts in the lead actor's mind about his talent, Geoffrey explains the predicament of the actor:

Actors are entirely dependent on other people for what they do. They need a writer, they need a director, they need someone to make their costumes, and sets, and props. They need a theater, worst of all they need other actors. That's a lot of people. That's not even including the audience. And you bring all those people into one place, the odds are, you're going to get screwed by somebody, usually somebody wearing a tie (ep 6).

In other words, by an administrator, not a fellow artist or technician. Geoffrey's explanation also makes clear why a spirit of community is so vital to good theater; otherwise, it simply could not happen. In this episode, when Richard's treachery is discovered, he is shunned by the rest of the company for jeopardizing its existence and undermining the community. It is an unwritten rule that the character never quite manages to learn. At the same time, the New Burbage community continually forgives and re-embraces both Richard and Darren throughout the series, pointing to sympathetic

tendencies in the theater, specifically, the ability to see an individual's predicament and to forgive their limitations, and to a fierce loyalty for anyone who undertakes the profession.

Indeed, Richard proves to be the most tragic figure of the series. He desperately wants to be more of an artist than he is, but his is the heart of an administrator. As such, the deeper satisfactions of the theater are not open to him. He participates only peripherally in the artistic elements, but his real concern and therefore the real pressure he exerts on the company of actors is economic. He is mired in the necessity of making the festival profitable and, more problematically, in his own ambitions.

At the end of the series, Geoffrey is ousted from the company, and Richard, in collusion with a corporate-minded board member, replaces him with the appalling Nichols who will not challenge Richard's authority and will thus allow him to turn the festival into a money-making musical factory (presumably Nichols will continue to produce his outrageous Shakespearean productions as he has throughout the series). This is the last straw for Anna, Richard's long-suffering administrative assistant (played by Susan Coyne, also the series creator / writer). She tell him tearfully, "You came so close, Richard, to becoming a human being, but you lost your soul, and now you're just a fool" (season 3, ep 6). It's a bitter end for the New Burbage Festival, now that every theater professional with an ounce of integrity is no longer a part of it. It would be incorrect to say that large theater companies like the Stratford Festival are somehow not part of the larger contemporary theater community, but their sheer size and scope, to say nothing of the legal complications of unions, grants and taxes, have cut them off from the



theater's most basic principles. The implied criticism is that they have forgotten their basic mission; they have become corporate entities who produce soulless plays.

This end, however, is not a condemnation of theater itself. The production on which Geoffrey was working when he was ousted, *King Lear*, is remounted in a church community center with makeshift props, pilfered costumes and sound effects provided by a sheet of tin. In the final scene of the series, Geoffrey suggests that he will restart his defunct theater company, Theatre Sans Argent (Theater Without Money). The end tells us that good theater will go on in a presumably scrappy way, perhaps without high production values but with all that is necessary for good theater. Stephen Ouimette, who plays Oliver, the ghost that haunts Geoffrey throughout all three seasons. said of the show:

When the series started everyone said, "Oh this is going to be a sort of wicked satire of the Stratford Festival"...at the end of the day, especially people started to realize at the end of the first season, that it's really like a love letter to the theater (Bonus Disk, *Behind the Scenes*).

He does not necessarily mean the Stratford Festival who could not have felt much love from the series' ending, but to the theater community in general. It is, in fact, a reminder that all one really needs to make good theater is an empty space and some people who are willing and able to get up in front of a crowd and tell a story with their bodies and voices. It is, in the end, a reassertion of the willingness to risk.

## **Willingness to Risk**

David Mamet is perhaps the most vocal proponent of the turn against the academic in theater; indeed, one of his principal tenets for actors is, “stay out of school” (*True and False* 18, 24). Mamet argues that the training a modern actor undertakes is “not only useless, but harmful” because it stresses the “academic model” (i.e. intellectual analysis) whereas acting is a “physical skill” (18-19). He sees Stanislavski’s system as being at the root of this model, although, as I have suggested above, such attempts at training and mitigating risk go much further back. As I discussed at the end of my chapter on *Disguise*, however, Mamet’s real problem is that such training is meant to insulate the actor from the feeling of discomfort which is the inevitable result of being onstage in front of other people saying words written by someone else (21).

Mamet himself has never been one to shy away from risk; he rather invites it. His work is known for his liberal use of profanity and his willingness to take on explosive topics in a aggressive, politically incorrect way. In his 1992 play, *Oleanna*, Mamet takes on what was at the time the hot-button issue of political correctness itself, especially in regard to sexual harassment and as it manifests in higher education. It is a three-act play with two characters: John, an assistant professor on the brink of tenure, and Carol, a female student struggling in his course. In the first act, Carol stops by John’s office without a prior appointment because she is concerned about her grade and worried about the fact that she cannot understand the course material. John is distracted by telephone calls from his wife about the new house they are buying “to go with the tenure” (*Oleanna*

1.295) Between calls, however, John and Carol discuss the subject of the course which is a critique of higher education. John's book, which he obviously needed to produce in order to secure tenure, argues that higher education is a "virtual warehousing of the young" (1.64) and that "college education since the war, has become so a matter of course...that we have ceased to ask, 'What is it good for?'" (1.289). Carol, for whom achievement in school is an indication of her worth as a person, is incensed by his glib dismissal of the work it took for her to get into this school. Nevertheless, they seem to part amicably enough. In the second act, we find out that Carol and her newly found "group" have challenged John's tenure by what is obviously a deliberately misconstrued account of their first meeting. She accuses him of sexual misconduct and of abusing his power as a professor. In the third act, John's tenure has been revoked, but he has asked Carol to his office to find out why she hates him so much and to see what he can do to make amends. He is unaware that Carol and her group have accused John of rape based on an incident that happened at the end of the second act where he prevents her from leaving the office just before the lights go down. Carol tells him, however, that she and her group would be willing to rescind their complaint if he will agree to sign a statement and have certain books removed from the curriculum, including his. John refuses to sign in very high-minded fashion, and we are led to think he will fight nobly against all such book-banners. Then a call comes from his wife, whom he calls "baby," as he has repeatedly called her throughout the play. As Carol is leaving his office, she says, "don't call your wife 'baby'" (3.202). Suddenly, John loses all sense of self-control and begins

beating Carol until he realizes what he has done and tries to regain composure. Carol's final line is "Yes, that's right, that's right" (3.206).

In performance, audiences often cheered as John beat Carol, glad that she was getting what she deserved.<sup>16</sup> For Mamet, that is proof of what political correctness attempts to deny: that we have animalistic tendencies that have hitherto been kept in check by small rebellions, but when even those rebellions are taken away, human beings will lash out in much more brutal ways. When John's small rebellions, questioning the institution of higher education and calling his wife "baby," are threatened, his animalistic side is loosed, and the result is a level of violence of which he would never have thought himself capable.

The reactions to *Oleanna* and Mamet himself were immediate and at times vehement. The play was written around the same time as the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings in which Hill accused Thomas of making improper sexual advances in the workplace. At the time, sexual harassment was barely a concept in the national consciousness. Feminists argued that Carol was so vile and one-dimensional a character that audiences were encouraged to hate her; moreover, her clearly false accusations encouraged an already skeptical public to distrust legitimate claims of sexual harassment.<sup>17</sup>

I am not interested here in parsing the merits of the play, merely in noticing that Mamet is willing to risk being called a misogynist and endangering his career, one of the

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<sup>16</sup> See *Conversations with Pinter* by Mel Gussow. London: Nick Hern, 1994, pp. 148-9. See also the review by Leslie Kane of Westfield State College, *Oleanna debuts at Cambridge Mass*, Online.

<sup>17</sup> For a broader discussion of Mamet's critical reception, see *Gender and Genre: Essay on David Mamet*. Eds. Christopher Hedges and Leslie Kane. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

most commercially successful among contemporary playwrights, in order to provide a startling night at the theater. So too were his actors willing to risk being hated by the audience. For Mamet, this daring is an integral part of theater because “a standing ovation can be extorted from an audience. A gasp cannot” (*True and False* 126).

Another playwright, David Hirson, although considerably lesser-known than Mamet, nevertheless provoked similarly vehement reactions, this time from critics, with his play *La Bete* (1991). It is an audacious play, with two bold and unavoidable stylistic elements: the first is that it is written entirely in rhyming couplets, the second is that twenty-two minutes of the first act are devoted to a giddily flowing monologue by the play’s antagonist Valere.

*La Bete*, which translates as both “fool” and “beast,” is set in the 17th-century French court where the famed playwright Elomire (an anagram of Molière) and his troupe live and perform under the gracious and generous eye of Prince Conti. Prior to the start of the play, the Prince has found a street performer named Valere whom he wants Elomire to take into the troupe. The play opens with Elomire’s insistence to his second-in-command Bejart that he will not work with Valere under any circumstances. Valere then joins them onstage and proceeds to talk for twenty-two minutes straight, commending his own intelligence and modesty throughout the whole of the monologue. Even when Elomire finally gets to speak and tells Valere that he has been “appalled by every word” (1.83) the latter has uttered, Valere is apparently so doltish as not to take offense. Eventually Prince Conti arrives, and he and Elomire debate Elomire’s responsibilities to his benefactor, his troupe and his art. They agree to judge the merits of

Valere's play, *The Parable of Two Boys from Cadiz*, and then decide whether or not he would be an asset to the troupe. Elomire demands that the rest of the troupe be included in the play, normally a one-man show. After a shaky start, they soon find themselves having fun with it. Still, the play is not very good, and Elomire finally issues an ultimatum to the Prince: either Valere goes or the troupe does. But the troupe does not want to go, and Prince Conti tells them they can stay if they will work with Valere. They take the offer, abandoning Elomire who is left to face the difficulties of life on the road once more, now without his troupe.

When the play premiered in New York in 1991, it was savaged by the critics, particularly at the *New York Times*, both of whose reviewers attacked not just the play but Hirson himself. Frank Rich of the *New York Times* wrote:

No, one won't soon forget the first half-hour or so of "La Bete," which takes the brave chances so rare in new American plays. The flip side of such daring, however, is the high expectations it raises. Mr. Hirson promises nothing less than a mock-Moliere comedy of manners and ideas as refracted through (or deconstructed by) a post-modern sensibility. His theme is equally expansive: the decline and fall of culture in a West where "mediocrity is bound to thrive/while excellence must struggle to survive." Yet the follow-through is almost nonexistent. By the time "La Bete" dwindles down to a coda as embarrassingly mawkish as its prologue was startling, one is still waiting for the promised laughter, ideas and dramatic conflict to possess center stage.

Of course, Rich misses the point which is that the success of the play is its willingness to take such risks, whether or not it succeeds by his somewhat befuddling critical standards (Richard Wilbur's Molière translations serve as Rich's yardstick for this play). The play closed after only 24 performances, but its reception became legendary for its brutality and the way it showed a deep division between critics and the theater. It is sometimes easy to think that critics are somehow part of the theater industry. *La Bete's* production history made such a conclusions impossible. As one letter to the editor pointed out,

Reading the reviews of David Hirson's new play "La Bete" by the Times critics Frank Rich and David Richards was like watching someone shoot down an exotic bird that has magically appeared among a flock of sparrows...Wholly absent from either review was a sense of how unique an event "La Bete" is, or how exhilarating (McDonald).

This writer of this letter to the editor also "wondered at the violence of the attack," a sentiment considered by audiences at large. Talkback audiences for later performances suggested that part of the critical vitriol might have been the fact that the producers of *La Bete* did not go through the regular channels for a new play, which usually involve "try outs" in regional theaters through which critical support is built; *La Bete's* opening directly on Broadway might have been considered "an act of hubris that needed to be punished" (Hirson xlvii). Hirson conceded that the regional try-out is "safer, but is it good for the theater? Doesn't it discourage innovation and risk-taking, and abdicate, to the press, the decision about which plays a Broadway audience will ultimately be allowed to see?"

Theater luminaries agreed with Hirson. A letter of protest signed by the likes of Katherine Hepburn, Joanne Woodward, Harold Prince, Kevin Kline, Peter Schaeffer and twenty-three others was sent to the *New York Times*, “urging readers to judge this ‘amazing evening in the theater’ for themselves” (xlii). The *Times* refused to print it, but that fact hardly matters. Hirson notes, correctly, that the “remarkable campaign waged to save *La Bete* suggested deep concern within the theater community -- concern bordering on alarm” (xlvi). That concern as expressed in that letter was a clarion call from the theater community to understand the value of taking a risk, a practice made almost impossible by the economics of Broadway, whose interests critics serve; poor critical responses encourage audiences to save the exorbitant price of a ticket rather than risking it on a play that is not guaranteed to please. The fears of the theater community seem to have been justified. By 2000, less than ten years after *La Bete*’s Broadway premiere, “Times Square had been transformed by corporate interests into a vast entertainment complex that has effectively wiped out the ideal of mainstream theatre that could also claim to be artistically ambitious” (xlv). *La Bete*’s reception history re-inscribed the divide between public intellectuals (critics) and the industry of the theater while simultaneously making the connection between such public intellectualism and economics blindingly apparent. Also apparent was the way in which those forces of public intellectualism and economics are squarely opposed to one of the more deeply held tenets of the theater, that is, that there can be no theater without risk.



## A Prohibition Against Self-Aggrandizement

One of the criticisms in a largely scathing indictment of *La Bete* from the *New York Times* critic David Richards was,

Fifteen minutes of [Valere] are funnier than 30, however, and 30 are easier to take than 45. Mr. McGowan [who plays Valere] is operating under the law of diminishing returns, and it's not his fault. Valere, existing as he does in a self-contained universe of one, is allowed precious few chances to interact with others.

For Richards, Valere's failure to continue to delight is somehow one of the many failures of Hirson's play, but like his fellow *Times* critic Frank Rich, he accurately perceives what is happening in the play but somehow misses its point. Valere is indeed a self-contained universe, and he annoys *because* that mammoth ego of his will not allow him to interact with others. His monologue is a feat of self-aggrandizement that proves deeply un-theatrical.

Elomire notices and comments on it as well, saying that he almost missed the absurdity of Valere's views of life and art since "one hardly notices above / The mountain of your towering self-love" (1.1.83). He also refers to Valere's unrelenting witticisms as "self-adoring." Elomire restates these views less emotionally when debating with the Prince as to why Valere would not make a good addition to their troupe.

He acts *alone*, my lord, not in a corps  
Of players like our own, where all take part.  
His monologue's a selfish pseudo-art

Which puts the man himself above the group (2.216, emphasis his)

It is for this reason that Elomire insists that the troupe take part in Valere's impromptu performance of *The Parable of Two Boys from Cadiz*. He hopes to show that Valere cannot work within the troupe and that to bring him into the company would prove at best useless and at worst disastrous. Valere, for his part, seems no more eager to act with the troupe than they are with him. When the Prince demands that the troupe act with him, he is both nervous and annoyed that he will have to share the limelight.

But then, a miraculous thing happens. The troupe does partake in the play, and it transforms into something delightful. Perhaps it does not reach dizzying artistic heights, but it allows the actors to *play*, in a way that Elomire's work has ceased to do for some time. The stage directions tell us that Elomire's work of late has been "too insensitive to their needs as a troupe" (2.614). Elomire has been committing the very sin he believes will trap Valere, self-aggrandizement. He shrouds his self-aggrandizement in the virtuous cloth of artistic integrity; he claims to be holding the line against the devaluation of art, as epitomized by Valere. Yet even when faced with the opinions of his troupe, who concede that Valere's work has some merit, he is unable to yield to them. His own ego will not allow him to consider that he may have been wrong. In the end, he leaves the court and his actors who choose to stay. In the final moment, an adolescent troupe member Dorine who speaks only in monosyllables rhyming with "blue," turns to face the audience with tears in her eyes. Hirson asks,

What, one wonders, do Dorine's tears signify? Are they expressed poignantly for an artist-hero who, against overwhelming odds, sets out to

defy the brutal cynicism of a corrupt world? Or do they suggest compassion for a not-quite-whole man who is committing himself to a life of terrible and perhaps unrelenting loneliness with nothing but the courage of his potentially wrongheaded convictions to sustain him? (xl).

Elomire's right hand, Bejart, has been urging him throughout the play to find a compromise. He says in the final moments of the play that "there *is* a way that's less extreme" (2.627, emphasis his). One of those ways is to acknowledge one's part in, not control over, the theatrical process.

So we are back to the importance of community, self-aggrandizement's antidote. Valere is able to remain with the troupe because he manages to adhere, at least in this moment, to one of the foremost rules among the 17 from Kathleen Freeman's 1945 Code of Ethics with which this concluding chapter began:

I shall forego the gratification of my ego for the demands of the play. Here the play demanded that he work with the other actors, and that is precisely what he did. It is interesting to note that, like Freeman whose parents were vaudevillians, Hirson was also raised in the theater, so to speak; his mother was an actress, his father a playwright. That both should find solutions to the problems of the theater in the values that can be found in the earliest practices of industry speaks to the essential nature of these values.

It is also interesting to note that what *La Bete* and Freeman's theater have in common with the Renaissance theater is infancy. *La Bete* was Hirson's first play and the Circle Theatre was just beginning when Freeman wrote her Code of Ethics. The

Renaissance theater was also at its beginnings, when the community really was a small one and its problems were manageable. It had yet to experience the growing pains that come when bigger spectacles require more money and a bigger industry attracts attention from other constituents who hope to harness the theater's power. One could argue, then, that the values I have attributed to the theater are youthful or even naive, before they were complicated by political, economic and legal realities.

Yet heaven forbid that any of us are merely the sum of our political, economic and legal realities. Much scholarship would seem to want to reduce the theater to such pedestrian concerns, a pursuit that seems particularly odd to me since, as I argued above, reality is not what the theater does best. That the theater of the late 20th century and beyond has sought to reassert those values speaks to a real desire to rise above harsh realities and to make a case for living by the artistic code the industry has developed.

Perhaps, then, in light of these challenges to the theater's survival, a new value has emerged: the theater is important. Practitioners for hundreds of years have felt the need to fight for ownership of it and now to extol its virtues. This dissertation participates in some ways in the belief that the theater is important. My own experiences in the theater and now in academia have convinced me it is even more necessary today than it has perhaps ever been.

### **Final Thoughts**

I have argued, throughout this dissertation, that the theater held values that seem to be at odds with its more obvious outward appearances, but, as I hope I have shown,

that vision of the theater is somewhat superficial. Certainly, there are stars and divas, but the interest in celebrity is largely a construct of audience and other constituencies outside the actual profession; inside it, star and diva behavior is unacceptable. Certainly, the whole art seems to be predicated on the projection of a carefully crafted image, honed over weeks of rehearsal. Yet theater practitioners know that spontaneity is what creates excitement. Even the most proscriptive acting techniques are trying to create situations onstage that make spontaneity possible. Practitioners also understand some of the dangers that pretending all the time entails. With that knowledge comes almost a preoccupation with sincerity. Understanding these elements of the theater industry will, I believe, shift some commonly received textual interpretations, as I have attempted to do in previous chapters.

If the truth be told, however, I am more concerned with the possibilities that this shift may open up in terms of behavioral interpretations, that is, in how we answer the question, how should I act? Here is why I am concerned.

When I started teaching college students, I had expected a good amount of sarcasm and rebellion -- these were 18-year-olds, after all -- but to my surprise these traits never materialized. What did materialize and what I did not expect was the kind of knowing cynicism that continually cropped up in class discussions and student papers. Students would regularly question the ethics of the speaker or, more usually, the author of a given text. They were able to uncover an almost universal self-interestedness from the context of the work. The question asked first and foremost was, what gains have accrued

to the author from writing the text? The answers to this question were often clever and sophisticated interpretations of complex contextual issues.

When it came to the actual text, however, they had nothing to say. Knowing, as they did, that the author had only written the text for personal advancement, the ideas in the text themselves could only be regarded as a means to an end and therefore not anything that warranted attention in its own right. They were just elements of some grand social or political game in which the author was participating. Nor could my students imagine that these authors were sincere in their ideas; attempts on my part to convince them of that possibility were met with suspicion.

I found all of this very odd until I realized the kinds of theoretical bents that were prevalent in academia. I did not begin to find it distressing, however, until I began teaching plays. Then the deficiencies of such interpretations became obvious to me. Instead of understanding the immediate context of the play, the theater industry, plays were interpreted within their larger political contexts, even when that meant ignoring large sections of the play itself. Instead of seeing the ways that the historical continuum of Western theater influenced works, plays were rigidly fixed in their own era. Instead of seeing the conflict of ideas that the playwright sets up and must set up if there is to be any drama, plays were seen as expressions of one man's ambitions. While I can see the value of such interpretive lenses, I can also see their pitfalls.

The pitfall that most concerns me is that these lenses obscure the way the mainstream theater, not just intentionally subversive drama, has often resisted its political contexts and has instead created, in some ways, a world apart. In that world, it is not

naive to pursue truth, nor to respond with compassion, nor to base decisions on something other than the pursuit of better political positioning or more money. To me, these are lessons worth preserving and passing on to students, an ideal that is often made impossible when textual interpretation defaults to readings that privilege a context other than that of the theater.

This dissertation, therefore, has been an attempt to make theatrical values more apparent so as to allow for different kinds of interpretations of behavior. It has been an attempt to make apparent what has always been clear to me from my own experience in the theater: people who do theater participate in a grand tradition that asks its audience members to reconsider their own behavior even as it requires its adherents to tailor theirs to the demands of this important craft.

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