Theater of Enigma in Shakespeare’s England

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ABSTRACT

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_Theater of Enigma in Shakespeare’s England_ demonstrates the cognitive, affective, and social import of enigmatic theatrical moments. While the presence of other playgoers obviously shapes the experience of attending a play, I argue that deliberately induced moments of audience ignorance are occasions for audience members to be especially aware of their relations to others who may or may not share their bafflement. I explore the character of states of knowing and not-knowing among audience members and the relations that obtain among playgoers who inhabit these states. Further, I trace the range of performance techniques whereby playgoers are positioned in a cognitive no-man's land, lying somewhere between full understanding and utter ignorance—techniques that I collectively term “enigmatic theater.”

I argue that moments of enigmatic theater were a dynamic agent in the formation of collectives in early modern playhouses. I use here the term “collective” to denote the temporary, occasional, and fleeting quality of these groupings, which occur during performance but are dissipated afterwards. Sometimes, this collective resembles what Victor Turner terms _communitas_, in which the normal societal divisions are suspended and the playgoers become a unified collectivity. At other times, however, plays solicit the formation of multiple collectives defined by their differing degrees of knowledge about a seeming enigma. In either case, I show that a core achievement of early modern theater of enigma was to link issues of knowledge with issues of belonging—even when that pleasurable sense of belonging is as transient as the occasion of performance.
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the eye during that first seminar, for seeing a dissertation here before I did, and for combining exactly high standards with unwavering support and encouragement.
Introduction:
Enigmatic Theater

In this dissertation I ask what happens in an early modern London playhouse when some playgoers come to know that they do not know something: when they are made particularly aware of the specific character of their ignorance. The effects of such occurrences are varied, but each is inflected by the specifically communal character of playgoing in early modern England, whereby one is made continually aware of the other playgoers surrounding oneself. This factor definitively distinguishes early modern playgoing from modern scholarly reading, and I will repeatedly seek to bridge the imaginative gap between the two practices. How does the presence of these playgoers shape the experience of attending a play in early modern England? What is the feeling of knowing and not-knowing among this mass of bodies? How does each state feel, and what relations obtain among playgoers who inhabit these states?

Early modern plays repeatedly stage such situations, in which an onstage “audience” (and the playhouse audience) knows more than those that it oversees and intellectual competencies help determine social distinctions. Take the case of Twelfth Night, in which an inset group—Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian—observes Malvolio finding, reading, and interpreting a letter that they (and the playgoers) know has been forged by Maria to resemble that of the Lady Olivia. The playgoers know in advance, as Fabian puts it, “how imagination blows” Malvolio, which leads him to find what he is looking for in the enigmatic letter, part of which he reads aloud:

I may command where I adore;
But silence, like a Lucrece knife,
With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore:
M.O.A.I doth sway my life.¹

Having just fantasized aloud about marrying Olivia, Malvolio looks to make this “fustian riddle” refer to himself: “what should that alphabetical position portend? If I could make that resemble something in me! Softly – “M.O.A.I….‘M.’ Malvolio. ‘M.’ Why, that begins my name!” (2.5.116-19,123-24). Yet Malvolio quickly points out that the letters do not seem to point toward himself, because “there is no consonancy in the sequel…‘A’ should follow, but ‘O’ does” (2.5.127-9). Undaunted, he resolves “to crush this a little” so that “it would bow to me” (2.5.136-38). All this while, Toby, Andrew, and Fabian crack jokes at Malvolio’s expense, vilifying him as a “cur,” a “rogue,” a “scab,” a “trout,” and a “woodcock”—all of which emphasize Malvolio’s foolishness and mark him as one outside the community of good fellows, as one who knows less than they (and the playgoers) do (2.5.125,27,30,32,72,19,82). In Frank Kermode’s terms, Malvolio is an “outsider,” one who cannot “hope to achieve correct interpretations,” unlike we “insiders,” who are able to “divine the true, the latent sense”—which, in this case, is that there is in fact no “latent sense.”² When playgoers are invited to mock Malvolio for his manifestly “crush[ed]” interpretation of “M.O.A.I.,” they are invited to feel themselves as insiders who know what the outsider Malvolio does not: namely, that he is being tricked.

Yet the playgoers’ feelings of superiority and competence—feelings that the scene is at pains to elicit—are at the same time only partially justified. Because despite the advantage that playgoers have over Malvolio, they do not possess full knowledge. What, after all, does

¹ William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, ed. Keir Elam (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2008), 2.5.39-40; 2.5.94-97. Subsequent citations are given in the text.
“M.O.A.I.” actually mean? The letters invite decipherment, and critics have responded to this invitation in two ways: by trying to solve the riddle or by scorning such endeavors entirely. Yet to claim that one knows what “M.O.A.I.” means has been to prove oneself an outsider, definitively demonstrating that, like Malvolio, one simply does not get it. The smart set has always demonstrated its superiority by claiming that the riddle is unsolvable and admits of no solution. At this moment, then, you know that the letter is a fake, which is more than Malvolio knows: you are no fool, like he is. But at the same time, you are also curiously like Malvolio. You are both ignorant: caught between trying to decipher “M.O.A.I.” and not knowing whether you should even try. In this curiously mixed epistemological and affective state, playgoers are offered the awareness that they are both comfortably unlike Malvolio and uncomfortably like him. There is no escaping this crux: to claim that one understands how the joke is being played on Malvolio—that one knows what “M.O.A.I.” means—would

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3 Many have tried to solve the riddle. Among these include Leslie Hotson, who claims that it signifies the four elements: “Mare Orbis Aer Ignis” (The First Night of Twelfth Night [London: R. Hart-Davis, 1954], 166), and Lee Sheridan Cox, who suggests “I AM O(ivia)” (“The riddle in Twelfth Night” Shakespeare Quarterly 13.3 (Summer 1962): 360). Inge Leimberg argues that the letters, when properly rearranged from MOAI to IMAO, cites Revelation 1:8: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” and “is an ironic pointer to Malvolio's ruling passion, self-love” (“’M.O.A.I.’ Trying to Share the Joke in Twelfth Night 2.5 (A Critical Hypothesis)” Connotations 1.1 (1991): 85). Alistair Fowler suggests that MOAI should be rearranged (and added to) to make OMNIA, to which Fowler wishes to add “vanitas” (“Maria’s Riddle” Connotations 2.3 (1992): 269-70); for Matthias Bauer, MOAI is Malvolio’s name but argues that “Two consonants are missing, L and V, indicating what is really lacking in him who is neither lover nor beloved” (“A Note in Reply to Alastair Fowler,” Connotations 2.3 [1992], 274). Peter Smith rehearses many attempts to solve the riddle before proposing his own: that it alludes to Harrington’s “The Metamorphosis Of A Iax” (“M.O.A.I. ‘What Should That Alphabetical Position Portend?’ An Answer to the Metamorphic Malvolio,” Renaissance Quarterly 54 (1998): 1199–1215). Other proposed solutions include “My Own Adored Idol,” and “John Marston” (MOAI→ “IO. MA.”) (Horace Howard Furness, ed., A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Twelfe Night, Or, What You Will, vol. XIII [Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1901], 2.5.102n).

4 In the Variorum, Furness suggests drily that “no satisfactory explanation of M. O. A. I. has hitherto been given” (2.5.102n). J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik warn that “Attempts to wring further meaning from [the letters] are misplaced” (Twelfth Night, eds. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik [London: Methuen, 1975], 2.5.109n). For Adam Zucker, Malvolio is “Shakespeare’s most strident, studious explicator of meaningless text,” and the “famously empty acrostic…is a radioactive version of nonsense, or even anti-sense” (“Twelfth Night and the Philology of Nonsense,” Renaissance Studies 30.1 (2016): 98).
entail crushing it like Malvolio. But to admit that one doesn’t know what “M.O.A.I.” means is to confess to committing the fatal Malvolian faux pas: not getting the joke.⁵

“M.O.A.I.” is an enigma that produces varied results based on different degrees of insider knowledge and social capital. It divides its audience into the knowledgeable and the ignorant, or—more accurately—into those who feel themselves to be one or the other. This moment is an instance of what I will call “enigmatic theater”: moments when plays are intentionally riddling, making playgoers aware of what they do not (yet) know. I will argue that these moments of deliberately deployed opacity during performances could be dynamic agents in the formation of collectives in early modern playhouses, bringing playgoers into relation with one another in ways of which they might not have previously been aware. I use here the term “collective” to denote the temporary, occasional, and fleeting quality of these groupings, which occur during performance but are dissipated afterwards. Sometimes, this collective resembles what Victor Turner terms communitas, in which the normal societal divisions are suspended and the playgoers become a unified collectivity.⁶ At other times, however, plays solicit the formation of multiple collectives defined by their differing degrees of knowledge about a seeming enigma. In either case, I show that a core achievement of early modern enigmatic theater was to link issues of knowledge with issues of belonging—even when that pleasurable sense of belonging is as transient as the occasion of performance.

⁵ Much of my reading of this scene is inspired by that of Stephen Booth, who suggests that “in their—in our—inacity fully to enter into the comic spirit of genuinely funny scenes (scenes that...sweat under a weight of elaborate, inefficient effort to amuse), audiences to Twelfth Night come dangerously close to seeing a likeness between themselves and the harshest of the many onstage critics of comedy in this play, Malvolio—Malvolio, self-exiled from the carefree festival spirit Toby advertises and the object of our scorn because he refuses to do what we want to do but cannot”: i.e., close our minds to the fact that some things just aren’t that funny (Precious Nonsense: The Gettysburg Address, Ben Jonson's Epitaphs on His Children, and Twelfth Night [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], 173).

⁶ For Turner, communitas represents “the desire for a total, unmediated relationship between person and person,” and its bonds “are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I-Thou...relationships” (Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974], 274.
I use “collective” to name the agglomerations of playgoers that can occur during early modern performances, instead of “publics” or “communities,” as some recent criticism has termed them. Steven Mullaney, for example, argues that “[p]layers and their audiences were agents and actors in what we might call, with some necessary qualifications, an early modern public sphere,” a claim pursued variously in a range of recent and forthcoming books.

Arguing for “early modern amphitheatre drama” as an “affective and cognitive technology” in which “the cognitive and the affective remain in full solution with one another,” Mullaney describes performance as one way “in which thoughts and feelings and beliefs could be made public in sixteenth-century England” (146). Performance, he argues, “could serve as a catalyst for the making of various publics and counterpublics, imagined communities and collective identities” (150). Like Mullaney, I study the “affective and cognitive” work of the theater as well as the relation between the theater and the social world, though my approach will differ. While I will argue for the theater’s ability to shape collectives during performance, I am far more skeptical about the ability of these collectives to remain after performance and to create meaningful and sustained “publics,” which Michael Warner defines as “space[s] of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself.” I suggest instead that plays can use enigmatic techniques to initiate playgoers into cognitive in-between spaces, which have the possibility of temporarily reconfiguring their relations.

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7 This is not to say that the participants in the “Making Publics” project have not left the terminological question open; importantly, the terms “public” and “association”—despite their quite different valences—both appear often in their writings, as in the recent title Forms of Association: Making Publics In Early Modern Europe.


toward one another, enabling a sense of identity and belonging based at times on a shared competency, but at times on a shared deficiency. The kind of “formation and reformation of collective and private identities” (to use Mullaney’s words) which I identify in the following chapters are therefore far more transient and fleeting than his, not yet rising to the level of a “public” or “community.”

In addition to “collective,” I will also at times use the term “association” to denote a real but nonetheless temporary and transient kind of grouping. I borrow the term from Bruno Latour via Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin; for Latour, “association” denotes a relation between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together…Thus, social, for ANT [Actor-Network Theory], is the name of a type of momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together into new shapes.10

An “association” importantly occurs in a “brief moment,” only “momentar[ily],” as a result of some kind of “reshuff[ling].” In my readings of early modern plays, the time of performance (or a slice of performance) will often constitute that “brief moment” in which playgoers might find themselves “reshuffled together.”

The moments of enigmatic theater on which I will focus have at times fallen beneath critical notice, in part because they can be fleeting and at times inessential to the play’s overall action. Yet they are not invisible, nor have they always been: in 1664, Richard Flecknoe criticized Elizabethan and Jacobean plays for “huddling too much matter together” such that playgoers would be at times unable to “finde their way at last.” “Auditors,” he

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writes, “shu’d be led in a Maze, but not a Mist.”¹¹ In these experiences of “Misty” theatrical moments, I will argue, playgoers could affiliate and disaffiliate with others, joining together into temporary, ad-hoc collectives. I thus explore the cognitive, affective, and social effects on early modern playgoers of four modes of enigmatic theatrical performance: foreign languages, dumb shows, tautological and contradictory language, and on-stage whispering. In a city in which the only licensed occasions for gathering with unknown people were sermons, executions, fairs, and plays, these moments of enigmatic theater could function as flashpoints through which playgoers could become aware of their own position within and connection to the mostly-anonymous Londoners who surrounded them.

A problem presents itself, however: namely, how can a responsible scholar say anything at all about the experience of early modern playgoers? The experience of others seems always in some sense inaccessible, much less that of those who lived in a space, time, and world much different from our own. This is a problem to be acknowledged and managed rather than solved and dispatched, with the result that any discussions of theatrical effects must remain in some sense speculative. Yet my interpretations are built upon the concatenation of a variety of materials, including accounts of early modern performances, “antitheatricalist” writers (and their polemical opponents), and handbooks of rhetoric and poetics. None of these, of course, offer an unmediated glimpse of early modern theatrical experience. But these sources will throughout be joined to evidence from early modern playscripts, which themselves often project an image of early modern theatrical experience. These can be found not only in moments of “metatheatre” such as plays within plays, but also in plays’ very design. In other words, I assume that plays are made with the intent that they “succeed” (however variously this term might be defined) and that therefore repeated

features in plays signal success: that they have the potential to induce successfully (more or less) their desired audience experience.

Consequently, the majority of evidence that I will present is derived from early modern playtexts. As Jeremy Lopez writes,

one can better understand the audience of the English Renaissance if one better understands the plays they watched. That is, the plays contain within themselves most of the evidence needed to understand what audiences expected and enjoyed and experienced. In order to make a convincing case for this, one must look at a great many plays, and look at them quite closely.12

So while each of my chapters will offer an extended reading of one play by Shakespeare, my account of each enigmatic technique will involve looking at a wide range of early modern playtexts. In suggesting some of the effects of these theatrical devices, however, I am not claiming to offer a strict “description” of “what actually happened” based upon the evidence of a playtext, as if the playtext simply enforces a particular kind of performance.13 When I describe a particular scene as enigmatic, I do so assuming variability across particular performances; I am describing less what playgoers’ experiences were than what kinds of experiences early modern theater could make available. In doing so, I follow the mainstream of the critical tradition, in which, as Musa Gurnis writes, “any close reading that posits a possible way early modern people may have experienced a play depends on the underlying

13 There is also the somewhat banal fact (Diana Taylor’s work notwithstanding) that “Performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive,” and is thus an “undocumentable event” (Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance [London: Routledge, 1993], 148). Thus any claims I make about what “would have” or “could have” happened during a performance are necessarily conjectural. This is not a weakness, however; in my view the best literary criticism lies just to the side of the point where conjecture and evidence meet, making claims that are neither fully supportable nor unsupportable; “explanation” is Robert Nozick’s term for this non-coercive approach to argumentation that is “not directed toward arguments and proofs” (Philosophical Explanations [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981], 8).
assumption that formal conventions have identifiable effects.”¹⁴ In this project, then, I am attempting a historicized, necessarily speculative reconstruction of what sorts of effects and experiences were possible during early modern performances—a task which involves drawing on what we know about the performance conventions of early modern theater, while revising or elaborating some of those assumptions in the light of close readings of contemporary evidence and playtexts.

II: Enigma and The Enigmatic In Early Modern England

I use the term enigmatic and its noun form enigma—instead of other related terms, such as uncertainty, ambiguity, obscurity, or undecidability—for both historical and conceptual reasons. Because the enigma, or riddle, was a current term in early modern rhetoric and poetics, I can ground historically some of my discussions of the effects of enigmatic theater in early modern texts, especially non-dramatic ones. In addition to its attractions for historicist scholarship, the term “enigmatic” also evokes a flexible dynamic of revelation and concealment, invitation and repulsion, openness and obscurity, knowledge and ignorance. As a concept, the enigmatic partakes of both terms of these binaries, denoting a wide field of potential effects ranging from sheer bafflement to hardly-noticed incomprehension. At the same time, the concept’s irreducibility to any of the terms in these pairs also inhibits the itch to settle for one of the banal inversions that these binaries often invite, whereby (to use an early modern example) foolishness turns out in the end to be wisdom, or (to use a contemporary one) failure success.¹⁵

¹⁵ The logic of the wise fool is most famously articulated in Erasmus Praise of Folly; the contemporary example comes from Jack Halberstam’s Queer Art of Failure, whose first chapter closes with a ringing call to embrace failure so that we can “make meaning” in a world in which “nobody gets left behind” ([Durham: Duke
Most simply, an enigma is a riddle; the terms were used interchangeably in early modern English. While enigmas might be riddles in the sense that they had a one-word solution, such as “as long as I live, I eate, but when I drincke, I dye” (i.e., fire), some proverbs were also considered enigmas, such as “The halfe is more then the hole.”16 Whatever its form, the enigma by definition manifests its own incompleteness and invites further consideration: it informs its recipient that something is yet unknown.

The enigmatic and the broader category of the unknown were largely understood negatively in early modern political and rhetorical discourses. After all, the early modern period is associated with the explosion of new forms of knowledge, whether economic, historical, political, or geographical. Set against this background of escalating confidence in the human power to know, the enigma appears as a problem to be vanquished by bringing truth into the light. Enigmas—which are, of course, by definition unsettled—were often felt to be unsettling. A prominent example was the “riddle” of the letter to Lord Monteagle, warning him of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot.17 This riddle was said to have been solved by King James, whose “fortunate judgement in cleering and soluing of obscure riddles & doubtfull mysteries” enabled him to divine the meaning of what one preacher termed the “Aenigmaticall and Hieroglyphicall letter.”18 By using an enigmatic mode, the Gunpowder plotters (it was charged) concealed dangerous and valuable information. But King James determined the meaning of the letter, it was said, by “construing [it] contrary to letter and arte,” which he was able to do because he had received, as the divine right demands he must,
the gift of prophecy: “a spirit of divination in the mouth of our Kingly Prophet.” In this case, the “regius propheta” is understood positively as the one who can solve enigmas, which are themselves the problem.

At the same time, however, the prophet could also be understood negatively if he was the one peddling, not solving what John Harvey (Gabriel’s brother) termed “vnknowen riddles, and inexplicable propositions” that can “cosen, delude, and as it were intoxicate the weake senses of the simpler sort.” As in the case of the Monteagle letter, enigmas are here also a problem, but for a different reason. While the Monteagle enigma (temporarily) prevented the plans of political enemies from being made known, the riddles Harvey discusses seek to unsettle the political order. At stake for Harvey—in addition to his own status as an astrologer, of course—is the peace and stability of the state. As the title page indicates, the book was “deuised especially in abatement of the terrible threatenings, and menaces, peremptorily denounced against the kingdoms, and states of the world.” The problem with prophets is that they puzzle people by using “Characteristicall, and Polygraphical suttelties,” “Acrostique, and Anagrammatistique deuises,” “Steganographicall, and Hieroglyphical mysteries,” and “aenigmaticall riddles,” thereby destabilizing the political order (K1r). It is the very inscrutability of these speeches, texts, and “deuises” that makes the common people (and rulers) skittish, because people wonder if the prophecies conceal what Angel Day, in his discussion of enigma, will call “high and deepe misteries.”

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19 Jackson, The conuerts happiness, F1v.
20 John King, A sermon preached in Oxon: the 5. of November. 1607 (Oxford: 1607), E1r.
21 A discoursiue probleme concerning prophesies how far they are to be valued, or credited (London: 1588), K2v. Subsequent citations are given in the text. An astrologer himself, Harvey is here reassessing the unfulfilled astrological predictions that he had made earlier in the decade by distinguishing between illegitimate astrological and other kinds of prognostications.
22 The English Secretary (London: 1592), M4v.
Similarly, enigmas in the rhetorical tradition were widely considered inappropriate because their use contradicts the rhetorical virtue of *perspicuitas*, or clarity. Quintilian defines enigma as an allegory that “is too obscure,” and he disapproves of it: “It is a fault in my opinion, seeing that Lucidity is a virtue of speech, but the poets use it.” Following suit, Henry Peacham judges that for an Orator, “perspicuity of the speech, is a goodly virtue” (D2r). But Quintilian’s guarded allowance of obscurity in the case of poetry was not always shared. Ben Jonson, for example, notoriously expressed his distaste for obscure, riddling language, remarking that “Whatsoever loseth the grace and clearness, converts into a riddle,” in which only “the obscurity is marked, but not the value.”

Almost wholly assimilating poetry to rhetoric, here Jonson—unlike Quintilian and, as we will see, Peacham—holds both poets and orators to the same standard of clarity: “The chief virtue of a style is perspicuity, and nothing so vicious in it as to need an interpreter…we must take the care that our words and sense be clear” (432, 433). William Drummond similarly reports that Jonson “scorned Anagrams” and that he quipped “That Donne himself, for not being understood, would perish” (473, 466).

But these desires for clarity and intelligibility were simultaneously shadowed by a range of countertraditions, according to which truth was submerged, veiled, or otherwise at least partially inaccessible, and should perhaps remain so. The reasons adduced for this veiling differed, depending on whether one was working within a hermetic, apophatic, or skeptical tradition. The hermetic, Gnostic, neo-platonic strains that infiltrated the discourses

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of philosophy, theology, and alchemy—which scholars now gather under the umbrella term “Western esotericism”—understood the world as fundamentally enigmatic: the written word, the visual image, and the natural world all encoded secret forms of knowledge.\(^{25}\) In this tradition, the most important truths were said to have been passed down as secrets to guard them from the unworthy.\(^{26}\) In the apophatic tradition, descending from pseudo-Dionysius through medieval thinkers such as Nicholas of Cusa and sustained among the English by Catholics like Augustine Baker, failures of understanding served as evidence that one was approaching the “darkness of God.”\(^{27}\) In a related vein, skeptical writers claimed that failures of understanding could be salutary, as they could lead to the virtue of humility and destroy the vice of pride.\(^{28}\) These elite cultures of learning were themselves situated among more widely diffused practices, such as sermon-going and jesting, both of which were saturated by a similar fascination with the enigmatic. English preaching of the period (of at least the


\(^{28}\) Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, for example, attacked the “euil vses” of “Artes and Sciences” by arguing that truth “can not be perceiued, with the speculations of any Science, nor with any straite iudgement of the Sences, nor with any argumentes of the Arte of Logike, nor with any euident provefe, with no Sillegismes of Demonstration, nor with any discourse of mans reason, but with Faithe Onely” (*Henrie Cornelius Agrippa, of the vanitie and vncertaintie of artes and sciences*, 1526 [London: 1569], *3r, B4r). Similarly, Thomas Browne claims to pursue feelings of ignorance so that he can exercise his faith, not his reason. “I love to lose my selfe in a mystery to pursue my reason to an oh altitudo,” he writes, so that “by acquainting our reason how unable it is to display the visible and obvious effect of nature, it becomes more humble and subsmissive unto the subtilties of faith.” (*Religio Medici*, ed. L.C. Martin [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964], 1.9.9, 1.10.10). See also Richard Henry Popkin, *The History of Skepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
“metaphysical” sort) manifests a “fondness for paradoxes, riddles, and emblems,” modes of speech demanding “a teasing concentration on the meaning of what appears to be mysterious and thought-provoking.” Similarly, the early modern culture of jesting depended on a familiarity with the riddle and the intellectual provocations that such modes of speech could present. The popularity of early modern “jestbooks” depended in part on the delight afforded by the interplay of these verbal challenges and responses, as seen in the “witty questions” and “merry riddles” that populate them. In sum, enigmas and the enigmatic were understood positively in each of these domains, suggesting frames within which cognitive failure or lack might not be altogether undesirable.

These countertraditions helped fuel some of the strains within early modern poetics that valorized poetic difficulty, obscurity, and unintelligibility. Jonson’s strictures against obscurity notwithstanding, the enigma and the enigmatic were central to early modern English poetics. For George Puttenham, for whom dissimulation is fundamentally at the heart of poetry, enigma is a species of allegory and one of the “soldiers to the figure allegoria” that “fight[s] under the banner of dissimulation.” Puttenham correspondingly defines enigma as a particular kind of dissimulation: “we dissemble…under covert and dark speeches when we speak by way of riddle (enigma),” an instance of language “abuse” that produces “mirth and solace” (272, 239). In his discussion of enigma, Peacham similarly notes the pleasure of the enigmatic, suggesting that “sometime, darcknesse is delectable” (D2r). Defining enigma as

30 See, for example, Mery Tales, Wittie Questions, and Quicke Answeres (London: 1567), and The Booke of Merrie Riddles (London: 1617); on riddles, see Archer Taylor, The Literary Riddle Before 1600 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948); on the early modern culture of jesting, see Pamela Allen Brown, Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), and Chris Holcomb, Mirth Making: The Rhetorical Discourse on Jesting in Early Modern England (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).
“a sentence of which for the darknesse, there ca[n] be no certaynty gathered,” Peacham at first discourages his readers from using the trope: “this Trope is more agreeable to Poets, then to Orators,” because “euery Oratour doth in speaking, flye obscurity, and darck speeches, in whome the facility and perspicuity of the speech, is a goodly virtue” (D2r). But this virtue, it turns out, need not always be practiced:


notwithstanding sometime, darcknesse is delectable, as y[e] which is understood of wyse and learned men, for when men fynde at last, by long consideration, the meaning of some darcke riddle, they much delight and reioyce, that their capacity was able to compasse so hard a matter, and commende highly the deuysers wit, therefore it may be in an oration, where wyse men be hearers. (D2r-v)

Peacham’s affectively charged language indicates a nexus of cognition and affect. In other words, it renders this a particularly rich account of enigma because it suggests something of what it might have felt like to encounter the enigmatic—that is, to know that one does not understand something—within a larger group in early modern England. But while Peacham asserts that “sometime, darckenesse is delectable,” he is less than clear about exactly when and how it is so. Is it “delectable” while listeners are in their state of confusion, or only afterwards? The prose seems to support both interpretations; while he cites the “delight” of those who have found “at least…the meaning,” he also baldly describes “darkness” itself as “delectable.” A similar ambiguity haunts Puttenham’s account; while dissimulation and all forms of poets’ “abuses tend but to dispose the hearers to mirth and solace,” he also lists “extreme darkness” under the heading “Of the vices or deformities in speech and writing”
(335). Although he admits the possibility that the “good discretion” of a poet may convert some vices of speech to “virtue[s],” nevertheless,

some manner of speeches are always intolerable and such cannot be used with any decency, but are ever indecent: namely barbarousness, incongruity, ill disposition, fond affectation, rusticity, and all extreme darkness such as it is not possible for a man to understand the matter without an interpreter; all which parts are generally to be banished out of every language, unless it may appear that the maker or poet do it for the nonce, as it was reported by the philosopher Heraclitus that he wrote in obscure and dark terms of purpose not to be understood, whence he merited the nickname Scotinus. (335)

Like Peacham’s “notwithstanding” above, Puttenham’s unexpectedly qualifying “unless” contradicts his prior firm statement that “extreme darkness” is “always intolerable.” It turns out that darkness is, in fact, sometimes “tolerable” and that this vice is sometimes not a vice, or at least not an undesirable one. Puttenham’s fierce rejection of poetic darkness, followed by its readmission, neatly signals this unresolved ambiguity in early modern poetics: is darkness always delightful? Sometimes delightful? Always a vice? Sometimes a vice? Delightful to experience? Or only delightful afterwards? The ambiguity of Peacham’s and Puttenham’s prose at these moments suggests the presence of a half-submerged position: that it is perhaps the enigma’s indecipherability that might render it pleasurable. According to this understanding, the enigmatic might afford pleasures that are not always the consequence of one’s eventual comprehension of its meaning, but rather of encountering, recognizing, and tarrying with its impenetrability. But to unearth further this half-articulated strain of thought, we need to attend to the vacillations, tensions, and even contradictions that sometimes
accompany discussions of enigma not only in Puttenham and Peacham’s writings, but in other early modern writers, as well.

In short, the early modern rhetorical and poetic traditions were of two minds about enigmas and the enigmatic: one the one hand, they were undesirable because they could impede communication; but they were also desirable because they could produce pleasure. Accordingly, one often finds early modern writers performing an uncomfortable two-step, in which “darkness” is first denigrated and then defended under certain circumstances. For example, while Richard Sherry first writes that “Obscur[ity] is, when ther is a darknes thorow fau[l]t,” the “fault” is nowhere mentioned in his later discussion of enigma, which he categorizes (like Quintillian before him and Puttenham after) as a species of allegory, defining enigma as “a riddle or darke allegorie” (B8v, C7r). Similarly, Angel Day, having defined enigma as “a darke sentence” or “riddle,” writes that enigmas are used either for “high and deepe misteries” or mere “pleasant fancies.”32 The enigma could thus be associated with both extremely important and extremely frivolous subjects.

Engimas held forth two possibilities: that something important was being held back in reserve, or that a trivial game was being played. Day himself echoes Erasmus, who in On Letter Writing similarly denigrates and then defends obscurity as sometimes acceptable. While he writes that “obscurity is always harmful and must always be avoided by a speaker or a writer,” he nevertheless professes himself “inclined to believe that letter-writing is the one genre in which it is most permissible, provided the obscurity is not unlearned… One must but take into account the subject and recipient of the letter.”33 Like Peacham, who restricted the use of enigma to an audience of “wyse and learned men,” Erasmus associates

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32 The English Secretary, M4v.
acceptable obscurity with a certain kind of male audience, a “recipient” who by understanding a “not unlearned” obscurity thereby proves himself an insider. The enigmatic is thus made into a consolidator and marker of a particular kind of association. Consideration of what Erasmus terms the letter’s “subject” suggests that he has in mind what Day called “pleasant fancies”; for really important matters, it seems, one should be perfectly clear.

In *De Copia* Erasmus sounds a similar note but also expands his range of acceptable audiences for enigmas. He remarks that that an “enigma” can be “no bad thing if you are speaking or writing for an educated audience, and not even if you are writing for the general public, for one should not write so that everyone can understand everything, but so that people should be compelled to investigate and learn some things themselves.” Here the audience for enigmas is not only the “educated,” but also includes “the general public.” This latter group can also benefit from encountering enigmatic material because it can spur people to seek something out. This logic of the enigma—that something should be held back in order to prompt investigation—is explicitly elaborated in Erasmus’ Prolegomena to the *Adages*, where he explains adages’ attraction by citing a particular one, “Good things are difficult,” adding that “things which seem easy are scorned and held cheap by the popular mind.” This commonplace justification for obscurity can be traced back to Augustine and is encapsulated in the phrase *prompta vilescant*: “obvious things are despised.”

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36 The *locus classicus* for this notion is Augustine’s *Contra Mendacium* 10.24: “Those things are veiled in figures, in garments as it were, in order that they may exercise the mind of the pious inquirer, and not become cheap for being bare and obvious [*ne nuda ac prompta vilescant*]” (154). (qtd. in Madeline Kasten, *In Search of "Kynde Knowynge": Piers Plowman and the Origin of Allegory* [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007], 27). In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine writes that “what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure. Those who do not find what they seek directly stated labor in hunger; those who do not seek because they have what they wish at once frequently become indolent in disdain” (trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. [New York:
This concern for audience is particularly relevant because of my aim in this dissertation: to describe the cognitive, affective, and social import of enigmatic theatrical moments in early modern English playhouses. Though not in a straightforward manner, the discussions of the enigmatic in the domains of rhetoric and poetics can illuminate early modern theater. Though the theater possesses some distinctive means for creating enigmatic situations, it also shares common features with poetry and rhetoric: namely, the use of patterned, publicly spoken language. Accordingly, Peacham’s discussion of the affective dimensions of a collective response to an enigma offers a model for how we might understand early modern playgoers’ experience of similar situations in playhouses. Most immediately, Peacham’s account suggests the possibility that theatrical confusion might be a pleasurable state and that enigmatic moments were at times pitched toward or away from playgoers’ particular competencies, competencies of which playwrights would have been aware. I suggest that early modern English playwrights, situated within a culture that was saturated by a fascination with the enigmatic, took Peacham’s view to heart. They studded their plays with various forms of “darcknesse,” seeking thereby to make them more “delectable.”

III: The Enigmatic and Early Modern Theater

Early modern plays repeatedly raise the possibility of enigma. Often they do so in order to deny its presence, as in the commonplace disclaimer that a play does not refer to contemporary Londoners. Thus does John Marston in The Malcontent (1604) decry those who “have been most unadvisedly overcunning in misinterpreting me” by twisting his

Macmillan, 1958], 2.6.8). Notably, while Erasmus cites this principle to defend the obscurity of adages, Augustine cites it to defend obscurity in a very different text: the Bible.
“hurtless thought[s] to private sense.”

In his prefatory epistle to *Volpone* (1607), Ben Jonson sounds a similar note when he denounces “inuading Interpreters” who find secret references everywhere:

> Application, is now, growne a Trade with many; and there are, that professe to haue a Key for the deciphering of euery thing, but let wise and noble Persons take heed how they bee too credulous, or giue leaue to these inuading Interpreters to be ouer-familiar with their fames, who cunningly, & often, vtter their owne virulent malice, vnder other mens simplest meanings.

Marston and Jonson allude to the enigmatic potential of theater precisely to deny that they have written topical, politically dangerous *romans a clef*. Voicing some of the same concerns slightly later, the Prologue in Richard Brome’s *The Novella* (1632) contrasts the play’s clear style with others’ enigmatic styles:

> All we pretend to is but Mirth and Sence.

> And he that lookes for more, must ee’ne goe seeke

> Those Poet-Bownces that write English Greeke.

Brome attests that his play will avoid the intentionally obfuscatory form of enigma, the kind that aims to lord its learning over the ignorant. Other plays simply name the possibility of enigma’s presence. In Thomas Heywood’s *The Brazen Age* (1611), for example, the play’s presenter, Homer, digresses from his account of the Golden Fleece to call attention to the affordances of the enigmatic:

> The sages, and the wise, to keepe their Art

> From being vulgar: yet to haue them tasted

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38 *Ben Jonson his Volpone or The foxe* (London: 1607), ¶2v.

With appetite and longing, giue those glosses,
And flourishes to shadow what they write,
Which might (at once) breed wonder and delight.
So did th’ Aegyptians in the Arts best try’d,
In Hierogliphickes all their Science hide.\footnote{The Brazen Age (London, 1613), C4r.}

Heywood’s account of intentional obscurity is commonplace, echoing that of Plutarch and contemporary writers.\footnote{Plutarch, The philosophie, commonlie called, the morals (Moralia). Trans. Philemon Holland (London: 1603), Qqqq3v-4r; Thomas Nashe, Anatomie of Absurditie (London: 1589), b4v-c1r; John Harrington, Preface to Orlando Furioso, (London: 1591), ¶4r; Francis Bacon, The Advancement of Learning, in The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon, ed. John M. Robertson (London: George Routledge, 1905), 125; Henry Reynolds, Mythomyestes (London: 1632), F2r-F3v.} Most significant, however, is that here we find this commonplace of early modern poetics voiced inside a playhouse; elite theories of poetry are now circulating within the Rose and Red Bull theaters. Other plays simply name the possibility that not all playgoers will understand some aspect of a performance; Hamlet, for instance, famously claims that “dumb shows” are “inexplicable.”\footnote{William Shakespeare, Hamlet, eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 3.2.10-11.} At other times the use of a foreign language can create an enigmatic situation that is signaled by the dialogue. In The Spanish Tragedy, for example, Balthazar claims that if he and his companions speak in four different non-English languages, then “hardly shall we all be understood”; similarly, Vittoria in the White Devil argues that the opposing lawyer should cease speaking in Latin because “the half or more” of “this auditory” “May be ignorant” of the language.\footnote{Thomas Kyd, The Spanish Tragedy, eds. Clara Calvo and Jesus Tronch (London: Arden, 2013), 4.1.172-73; John Webster, The White Devil, in The Works of John Webster, vol. 1, eds. David Gunby, David Carneigie and Antony Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 1995), 3.2.15-17.} These scattered references suggest that as much as other early modern poets and writers, playwrights were aware of and explicitly named the possibility of enigmatic theater.
Studies of enigma and obscurity in early modern theater have been rare, although recent work by William N. West on confusion, Carla Mazzio on the inarticulate, Andrew Sofer on invisibility, and Adam Zucker on nonsense overlap somewhat with the issues I will explore. 44 Twenty-five years ago, however, Stephen Orgel briefly sketched what he termed a “poetics of incomprehensibility” in early modern theater. Surveying editors’ attempts to clarify the meaning of obscure words or syntax in Shakespeare’s plays, Orgel asked: “How do we know that the obscurity of the text was not precisely what it expressed to the Renaissance audience?” Orgel suggested the possibility that a text’s “complexities and obscurities were…an essential part of the meaning and not to be removed by elucidation.” “[W]hat,” Orgel asked, “are the implications for drama of a text that works in this way?” 45

Rather than providing an answer, Orgel’s article sought to clear the ground in which to ask the question. So I offer here my answer: that early modern playgoers would often have found these experiences of complexity and obscurity pleasurable – and, correspondingly, that these kinds of experiences were an important ingredient in the appeal of early modern playgoing. By “pleasurable” I mean merely that these moments offered playgoers an experienced that they liked. The sheer recurrence of these enigmatic moments indicates that on some level they worked—otherwise, playwrights would not have used them. As Jeremy Lopez writes, “for a [theatrical] device to become conventional it must be functional.” 46 In other words, recurrence is a sign of success. And in the commercial theater, success means pleasing—in some form—the playgoers.

46 Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama, 4.
Substantiating the claim that enigmatic theater could afford pleasure to playgoers requires assessing the varied effects that early modern plays can achieve. I do so by weaving together two different scholarly approaches, neither of which have fully taken the measure of the other: historical phenomenology and theater history. Phenomenologically oriented scholars have taken up Bruce Smith’s call for inquiry into the “unclear and indistinct matters” of early modern literature and culture in various ways.\textsuperscript{47} Much of the best work in this vein – by critics such as Gina Bloom, Holly Dugan, and Alison Deutermann – has sought to historicize the five senses, or it has argued – as Tanya Pollard, Matthew Steggle and Alison Hobgood have done – that intense emotional experiences were central to the appeal of early modern playgoing.\textsuperscript{48} Collectively, this body of scholarship has enlivened the study of early modern theater by showing how its embodied, material, and sensory features are just as important to its effects as its language. Yet such work has not always sufficiently taken account of the importance of cognitive issues, especially states of unknowing, on playgoing experience. Doing so requires drawing on more traditional work in theater history on issues such as repertory practices, audience composition, and early modern stage conventions.\textsuperscript{49}


Combining these two approaches enables my distinctive line of inquiry: an analysis of what one might call “the feeling of (un)knowing” in early modern theater.

One of my claims is that the interplay of revelation and concealment in early modern plays was central to the formation of relationships among playgoers and that feeling part of a larger group was itself a source of pleasure. In arguing, then, that playgoers could feel things together—but not always in perfect unison—I am entering into the much-controverted issue of whether early modern audiences responded or felt themselves to be a group or individuals (or perhaps as divided into smaller subgroups). An older, positivistic form of audience study, based on empirical evidence from the period, has sought to describe the segmentation of audiences into subgroups.50 Such approaches, as Jeremy Lopez argues, can sometimes obscure the fact that “we can to a large extent generalize a playgoing public even while acknowledging that it was in no way homogenous.”51 Lopez claims that differences among playhouse audiences and playgoers “were very much differences of degree rather than kind: Elizabethan and Jacobean drama seems to be very sure of the response it wants from its audience as a whole at any given moment” (8). More recent work has furthered this trend, arguing that playhouse audiences should be understood largely as unified collectives:

Andrew Gurr and Karoline Szatek, for example, state bluntly that early modern English

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50 This is the approach taken by Harbage, Cook, and Butler.
51 Lopez, Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama, 18. Subsequent citations are given in the text.
audiences “behaved as crowds, not as individuals.” But to reduce the question to an either/or choice—as if scholars must commit fully to either a model of “crowd” or of “individuals”—fails to acknowledge that early modern theater does not consistently solicit or assume one conception or the other but instead constantly moves between and blurs them. For however much (as Stephen Greenblatt writes) the early modern “theatre manifestly addresses its audience as a collectivity” and “the Shakespearean theater depends on a felt community,” it is equally true that early modern playwrights sometimes seek to achieve effects that depend precisely upon breaking with this model. Actors at times address the audience as a collection of subgroups, calling attention to the differences among playgoers. For example, when the actor playing Rosalind at the end of As You Like It first addresses the women (“I charge you, O women…”) before the men (“and I charge you, O men…”), the effect is manifestly to make playgoers conceive of themselves as members of one of two subgroups, and not as either a unified, singular “collectivity” or as a congeries of monadic “individuals.” In a much less playful vein, Leontes in The Winter’s Tale similarly calls attention to the playgoers’ division along gendered lines:

And many a man there is even at this present,
Now, while I speak this, holds his wife by th’arm,
That little thinks she has been sluiced in’s absence,
And his pond fished by his next neighbour, by
Sir Smile, his neighbor.

While Rosalind neatly divides the audience into two groups, Leontes names three subgroups among the playgoers: husbands, wives, and an omnipresent but unlocalizable “neighbor,” “Sir Smile,” who could be, of course, any other man outside or inside the playhouse. These kinds of moments would make playgoers more aware both of their own sheer bodily presence during performances and of the potential divisions that might obtain among them.

In pointing to these examples, I am not claiming we cannot draw any conclusions about how early modern audiences in general were addressed, nor would I claim that early modern playgoing resembles modern playgoing, in which (as Greenblatt writes) there is often a “dimming of lights…[an] attempt to isolate and awaken the sensibilities of each individual member of the audience, [a] sense of the disappearance of the crowd” (5). But I am skeptical that contemporary playgoers sitting in the dark feel themselves to be isolated individuals whose experience is unaffected by the presence of others: even when darkened, a crowded movie theater feels different than an empty one. As the examples in the previous paragraph indicate, there exists evidence to support conceptions of early modern audiences as both crowds and individuals/subgroups. Consequently we cannot adopt one model to the exclusion of the other but instead should acknowledge that both models are always available for playwrights and audiences, waiting to be activated. As Anthony Dawson writes, “the individual and the collective [are] always in some ways being negotiated within the playhouse,” even as at times “a (temporary) collective is constructed out of an array of separate persons.”56

power of a collective that seems to think and feel as one. Their accounts can resemble those of contemporary affect theorists, who also emphasize (in Lauren Berlant’s words) that “affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and that bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves.”

The performance scholar Jon Foley Sherman similarly argues for the fundamentally social character of playgoing: “Performance events in particular reinforce my reliance on other people’s perceptions by the nature of attendants standing or sitting amongst each other. The experience of attending a performance with others heightens some reactions and dampens others.”

Both contemporary and early modern observers of theater thus note the tug of the collective on the individual. I cite these contemporary discourses here not to deny or dissolve the basic problem facing historical phenomenology—that past experiences will always be in some sense inaccessible—but to suggest that the resonances, affinities, and intersections between these contemporary and early modern discourses of theatergoing imply that we need not treat all early modern discussions of these issues as mere “imaginings” of audiences, but also as perhaps descriptions of them.

Thus does Ben Jonson describe the feeling of thinking that occurs when one’s judgment is swayed by that of proximate others as occurring by “contagion.” One of the “Articles of Agreement” set down in the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair* reads: “It is also agreed that every man here exercise his own judgement, and not censure by contagion or upon trust from another’s voice or face that sits by him, be he never

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59 The decision to describe not actual audiences but how they were “imagined” is the key methodological move in the recent edited collection *Imagining the audience in early modern drama, 1558-1642*, eds. Jennifer A. Low and Nova Myhill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
For Jonson, individual judgment is a hard-won achievement, because the general impulse was to take cues from nearby others. Jonson here voices a commonplace of the rhetorical tradition, whereby the member of the crowd is likely to judge poorly because of the social pressure and distorting effect of others’ presence. In his comparison of reading versus listening to a speech, Quintilian offers a detailed description of the individual’s absorption into the collective feeling of the crowd:

[A] listener’s reactions are frequently distorted by personal inclination or by the noisy cries of the applauding audience. We are ashamed to disagree, and our unconscious modesty inhibits us from putting more trust in ourselves than in others; and yet the majority likes what is bad, and an invited audience will applaud even what it does not like. (10.1.17-19)

Similarly, Quintilian remarks elsewhere, “a judge who is overcome by his emotions gives up any idea of inquiring into truth; he is swept along by the tide, as it were, and yields to the swift current” (6.2.6-7). Francis Beaumont echoes this sentiment in his commendatory poem to the first edition of John Fletcher’s *Faithful Shepherdess* when he describes early modern spectators as each looking to another to know how to respond:

One company knowing they judgement lack,

Ground their belief on the next man in black:

Others, on him that makes signs, and is mute,

Some like as he does in the fairest sute,

He as his Mistress doth, and she by chance.61

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61 John Fletcher, *Faithful Shepherdess* (London: 1610), A4v.
The “judgement[s]” of Fletcher’s spectators are not to be trusted, precisely because they are not disengaged enough, but are instead all too engaged with what others around them think and do. Obviously, these three descriptions are not simply descriptive; they are also moves to assert the poet’s (or orator’s) authority, especially after his products—as, famously, both Fletcher’s *Faithful Shepherdess* and Jonson’s *Sejanus* were—have been rejected by the public. Nevertheless, each one testifies to at least the perception that playgoers’ activities during performances—whether cognitive, emotional, or (as in the case of “He” who “like[s]…as his Mistress doth”), both—were affected by the clothes, gestures, facial expressions, and mere bodily presence of others pressing around them.

Consequently, we need to imagine early modern playgoing as an experience in which individual playgoers’ experiences, whether manifested in gesture, facial expression, sound, speech, or body language, were essential ingredients of other playgoers’ experiences—and vice versa. Even when you might not speak to or hear or look at other people, you know that you are not alone. In this view, cognition and emotion are always social in the sense that they are to some degree shared (if only because observed and felt) experiences. And these effects were not always understood negatively. For Francis Bacon, for example, the affective vulnerability of playgoers could be a spur to virtue:

> [t]he action of the theater…was carefully watched by the ancients, that it might improve mankind in virtue; and indeed many wise men and great philosophers have thought it to the mind as a bow to the fiddle; and certain it is, though a great secret in nature, that the minds of men in company are more open to affections and impressions than when alone.62

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While Bacon understands this openness to “affections and impressions” to increase “virtue,” it could also be deployed for the sake of producing mere common feeling and therefore a kind of collectivity among the people assembled. Montaigne defends the performance of public plays on these grounds, arguing that “Politike and wel-ordred commonwealths, endevor rather carefully to vnite and assemble their cittizens together; as in serious offices of devotion, so in honest exercises of recreation. Common societie and loving friendship is thereby cherished and increased.” By connecting religious ritual (“serious offices of devotion”) to playgoing, Montaigne essentially articulates the logic of twentieth-century scholars who have approached theater as a kind of ritual. For Montaigne as for the anthropologist Victor Turner, then, coming together for a play was a means to further already-existing affective bonds—“common societie and loving friendship”—among playgoers.

Early modern thought understood this “common societie” to be both formed and bound together by shared cognitive and affective experiences. As Susan James writes, passions were understood to “pass from one person to another, and the expression of feeling


65 One might ask whether any of these early modern accounts of playgoing can tell us what actually might have occurred. After all, a shared demophobia unites Jonson’s, Quintillian’s, and Beaumont’s accounts, which at least qualifies their credibility. On the other hand, Bacon’s and Montaigne’s discussions, though related, have different concerns: virtue in Bacon’s case, and “common societie” in Montaigne’s. More importantly, their positive perspective on the same phenomenon that others viewed negatively suggests that these descriptions are not simply reworkings of common tropes. In particular, Bacon’s admission that the phenomenon is both “certain” and “a great secret” has the ring of a description from his own experience.
provokes in other people emotions over which they often have little control. The experience of passion is a kind of involuntary thinking that goes on in and between the bodies of individuals, binding them together or forcing them apart.”⁶⁶ Like the boundary between emotion and cognition, the boundaries among bodies were felt to be permeable. Not yet the absolutely self-contained, “buffered selves” (to use Charles Taylor’s term) of modernity, early modern bodies were felt to be open and therefore vulnerable to what Jonson and others termed “contagion.” For Taylor, the “buffered” self is capable of “taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind,” which is distinguished from an older model of the self that was felt to be “open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers.”⁶⁷ This picture of the early modern self has been elaborated in a wealth of recent scholarship on early modern humors, passions, emotion, and affect.⁶⁸ Emotion was understood to be “catching,” and feelings could be shared through bodily proximity, a premise with important implications for early modern playgoing. Alison Hobgood describes “early modern theatergoing—what it felt like to be part of performances in English theater—as an intensely corporeal, highly emotive activity characterized by risky, even outright dangerous bodily transformation,” imagining playgoing as an “affective encounter” that depends on an “older, pre-microbiological sense of contagion, emotional and otherwise, as a mutual give and take between participating entities on a particular occasion of encounter.”⁶⁹ Recent critics and theorists have argued for similar phenomena in contemporary and early

⁶⁸ Among this large body of scholarship, works most relevant to the study of early modern theater include Pollard, Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England; Steggle, Laughing and Weeping in Early Modern Theatres; and Hobgood, Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England, as well as Gail Kern Paster’s foundational books The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) and Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
⁶⁹ Hobgood, Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England, 10, 62.
modern performances, suggesting that my account of early modern playgoing can be simultaneously a projection and a description of what actually happened. Although different performance conventions obtain between twenty-first century and early modern London, the case of the new Globe in London is suggestive: “One of the lessons from the reconstruction of the Globe in London,” write Gurr and Szatek, “is that modern theater audiences, when visible to one another and mostly on their feet, respond much more actively and collectively than they do when sitting in a darkened auditorium” (161).70 This anecdotal evidence can be supplemented by recent theoretical work in performance studies. Jill Dolan, for example, describes “those inarticulate, ineffable, affective exchanges [in performance] that are felt and gone even as we reach out to save them.”71 For Dolan, theatergoing is a means of forging new forms of relation among attendees: “[p]erformance creates ever-new publics, groups of spectators who come together for a moment and then disperse out across a wide social field, sometimes (hopefully) sharing the knowledge they gained, the emotions and insights they experienced at the theatre” (90). As Dolan herself emphasizes, much of this work in performance studies draws on anthropological studies of ritual, which articulate a theory whereby the performance of ritual—theater here understood as a form of communal ritual—first separates the participants (i.e., brings people into a separate space: the playhouse) before

70 It is true, of course, that attending a performance in the Globe now—even if the physical space is completely identical to that of the Globe circa 1600—would feel different, because a performance at today’s Globe occurs within what W.B. Worthen terms different “regimes” of performance, what are themselves historically specific. As Worthen writes, the “force” of performance is produced not simply by the words of a text, nor even by the performance space, but by the “the disciplined application of conventionalized practices—acting, directing, scenography” (Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9). The practices of “scenography” that one finds at the new Globe today have a different force than they would have had in 1600, precisely because these practices today have a “historical” and “retro” feel that they would have lacked in the early modern England.

uniting them (i.e., binds people together into an at least temporary collectivity).\textsuperscript{72} We need not posit unchanging notions of “theater,” “theatergoing,” “ritual,” or “performance” in order to notice resemblances between contemporary and early modern theatergoing. Then as now, the bodies as much as “the minds of men in company” think, interact, and attend collectively and in response to others, at times joining into collectives and at times feeling themselves to be very much alone together.

IV: Four Modes of Enigmatic Theater

My basic argument is that moments of what I am terming “enigmatic theater”—a term encompassing a range of performance techniques whereby playgoers are positioned in a cognitive no-man’s land, lying somewhere between full understanding and utter ignorance—could be a dynamic agent in the formation of collectives in early modern playhouses. The first two chapters—one on foreign languages, and one on dumb shows—show how plays might make playgoers aware of these different collectives among themselves by inviting the exercise of competencies or knowledge that would have been differentially distributed among playgoers. In chapter one, “‘Broken English’: French Language and the Divided Playgoers of Henry V,” I argue that through the use of conspicuous amounts of untranslated French. Henry V (c. 1599) raises the possibility that some playgoers know something that others do not. The play’s use of French evokes emerging practices of language-learning and practice in early modern London, whereby one way to be of the “right sort” is to know what others do not—such as foreign languages. By characterizing Henry as both a bluff

\textsuperscript{72} Cf. Durkheim’s definition of “religion”: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 44). See note 51 above for more on the studies that link theater and ritual.
monolingual Englishman and a cosmopolitan multilingual monarch, the play thus speaks to concerns about the importance of monolingualism to male English identity. And because the presence of French-speaking (or at least French-understanding) as well as female collectives within the playhouse is repeatedly acknowledged, the use of foreign languages renders these collectives aware of their existence and of their difference from the masculine norm proposed most powerfully in Henry’s St. Crispin’s Day speech. By attending to what some playgoers do not know, I argue for a more complex account of what kind of responses the play solicits and against the possibility of its creation of a unified affective community.

While the first chapter explores how division might occur within an audience on account of a specifically linguistic feature of performance, chapter two—“Hamlet, ‘Inexplicable Dumb Shows,’ and the Pleasures of Confusion”—turns from foreign speech to the dumb show as a catalyst for bringing to consciousness differences among audience members stemming from social class and cultural competency. In the case of Hamlet (c. 1600), the enigmatic and half-understood dumb show contributes to the deployment and disavowal of a self-consciously “elite” theatrical aesthetic that sets the “judicious” against the “groundlings.” As dumb shows migrated from Inns of Court plays into public theater plays late in the sixteenth century, their effects shifted. Earlier dumb shows often divided audiences into insiders and outsiders, but later dumb shows tended to flatten distinctions among playgoers, forming a crowd based upon a shared ignorance. Hamlet’s dumb show works in the latter way and is one of the play’s many dark, unsolved riddles. While critics have seen the dumb show as a holdover from Tudor culture’s proclivity for painful overexposition, excessive didacticism, and tedious repetition, many dumbshows, including
that in *Hamlet*, withhold information to offer the possibility of a pleasurable theatrical experience marked by bafflement and failures of understanding.

The second half of the dissertation continues this focus on how enigmatic theater might elicit a unified experience of at-times pleasurable communally-felt ignorance by addressing two techniques that aim to produce such a unified collectivity. In chapter three—

“‘I am I,’ ‘I am not what I am’: Tautology, Contradiction, and Enigmatic Clowning”—I consider tautology, a mode of speech that lacks (in Wittgenstein’s terms) any “representational relation to reality.” I argue that in *Twelfth Night* (c. 1602), Feste the clown’s tautological speech reveals him as simultaneously open and secret. As the player who is both the closest to and the most hostile toward the audience, the clown alternately positions the playgoing collective as part of the theatrical event and as its antagonist. I show that on the early modern stage, tautological utterances tended to come from the mouths of clowns and villains, in part because these figures mediate between the world of the play and the event of performance. From Feste’s “That that is, is” to Richard III’s “I am I” to Iago’s “What you know, you know,” the tautology marks the clown and the villain as related roles. Paradoxically, these characters who tend to be the most intimate and open with playgoers are at the same time the most closed-off and reserved, performing and emphasizing their remove by using language that semantically means nothing at all. Tautological speech thereby helps to generate a sense of theatrical character not by minimizing the actor’s connection to the live playhouse audience, but by generating a paradoxical mixture of intimacy and disengagement.

In the final chapter—“Whispering, Politics, Prophecy, and *King Lear*’s ‘one word in private’”—I address early modern stage whispering, in which audiences witness one character speaking visibly, but inaudibly, to another. In *King Lear* (1606), the use of stage
whispering between Edgar and Lear creates a moment of silence, one that binds playgoers together in a pleasurable experience of expectant incomprehension. When Edgar (disguised as Poor Tom) and Lear share “one word in private,” just after Lear has asked a portentous-sounding question (“What is the cause of thunder?”), Edgar’s answer, whatever it is, remains “private” for the rest of the play. Situating King Lear within its theatrical, theological, and political contexts, I show how the play takes up the established trope of “whispering” in order to deploy prophetic affect, one that calls attention to its stance of mute unrevelation. This moment links prophetic and political concerns in eliciting a communally-felt experience of ignorance that agglomerates a single collective of playgoers, one rendered open to a future revelation – even if it never occurs.

In an old and elliptical essay on Caroline masques, D.J. Gordon suggested that their audiences could be “bound together by their capacity to understand.” Building on Gordon’s insight, I pursue in the chapters that follow a related but inverse possibility: that early modern playgoers could also at times be “bound together” by their incapacity “to understand.” In other words, I suggest that interpretive failure, as much as interpretive success, could define and shape a form of temporary collective existence that could offer playgoers a feeling of belonging based not on a satisfied recognition of one’s achievements, but of one’s shortcomings.

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Who knows French in (and at) Shakespeare’s *Henry V*? And how might the answer to this question shape our understanding of how the play solicits the affective engagement of its playgoers? I will argue that a particular foreign language—French, a language that carried strongly gendered connotations—was one means by which early modern English playgoers could come to recognize differences among themselves. Because the presence of French-speaking (or at least French-understanding) and female subcommunities within the playhouse is repeatedly acknowledged, recognizing their presence should change how we have understood *Henry V* to solicit responses from its audience and to forge relationships among playgoers. The presence of these subcommunities inhibits the full consolidation of the playgoers of *Henry V* into a unified group that figures the bonds shared among the military representatives of the other British nations. It is the use of foreign languages in the play that renders these subcommunities aware of their existence and of their difference from the English, masculine norm proposed most powerfully in Henry’s St. Crispin’s Day speech. By using conspicuous amounts of untranslated French, the play raises the possibility that some playgoers know something that others do not and that the affective community that so many critics have seen *Henry V* to encourage to form could not come to pass.

Critics have largely assumed—even when noting moments when royal authority is “subverted”—that *Henry V* aims to gather the playgoers into a unified community. For Stephen Greenblatt, the play reveals that “[t]he ideal king must be in large part the invention
of the audience,” a group of spectators “dazzled by their own imaginary identification with
the conqueror.”\textsuperscript{1} Understood here as solitary unit working with one mind, Greenblatt’s
audience resembles the “ideal audience” posited by an older form of stage-centered criticism,
which produced accounts of \textit{Henry V} in which (to use Michael Goldman’s words) “we are
thrilled,” “we respond,” “we love him,” and so on—without specifying exactly who this
“we” refers to.\textsuperscript{2} Similarly, Joel Altman has extended Greenblatt’s reading in arguing that
“Shakespeare’s audience (or so his dramaturgy implies) is transformed into a polity” and that
the play initiates the audience into a liturgical “national sacrificial ritual,” leading to a
formation of a new community, a “band of brothers within this wooden O.”\textsuperscript{3} Such readings
rightly point to the play’s addresses to its audience as a collective unit: Henry does seem to
incorporate the audience into the assembled “band of brothers” by addressing them as “we
happy few,” and the Chorus urges the playgoers to combine their “imaginary forces” as they
“Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.”\textsuperscript{4}

But soliciting \textit{communitas} is not necessarily achieving it. As this chapter aims to
show, the play also takes pains to splinter that communal feeling by using a particular
theatrical technique: foreign languages.\textsuperscript{5} When the French language is used to separate

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} \textit{Shakespearean Negotiations}, 63.
\item \textsuperscript{2} \textit{Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 70. In his defense of his
approach, Goldman writes that he uses “the word ‘we’ abundantly and unashamedly, not because I think I can
speak for everyone’s reactions, but because in the theater a play happens not to you or me but to us” (5).
\item \textsuperscript{3} “‘Vile Participation’: The Amplification of Violence in the Theatre of \textit{Henry V},” \textit{Shakespeare Quarterly} 42.1
(Spring 1991), 16, 29, 32.
citations from the play are given in the text.
\item \textsuperscript{5} A note on terms: I will call them “foreign languages” to accord with our own use, but in the period, persons
from foreign countries were usually called “aliens” or “Strangers” (Lloyd Kermode, \textit{Aliens and Englishness in
Elizabethan Drama} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2). What I call a foreign language was
sometimes called a “strange tongue” (George Pettie, trans., \textit{The Civile Conuersation}, by Stefano Guazzo
(London: 1581), iv; cf. also William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, \textit{King Henry VIII}, ed. Gordon McMullan
David Gunby, David Carneigie, and Antony Hammond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995),
3.2.19).
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playgoers from one another in this way, it makes apparent the ways in which language is not in fact coextensive with nation. According to Irenius’ oft-repeated claim from Spenser’s View of the Present State of Ireland, “It hath ever been the use of the conqueror, to despise the language of the conquered, and to force him by all means to learn his.” ⁶ But while Katherine—the eventually “conquered” French princess—does attempt to “learn” English, the action of the play does not straightforwardly chart the obsolescence of French and the rise of English. Instead, when in Henry V the “language of the conquered” finds its way into the playhouse, it can have the effect of forcing playgoers “by all means to learn” a second language—or to become aware of their need to do so.

The possibility that playgoers might not respond uniformly to a performance has been noted before, though its implications are rarely elaborated. Jean Howard suggests in a discussion of the presence of female playgoers that “the ideological consequences of playgoing might be quite different for different social groups”; Howard and Phyllis Rackin also posit that “Even the history plays…might, we have to assume, produce a different response among English women than the patriotic excitement Nashe assumed they evoked from English men.” ⁷ The recognition of women’s presence among playgoers has been recently supplemented by Marianne Montgomery, who briefly points to the existence of both “Francophone and female subcommunities in the audience who might not be inclined to applaud Henry’s taming of his strange-speaking Kate” in Henry V. ⁸ It is the question of these “different social groups” that I will take up in my analysis, showing how the differences

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⁸ Marianne Montgomery, Europe’s Languages on England’s Stages, 1590-1620 (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 47.
among playgoers in gender and linguistic competence might have offered a more variegated theatrical experience than the uniform, collective one described by Goldman, Greenblatt, and Altman.

While incorporating at times brief discussions of a range of early modern plays, this chapter will be organized around four scenes in Henry V, each of which deploy one or more of the available options in the theatrical repertoire for staging foreign languages. As Paola Pugliatti writes, “Henry V is a play written by an English playwright for an English audience. It is not, however, a play written in English.” In addition to French, broken English, broken French, English malapropisms, as well as Fluellen’s, Macmorris’s, and Jamy’s non-standard Englishes can all be heard during a performance of Henry V. Yet the French language—spoken in the play by Henry, the Princess Katherine, her maid Alice, the French noblemen, the French captive La Fer, and an English boy translator—differs from these other deviations from “standard” English because it carries the possibility of being incomprehensible to some of the English playgoers. While Fluellen’s “Welsh accented” English would have been comprehensible to playgoers who did not know Welsh, the French characters’ French—when it was left untranslated—would have been potentially incomprehensible to monolingual English playgoers.

Of the play’s scenes in which French is heard, the scene that has attracted the most comment for its foreign languages is the “language lesson” scene (3.4), in which the maidservant Alice teaches the French princess Katherine some of the English words for parts

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of the body. Although nearly the entire scene is in French, the words would likely have been made at least partially comprehensible to the largely English speaking audience through a technique of linguistic accommodation that I will term “gestural translation.” In scenes before the battle of Agincourt (3.5, 3.7, 4.2, and 4.5), the French soldiers are represented speaking in a plain English studded with untranslated French phrases. When Pistol captures the French soldier La Fer (4.4), the problem posed by La Fer’s ability to speak only French (and Pistol’s and some playgoers’ inability to understand it) is partially resolved by the presence of an onstage translator. The play’s final scene (5.2) represents Henry’s “wooing” of Katherine in a scene that combines translated French, untranslated French, English, and what Henry calls “broken English” (5.2.243).

In narrowing my focus to French in *Henry V*, I am forced to set aside the variety of other foreign languages heard in early modern (and even just Shakespeare’s) plays, most importantly (for this chapter) Welsh, which is spoken and sung—without any of the words given in the play text—in *1 Henry IV* (1596). As critics have noted, Welsh in *1 Henry IV*—like French in *Henry V*—is associated with noble foreign women. But I focus in this chapter mainly on French in *Henry V* because the language is voiced and heard in a particularly diverse set of situations, which allows my reading of the play to double as a taxonomy of some of the ways that foreign languages could be staged in early modern drama: as translated by gestures, as untranslated phrases, as translated by an onstage character, and as pidgin or “broken” English. My readings will also illuminate each scene’s design by at times situating

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11 The stage directions only record the bare presence of Welsh language: “Glendower speaks to her [his daughter] in Welsh, and she answers him in the same” (3.1.193SD); “The Lady speaks in Welsh” (three times, at 3.1.195SD, 3.1.199SD, 3.1.207SD); and “Here the Lady sings a Welsh song” (3.1.240SD). The second and third instances of “The Lady speaks in Welsh” are slightly different: 3.1.199SD reads “The Lady [speaks] again in Welsh, and 3.1.207SD reads “The Lady speaks again in Welsh.” Another example of this “missing” Welsh song occurs in Anthony Munday’s *John a Kent and John a Cumber*, which reads: “they play, the boy sings the welsh song” (ed. M. St. Clare Bryne (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), 572-3.
it within the immediate theatrical context, showing how the scene adapts techniques and
tropes within the already existing repertoire.

My goal is to understand the kinds of effects that this theatrical technique—the
speaking of foreign languages—could have had in an early modern performance of *Henry V*.
How would playgoers have responded? What would have struck them as usual or unusual
about how foreign languages are staged in *Henry V*? What kinds of affiliations or
identifications would the performance of foreign languages have made available to
playgoers? To understand what might have occurred during performance, it is first necessary
to supplement Goldman’s model of an “ideal audience” and Altman’s anthropological model
of playgoer response with one that is slightly more mundane: a model derived in the first
place from contemporary accounts of playgoing. Looking at one contemporary account of
playgoing and one play’s account of a playgoing-like situation can point us toward the
outlines of an early modern theatrical phenomenology of linguistic incomprehension.

In *A Refutation of the Apology for Actors* (1615), the author—perhaps John Greene—
decries playwrights’ habit of tricking out their plays with foreign languages.12 When
playwrights “adde Greke, Latine, and Italian, they make a great mingle-mangle,” he writes,
making the language “more obscure, and used amongst few; for the simple vulgar people
cannot understand it: And a plaine man can scarce utter his mind, for want of Phrases (as I
may say) according to the fashion.”13 Some foreign languages, Greene claims, are used to
distinguish one group of playgoers from another. The use of these languages sets the “simple
vulgar people” against those of “fashion” and in fact alters the conditions of conversation that

12 While I acknowledge (as Glynne Wickham writes) that the author is “supposed on insufficient evidence to be
one John Greene” I refer to him as such for convenience’s sake (Glynne Wickham, ed., *English Professional
exist outside of playhouses, where “plaine” men are silenced. The use of these languages in plays is perfectly avoidable, he implies; they are used only to exclude the “simple vulgar people,” turning them into unfashionable, silent, voiceless outsiders.

Greene’s comments are suggestive, implying that foreign languages in early modern plays might at times cause a kind of division among the assembled playgoers. But his account was printed in 1615, over 15 years after the first performance of *Henry V*; so how applicable is this model to *Henry V*? A moment in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (1599), the play likely written immediately after *Henry V*, actually describes how foreign languages might have effected this division in early modern playhouses. When the “plaine man” Casca, speaking to Cassius, describes Cicero’s address to the people of Rome, his account emphasizes his and others’ incomprehension:

> Cassius Did Cicero say anything?  
> Casca Aye, he spoke Greek.  
> Cassius To what effect?  
> Casca Nay, an I tell you that, I’ll ne’er look you i’th’ face again.  
> But those that understood him, smiled at one another, and shook their heads; but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me.14

Although Casca’s lack of knowledge of Greek puts him in an outsider position, he emphasizes that there were insiders (“those that understood”) also present—and that Casca notices their presence. These understanders, reports Casca, became aware of each other’s presence and made their awareness known to the others silently: they “smiled at one another, and shook their heads.” Greek, of course, is not French; Greek’s learned, even pedantic associations differ from French’s wide array of associations, ranging on the one hand from

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femininity, deviousness, and sexual impropriety to (on the other) the law, trade, and diplomacy.\textsuperscript{15} Nor should we conclude from this one passage that every time Greek (or any foreign language) was spoken during an early modern play, those knowledgeable in that language invariably commenced a bout of smiling and head-shaking. But Casca’s remark is nonetheless suggestive; it points toward the potential of a foreign language to divide an audience into insiders and outsiders—and more importantly, to make people aware of the other playgoers surrounding them to feel and recognize their position within either subgroup. In *Henry V*, I will argue, foreign languages could create similar senses of affiliation or disaffiliation among playgoers. Understanding what French means in the play requires that we attend not only to the way that the French princess Katherine is finally “silenced” in the final scene, but also to valences of what it means to perform and speak in French to an audience of Londoners in 1599.\textsuperscript{16}

The study of vernacular foreign languages in early modern drama has tended to focus on the ways that their use can raise questions of national identity—a particular form of marking insiders and outsiders—and thereby function as an exclusionary or xenophobic device.\textsuperscript{17} While most of these studies take up the question of foreign languages as a means of representing foreigners, some recent work has paid particular attention not only to what

\textsuperscript{15} On these mixed associations, see Juliet Fleming, “The French Garden: An Introduction To Women’s French,” *ELH* 56.1 (Spring 1989), 32.


foreign languages represent but also to their theatrical effects, and in particular to their potential not to be understood by some playgoers. Andrew Fleck outlines strategies by which English playwrights mitigated this possibility, showing how they could “present another tongue without turning their stage into an incomprehensible Babel” by using pidgin or “broken” English; by having characters speak in English while maintaining the fiction that they are actually speaking another language; or by staging actual words in a foreign language. Montgomery similarly describes the ways in which potentially confusing foreign languages in some early modern plays can be seen to “model productive cross-cultural exchange” and “bring audiences into proximity to alien sounds, make those sounds comprehensible, and convert them into theatrically meaningful languages.” While I share with these recent studies a focus on the effects that foreign languages might have had during performances, I depart from their predominant emphasis on the ways that comprehensibility or translation was achieved. Instead, I want to focus on the opposite situation: how comprehensibility might have been achieved either less than smoothly, or even not at all.

In the particular case of Henry V, scholars have examined the place of French and other linguistic issues in the play in various ways. Some scholars, focusing on the question of dialect, have shown how Henry’s own self-proclaimed ability to “drink with any tinker in his own language” plays out politically through the attempted absorption of the three dialect speaking “nations”—Wales, Scotland, and Ireland—into a British empire.

19 Europe’s Languages on England’s Stages, 3.
“foreign” language that is heard in the play—French—has been the focus of a range of critics who have explored the ways that French serves as the eventually-silenced language of the subjugated, sexualized, feminized French princess and nation.21 These two strains of critical inquiry are not fully separable; as Margaret Ferguson writes, “[i]deologies of nationhood, language, and gender are tightly knotted in Shakespeare's Henry V, and nowhere more so than in its final scene.”22 Ferguson has complicated readings that see only the silencing of French and other dialects, arguing that the play “speaks to, and draws from, an emergent imperial nationalism” that relies on “two contradictory fictions of legitimation”: first, the “ideal of national and linguistic unity” (i.e., one nation, one language); and second, the “imperial” ideal, whereby “the (male) ruler controls his subjects despite (or because) the peoples are divided among themselves and speak many different tongues.”23 This second imperial ideal might offer a solution to the question of not only why—if Henry really can “drink with any tinker in his own language”—his French is so bad, but also why Henry curiously insists that the French King address him in French and in Latin. Empire might

21 In addition to works mentioned above by Fleming, Newman, and Howard and Rackin, important considerations of the play from this angle include Lance Wilcox, “Katherine of France as Victim and Bride,” Shakespeare Studies 17 (1985): 61-76; Helen Ostovich, “‘Teach You our Princess French?’ Equivocal translation of the French in Henry V,” in Gender and Rhetorics: Postures of Dominance and Submission in History, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies), 147–161; Katherine Eggert, Showing Like a Queen: Female Authority and Literary Experiment in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, “‘Fause Frenche Enough’: Kate’s French in the English lesson scene of Shakespeare’s Henry V,” English Text Construction 6.1 (2013): 60-88. Recent work by Montgomery is a partial exception; for Montgomery, Katherine’s “French speech has the potential to disrupt the story of British authority that the Tudor myth constructed” (Europe’s Languages on England’s Stages, 36). N.B. that French in the play has been viewed through the lens of nationalism, not just gender; see for example Deanne Williams, The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Michael Sanger, Shakespeare and the French Borders of English (New York: Palgrave, 2013).
22 Dido’s Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 156.
23 Ibid., 153.
entail not the imposition of one language over all others, but rather the dissemination of as many tongues as possible, more than any one ruler could ever hope to master.

But as Ferguson points out, “[c]ommentators in general have paid less attention to Henry’s broken French than to Katherine’s broken English.” Following Ferguson’s lead, I examine in this chapter the different ways that foreign languages—such as Henry’s “broken French”—are staged in *Henry V*, at times drawing attention to the ways that it adapts techniques within the already existing repertoire. Instead of reading the presence of French as, for instance, a symptom of a submerged anxiety about Ireland, I propose we take the French language in *Henry V* on its own terms. Doing so, I argue, illuminates the play as an occasion for playgoers to affiliate and disaffiliate at various moments along axes of nation and gender. These moments of linguistic confusion make these axes more problematic than has been heretofore unrecognized. If *Henry V* is understood as a play that solicits an affective response that binds one to an ideal of English masculinity, then the question remains: why include so much French in this play, thereby risking alienating those who do not speak French? To answer this question requires that we acknowledge that the play does more than one thing: while it hails its audience as an affectively bound collective, it also makes available means by which that collective might be splintered into subcommunities, and (more importantly) by which it might feel itself to be so divided.

II.

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24 Ibid., 158.
25 According to this recurrent view, voiced succinctly by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, *Henry V* “offers a displaced imaginary resolution of one of the state’s most intractable problems” (“History and Ideology: The Instance of *Henry V*,” in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis, 225). This perspective has been elaborated in Neill, “Broken English and Broken Irish,” 11; and Montgomery, *Europe’s Languages on England’s Stages*, 24. In holding the Irish perspective at arm’s length in this chapter, I do not intend to deny any connection; Altman, “Vile Participation,” 8-13, demonstrates most persuasively the connections between the Irish campaign and the situation of early performances of *Henry V*. But I do want to ask what is at stake in routing concerns with the Irish campaign through France, and specifically, through the French language.
The first onstage appearance of Katherine and Alice immediately follows the scene depicting the English army’s harrowing sack of Harfleur. Henry’s threats of rape and pillage in that scene find an eerie resonance in the way that the language lesson scene (as Howard and Rackin write) “is designed not only to name Katherine’s body but also to exhibit it” for the consumption of English playgoers. Rackin has also argued that Shakespeare “departs from theatrical convention when he chooses to write the women’s lines in French, excluding them from the linguistic community that includes virtually all of the male characters (French as well as English) along with his English-speaking audience.” According to this reading, the effect of French in this scene would be to consolidate the playgoers’ feeling of belonging to a male-dominated community defined by the English language. But how do we judge whether these French women are being excluded from the audience, or alternatively, whether the audience is being excluded from the women? Jean-Christophe Mayer, for instance, has argued that in this scene Shakespeare allows playgoers “to experience for themselves what it means to be a stranger in a strange land” when they “have to struggle linguistically.” The accounts from Greene and Julius Caesar further suggest the possibility that when an actor speaks in an unknown language the audience might actually feel excluded, not excluding. But Mayer’s description of the phenomenology of performance does not necessarily exclude Rackin’s account; while the playgoers might be “excluded” at the level of performance, the women are indeed “excluded” at the level of representation.

Yet to speak of the playgoers as simply excluded from the conversation because it takes place in French overlooks not just the possibility that the words could be partially

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26 *Engendering a Nation*, 37.
understood through gesture but also that these playgoers are not completely homogeneous, nor would they feel themselves to be. The French language heard during the scene, I suggest, could have the effect of articulating playgoers into various subcommunities. The scene affords different pleasures to playgoers with different levels of competence in French: some jokes are pitched toward those who know French well; those who know no French could learn a few words and enjoy a laugh at Katherine’s expense; and those who know a small amount of French and could only comprehend the simpler parts of the conversation could experience the pleasure of understanding something that others around them do not.

The scene is able to articulate these different groups because although it portrays an English lesson on behalf of Katherine, it can also serve as a French lesson for the playgoers. Early in the scene, Katherine’s review of the body parts she has learned so far (“La main, de hand; les doigts, de fingres”) reinforces the associations for both herself and the playgoers (3.4.11). Yet not all of the playgoers were expected to be as ignorant of French as Katherine seems to be of English. When Alice remarks to Katherine that “vous prononcez les mots aussi droit que les natifs d’Angleterre” (You pronounce the words as correctly as the natives of England), the joke’s success depends on one’s ability to understand this French which goes untranslated, thus placing it out of reach of some playgoers (3.4.34-35). Similarly, despite editors’ and critics’ ingenious explorations of the extent of Shakespeare’s bawdy in nearly every word in this scene, it’s not at all clear that even the most “obvious” sexual puns in the scene—“de foot, et de coun”—would have been understood as indicating anything more specific than a “sexual” pun (3.4.47). For example, the Folio text adds a “t” to the latter—rendering it as “Count”—because, I suggest, playgoers did not know enough French to get the joke when it was rendered as simply “coun” in the Quarto. Of course, one does not
need to know that the French *foutre* is “fuck” or that the French *con* means “cunt” to find the scene funny, since Katherine’s shocked response could do much of the work. But knowing a bit of French does let one in on the jokes, placing one within an in-crowd whose laughter could lead the way for the more baffled, monolingual playgoers during a performance.

Yet any bafflement that did occur would likely have been mild, because as the performance history of this scene shows, an actor could make many of the French words comprehensible to monolingual English playgoers by having the actor playing Katherine point at each corresponding body part. We might term such a practice “gestural translation”: a means of “translating” foreign language not by giving an English translation, but by indicating the words’ meanings with an actor’s gestures. Gestural translation turns the scene into a kind of language lesson for playgoers, and as Karen Newman points out, the scene in fact resembles dialogues about parts of the body found in “the popular and cheap French phrase books fashionable in socially mobile late sixteenth-century London.”29 We should therefore situate this scene within a multilingual London, one in which some people were trying to learn languages in part as a means of social distinction. The moment of French in a playhouse in 1599 would thus have been quite complex: while for monolingual English playgoers French could be the indecipherable language of the other, for another set of playgoers French was the language to which they aspired, knowledge of which would distinguish them from others. When we view this scene against this background, we can see that it can do more than just humiliate naïve French women. The scene could also humiliate those closer to home: those playgoers who, as Katherine’s obverse, know a small amount of French and thus uncomfortably resemble Katherine the awkward language-learner; or those

29 Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama*, 107. Newman cites Bellot’s *French Dialogues* (1586), which uses dat for “that,” de for “the,” etc.
who know no French and find themselves largely baffled by this supposedly-funny scene.

Playing a counterpoint to Chorus’ repeated solicitations for the community to work together, the scene emphasizes the divisions existing among the playgoers.

III.

The French language also appears in the scattered phrases spoken by the French lords in four scenes in which they appear alone (i.e., without any English, in 3.5, 3.7, 4.2, and 4.5). Despite their marginal importance for the plot, these few lines of French can create a jarring effect, making the issue of competence in French relevant for playgoers. For example, as the French lords arm for battle they trade lines in French:

Dauphin    _Monte a cheval!_ My horse, _varlet laquais_, ha!

Orleans    O brave spirit!

Dauphin    _Via, les eaux et terre._

Orleans    _Rien puis? L’air et feu?_

Dauphin    _Cieux, cousin Orleans!_ (4.2.2-6)

The lords’ French occurs at the beginning of the scene, thereby establishing their “Frenchness” and their difference from the English; for the rest of the scene, they speak exclusively in English. When the lords speak in scattered French phrases in 3.5 and 4.5, the French also occurs only the first time that they speak. In 3.5, the French lords are each introduced with a phrase in French:

Dauphin    _O Dieu vivant!_ Shall a few sprays of us…

...........................................

Britain    Normans, but bastard Normans, Norman bastards!

_Mort de ma vie!_.............
Constable    Dieu de batailles! Where have they this mettle?

(3.5.5,10-11,15)

The effect of these snatches of French is not simply to make the French seem more “other”—to “record alien voices,” in Greenblatt’s formulation—because for the playgoers who understand this French (and for whomever wrote this French dialogue) French would not in fact have been an “alien” tongue. French is, in fact, what they know; they become more like the French than like the monolingual English who do not understand the French characters. I am not claiming that at this moment, those who know French would simply identify with the French or suddenly decide to root for them to win the battle of Agincourt. But I do think that by calling attention to who knows French and who does not, this moment raises the question for the playgoers of just how uniform the English actually are: and just how “other” the French actually are.

These French phrases and exclamations are reminders to playgoers that these characters are “actually” Frenchmen, despite the otherwise eloquent English that they usually speak. Yet the decision to stage “Frenchness” in this way would have registered as significant in the theatrical context of 1599, in which Shakespeare’s (or, better, the Lord Chamberlain’s) *Henry V* was likely competing with (or at least responding to) a now-lost
Admiral’s Men Henry V play (which Henslowe’s Diary reports was performed in 1595-1596) as well as the Queen’s Men’s Famous Victories of Henry The Fifth, which was entered into the Stationers Register in 1594 and printed in 1598. If, as Rosyln Knutson suggests, the Queen’s Men had revived Famous Victories in 1595 to compete with the Admiral’s Men’s Henry V, a discernible desire existed among London playgoers for this story, as well as a corresponding strong sense of expectation about how the story might be played.32 Because Shakespeare’s Henry V therefore joins and follows other versions of the story, its rendering of the French soldiers’ Frenchness through a combination of true French and true English would have been recognized as a departure from the strategy adopted by Famous Victories. That play used eloquent, unmarked English for highborn French characters (who speak no French words at all) and pidgin English for the lower-status French soldiers. The Dauphin, the French King, and the French Captain all speak in an English that is indistinguishable from that of the play’s English characters; the French soldiers speak a comically broken English in lines like “me will tel you what mee will doo” with repeated references to “English mans.”33 While both options—French and a French/English pidgin—represent more or less the same thing (i.e. a “native French speaker”), their effects would differ at the level of presentation. Pidgin languages can turn what Greene would later see as a potential cause for shame (the English-speaking audience’s ignorance of, in this case, French) into a cause for laughter. As A.J. Hoenselaars writes, assigning a character broken English could be “an ideal shorthand method to manipulate audiences against the speaker,” or at least to elicit a

33 Anon., The Famous Victories of Henry V (London: 1598), E3r. Subsequent citations from the play are given in the text.
stance of condescending superiority. Explaining this phenomenon, Greenblatt suggests that “[t]here is always a slight amusement in hearing one’s own language spoken badly, a gratifying sense of possessing effortlessly what for others is a painful achievement.” Pidgins could thus be occasions for English playgoers to do what Sidney deplored: to “jest at strangers, because they speak not English so well as we do.” At the greatest extreme, pidgin English marked one as not just a non-native, but as so other as to be worthy of death. In the anonymous Jack Straw (ca. 1591), a “Flemming” who is found to be unable to “say bread and cheese, in good and perfect English”—he pronounces it instead as “Brocke and Keyse”—is carried off to be executed.

Yet the soldiers’ French phrases in Henry V offer something else to English playgoers. Instead of being an occasion for “jest,” these phrases are left untranslated, a potential mechanism of exclusion for some of those playgoers who would not have been competent in French. While Famous Victories offers playgoers a sense of superiority over the pidgin-speaking French soldiers, Henry V’s depiction of the French soldiers could elicit feelings of both superiority and inferiority: superiority because some of the French, such as the Dauphin, are portrayed as vain and ridiculous; but also inferiority, because the hearing of the French language could become—for playgoers lacking what Greene called “Phrases…according to the fashion”—an occasion of struggling for comprehension. The scene, in other words, calls attention to who knows French (and who doesn’t) in early modern London.

34 Hoenselaars, Images of Englishmen and Foreigners, 50.
35 Shakespearean Negotiations, 59.
36 Sidney, Defence of Poesy, 151.
37 Anon., Jack Straw (London: 1594), D1v.
But how common were these playgoers, and what kinds of French-speaking ability might one expect to find in a typical audience at the Globe in 1599? Based on the extant evidence, scholars have largely judged that despite the range of languages that could be heard in early modern London, the majority of residents would have been monolingual. A moment in *Merchant of Venice* (1596) suggests as much, when Portia dismisses her English suitor Falconbridge on account of his linguistic incompetence: “He hath neither Latin, French nor Italian.” While this moment does not prove that nobody knew any non-English languages, for this particular joke to work, many people in the audience would have to recognize themselves in the description of the monolingual Englishman.

Yet some sought to remedy this situation for themselves or for their children by employing tutors, schoolmasters, and books promising a “plaine” route to competence in French. French could also have been heard in Huguenot churches and in London’s Royal Exchange, in which (as Thomas Dekker wrote) all “talke in severall Languages…insomuch that the place seems Babell (a Confusion of tongues).” Similarly, Paul’s Walk was described by another writer as “a heap of stones and men, with a vast confusion of languages; and were the steeple not sanctified, nothing liker Babel.” Schoolmasters, such as the Huguenot Claudius Hollyband, also taught French and English at schools in London; Hollyband advertised his school in his enormously popular books, *The French Schoolmaster*.

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40 Examples include *A Plaine Pathway to the French Tongue: very profitable for Marchants* (London: 1575) and *Playne treatise to learne in a short space the Frenche tongue* (London: 1576).
and *The French Littleton*. Foreign language instruction books like Hollyband’s also had, of course, a fiduciary interest in making readers feel inadequate about not knowing another language. Jacques Bellot, for example, states in his prefatory epistle to *The French Grammer* (1588) that “the Frenche tongue ...[is] now a dayes required of many,” and in 1593 John Eliot proclaims French “a jewel, so dearly bought, and so much desired of all” and “a Courtly speech, spoken and understood by most Princes, Noble-men, and Gentlemen in all parts of Christendome,” useful for work abroad as “the onely tongue for the Marcialist,” as well as “the only trading tongue in Europe.”

Many of these books teaching French in fact emphasize one’s need for it while travelling, often emphasizing, as one 1575 book does, that knowing French is “very profitable for Marchants.” Other English learned law-French for legal work, or French for use in diplomacy or aristocratic correspondence. As Bradin Cormack suggests, “a knowledge of French was, like the ability to write poetry, just the kind of literary and cultural marker that might attract the attention of a powerful patron in need of a secretary.”

In sum, French was a language that Londoners from the 1570s onward consistently wanted to learn and felt a need to learn. French was a kind of marker—not

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44 James Bellot, *The French grammer* (London: 1588), ¶3r; John Eliot, *Ortho-epia Gallica Eliots fruits for the French* (London: 1593), the first quotation is from B2v; all the others are from B1r.

45 Anon., *A Plaine Pathway to the French Tongue*: very profitable for Marchants, and also all other; which desire the same…. (London: 1575). The book *Here begynneth a lytell treatyse for to lerne Englysshe and Frensshe*, is to the point. The first dialogue begins: “I wyll begynne…To lerne to speke frensshe…Soo that I maye doo my marchaundyse…In fraunce and elles where in other londes…There as the folke speke frensshe” ([London: 1553], Aiv). Many of these books include dialogues in which one speaker asks directions to Paris, or rents a room in an inn, or inquires about prices of goods.


simply a “literary and cultural one”—that could set one apart and (just as importantly) make one feel set apart from the crowd.48

But the question of French in Henry V is further complicated because of the language’s feminine associations; the only female characters in the play, Alice and Katherine, speak mostly in French, and the other monolingual French character, the ironically named Monsieur La Fer [i.e. “Iron Man”], is similarly shown to be “unmasculine” and cowardly. Known as the lingua mulierum, French was also associated with effeminacy and sexual impropriety.49 This raises the particular question of the women playgoers’ knowledge of French. Some wealthy Englishwomen would have learned French, and as Juliet Fleming notes, through a variety of aristocratic women—including Anne Boleyn, Katharine Parr, Lady Jane Grey, and Queen Elizabeth—“women had had a substantial influence on the production of French text books” in the sixteenth century.50 The appearance of Peter Erondell’s The French Garden: for English Ladyes and Gentlewomen to walke in (1605)—a book ostensibly geared toward specifically female learners of French—does not necessarily mean that women were not using and learning from earlier books like those of Hollyband at the same time. However, those books, with their depictions of scenes of travel and trade, differ from The French Garden which, Fleming argues, “is remarkable among the phrase

48 Foreign languages’ ability to create distinctions among Londoners is what is at issue in a contemporary play, William Haughton’s Englishman for My Money (1598), in which—as Nina Levine writes—the monolingual English characters’ “botched impersonations [of foreign languages] show up the linguistic weaknesses of the native-born English, exposing an insularity that is simultaneously a measure of patriotism and vulnerability” (Practicing the City: Early Modern London on Stage [New York: Fordham University Press, 2016], 102).
books of its time for its willingness to consider a female audience.\textsuperscript{51} Henry V’s association of French with women, I suggest, demonstrates its similar consideration of its “female audience.” On the one hand, the French language in the play is largely devalued as the language of the feminized, vain, cowardly, conquered French. But the same time, the play at times makes playgoers aware of the importance of competence in the French tongue, a competence that some but not all playgoers would have possessed.

In the first two scenes I have discussed above, that competence is solicited but not yet absolutely crucial. The scenes take pains to make the question of understanding French less than essential: on the whole, the scenes can do their respective work (jokes at the expense of Katherine, and marking the vanity of the soldiers as distinctively French) whether playgoers know French or not. Yet the scene between Katherine and Alice does have a curious resonance with Fleming’s description of Erondell’s French Garden, a text written ostensibly for women language learners, but a book that is also directed toward other men: “What The French Garden does offer its male reader, however, is the opportunity to imagine women in their most private moments, alone with other women. And as the curious male gaze penetrates female separatism, it violates its propriety and turns it into an erotic display understood to exist for the pleasure of men” (31). One could hardly offer a better description of the English lesson scene in Henry V, a scene that depicts in some sense a separate women’s space—the French language only reinforces that sense of separation—while at the same time displaying that supposedly private space to all playgoers. But women in the audience could complicate that audience’s response to this scene; while some might have had a voyeuristic reaction to the scene, I suggest that the presence of women in that audience would have led to a range of responses, not all of which would have understood the scene

only as one of “erotic display…for the pleasure of men.” I am not claiming here that all women playgoers would identify with the women characters in the play, nor that only men could find pleasure in erotic display of a woman’s supposedly private spaces, conversations, and body parts. But I am suggesting that the presence of women in playhouses would have made these scenes more complex for their playgoers than critics have previously recognized.52

We might pose the question this way: if Henry V seeks to charismatically elicit the affective attachments of its playgoers, then did they all follow? Were they all supposed to follow? And—to be very specific—were the women supposed to follow? For Thomas Heywood, the virtue of “our domesticke hystories”—a group in which he explicitly includes “Henry the fift”—is that they bind English men together and encourage them in military virtues:

what English blood seeing the person of any bold English man presented and doth not hugge his fame, and hunnye at his valor, pursuing him in his enterprise with his best wishes, and as beeing wrapt in contemplation, offers to him in his hart all prosperous performance, as if the Personater were the man Personated, so bewitching a thing is liuely and well spirited action, that it hath power to new mold the harts of the spectators and fashion them to the

shape of any noble and notable attempt. What coward to see his contryman valiant would not bee ashamed of his owne cowardise?53

Heywood envisions specifically male playgoers whose hearts are “new moulded” by “liuely and well spirited action,” rendering them available for “noble and notable attempt[s].” History plays, for Heywood, can change male English playgoers into proto-English soldiers, a conversion similarly encouraged by Henry V’s Chorus, who commands the playgoers to “Follow, follow!...And leave your England...For who is he...that will not follow / These culled and choice-drawn cavaliers to France?” (3.0.17,19,22-23). For both Heywood and the Chorus, women are not involved in this process. And if there is little room for women’s “harts” to be “new moulded” in Henry V, then the play is bound—on some level—to not quite succeed in the way that it seems designed to do.

IV.

I now turn to the scene depicting Pistol’s capture of the French soldier La Fer. Occurring only in the Folio version of the play, this scene contains long stretches of the French language, some of which is translated and some of which is not. Although the French in this scene—as in the language lesson scene—is made partially comprehensible for monolingual playgoers, some of the humor depends on possessing some knowledge of French. Much of the scene’s appeal, of course, derives from it being Pistol who encounters a character who can only speak French. In this play as in 2 Henry IV and Merry Wives of Windsor, Pistol’s English is consistently marked as exuberantly inflated: Pistol says that Falstaff’s “heart is fracted and corroborate,” calls Hugh Evans a “latten Bilbo,” and at one

53 An Apology for Actors (London: 1612), B4r.
point picks up his sword, asking: “shall we have incision? Shall we imbrue?” So when Pistol captures a Frenchman who speaks no English, linguistic havoc can be expected to ensue. This character—identified as “Monsieur La Fer” in the Folio text, but only as “the French man” in the Quarto—first pleads with Pistol, and confusion follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French Soldier</th>
<th>Je pense que vous êtes le gentilhomme de bonne qualité.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pistol</td>
<td>Qualité? ‘Caleno custore me’!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Art thou a gentleman? What is thy name? Discuss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Soldier</td>
<td>O Seigneur Dieu!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pistol</td>
<td>O Signeur Dew should be a gentleman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perpend my words, O Signeur Dew, and mark… (4.4.2-8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pistol understands nothing of the French, but—and this is essential for those playgoers who get the joke—he seems not to understand just how little he understands. Although he knows no French, he does not feel his ignorance as a problem to be overcome. He therefore assumes that the words that La Fer speaks can be more or less assimilated into English: Pistol turns the French words “moi” and “bras” into the currencies (“moys” and “brass”) in which the soldier’s ransom is offered (4.4.10,11,17,18). As Cormack writes, “Pistol imagines French as versions of an English that has already internalized other national tongues.” In doing so, Pistol thinks of the Frenchman’s language not as truly different from his own but as a kind of broken English, a language whose difficulties derive merely from its status as a deficient variety of English. For Philip Schwyzer, Pistol is “the play’s representative of little English

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54 The first quotation is from Henry V, 2.1.124; the second from Merry Wives of Windsor, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (Walton-on-Thames: Arden, 2000), 1.1.150; the third from 2 Henry IV, ed. A.R. Humphreys (London: Methuen, 1966), 2.4.192.
55 A Power to do Justice, 216.
chauvinism,” and that “chauvinism” is here shown to have a specifically linguistic dimension.56

The jokes on moi and bras demand that a playgoer know some French or at least have learned during the language lesson scene—as Katherine did—that bras means “arm,” not “brass.” Either way, the jokes at Pistol’s expense require playgoers to know more than he does. But at the same time, Pistol resembles precisely those monolingual English playgoers who would assume based on prior theatrical practice that a “foreign” character onstage will speak a version of English that marks him or her as foreign, but that is still accommodated (and therefore comprehensible) to a monolingual English playgoer: in short, a broken English. Indeed, actual English playgoers might have expected this French captive to speak in broken English, as he did in the analogous scene in Famous Victories. In that scene, Pistol’s analogue, a comic carrier named Derick who has travelled to France as part of Henry’s army, captures a Frenchman who does in fact plead in a broken English that mixes English and French: “O good Mounsier compareteue. Monsieur pardon me” (F2v). In that play, the Frenchman gets away and the short scene ends as a draw. But Shakespeare’s scene is extended by the addition of a boy translator, through whom the negotiations between Pistol and La Fer proceed with some difficulty and tedium. Comparison with Famous Victories shows that Shakespeare has changed the French captive’s language from broken English to French, thus triggering the need for this additional character—the boy translator—whose presence makes explicit the problems of incomprehension that attend foreign languages.

Upon learning from the boy that the Frenchman’s name is La Fer, Pistol breaks into what turns out to be an untranslatably colloquial English:

Pistol: Master Fer? I'll fer him, and firk him, and ferret him. Discuss the same in French unto him.

Boy: I do not know the French for fer, and ferret and firk.

(4.4.28-31)

As this moment shows, the practice of translation is far from straightforward and at times even impossible. Nor does the boy merely translate in this scene; he actually renders Pistol’s short, direct English phrases into a more copious French, substituting the third person for the first:

Pistol: Bid him prepare; for I will cut his throat.

French Soldier: Que dit-il, monsieur?

Boy: Il me commande à vous dire que vous faites vous prêt, car ce soldat ici est disposé tout à cette heure de couper votre gorge. (4.4.32-36)

[He commands me to tell you that you [are to] make yourself ready, for this soldier here is disposed, this very hour, to cut your throat.] 57

The Boy’s final phrase offers another opportunity for Pistol to voice his favorite French phrase, rendered by the Arden edition here as “cuppele gorge.” 58 The French soldier’s reply sets off another round of a paragraphs, voiced first in French and then translated into English:

French Soldier: O je vous supplie pour l’amour de Dieu me pardonner! Je suis gentilhomme de bonne maison: gardez ma vie, et je vous donnerai deux cents écus.

57 This English translation is taken from the Arden edition, 4.4.33-36n.
58 Pistol also uses this phrase at 2.1.72 (“Couple a gorge”), and (in the Quarto) at the end of 4.6: “Couple gorge” (The Cronicle History of Henry the fift (London: 1600), E4r).
Pistol  What are his words?

Boy   He prays you to save his life: he is a gentleman of
good house, and for his ransom he will give you
two hundred crowns.

Pistol  Tell him my fury shall abate, and I the crowns will take.

French Soldier  *Petit monsieur, que dit-il?*

Boy   *Encore qu'il est contre son jurement de pardonner*
aucun prisonnier, néanmoins, pour les écus que vous
lui ici promettez, il est content à vous donner la liberté,
le franchisement.

French Soldier [to Pistol] *Sur mes genoux je vous donne mille remerciemens,*
et je m'estime heureux que j’ai tombé entre les mains
d'un chevalier, comme je pense, le plus brave, vaillant,
et très distingué seigneur d'Angleterre.

Pistol  Expound unto me, boy.

Boy   He gives you, upon his knees, a thousand thanks…

(4.4.40-60)

I present this extended quotation from the playtext to emphasize the length of this scene:
clearly, the substitution of French for broken English slows down the action tremendously.
Without discounting the exotic theatrical pleasures of hearing a foreign language, this scene
risks becoming tedious. Productions in which the Boy struggles through his French
awkwardly like a student in an oral examination only reinforce this point: much in this scene
can seem superfluous, however much French one knows.\textsuperscript{59} Those different levels of competence in French would lead to divergent reactions among playgoers. For those playgoers who comprehend the French fully, the translations are largely redundant; and those playgoers who require the translations to comprehend what is being spoken could find waiting for the relay tiresome. Even the “jokes” for the cognoscenti (like the boy mistranslating \textit{très distingué} as “thrice-worthy” instead of “very worthy” at 4.4.63) seem too subtle to justify staging so much French. Instead, the scene seems designed to raise the problems of cross-linguistic difficulty and translatability and to show how challenging it would be to solve them.

Yet this interest in the question of foreign languages—how they sound, how they are learned, how they get translated—is not unique to this play. Pistol’s linguistic exuberance—what the Boy calls Pistol’s “killing tongue….by the means whereof ‘a breaks words,” and which we see in Pistol’s voicing of other languages for their sonic appeal—appears in other characters in plays staged just before \textit{Henry V} (3.2.34, 35). While Pistol is an instance of a character type in early modern drama—a humors character, as critics have noted before—he is also one example of a different type: the linguistically incompetent but charming Englishman travelling abroad. For these monolingual Englishmen, their inability to speak a foreign language only renders them all the more endearing. One such character, the English tailor Barnaby Bunch in the anonymous Oxford’s Men comedy \textit{The Weakest Goeth to the Wall} (ca. 1595-1600) travels first to France and then as a refugee to Flanders, where he encounters and repeatedly insults a pidgin-speaking Dutchman as a “bacon fac’d Butterbox,”

\textsuperscript{59} Gary Taylor observes that “Although in productions the Boy's French is usually halting and mispronounced, there is no evidence of this in the text” (\textit{Henry V}, ed. Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 4.4.23n).
a “blockhead,” a “drunken Cannyball,” and a “beere sucker.”60 Although Bunch claims to have left England on account of his “honourable humour to learn language and see fashions,” his inability to learn foreign languages or accommodate himself to foreign “fashions” actually becomes a sign of his hardy English virtue (B2r). When at one point he finds himself caught up in international European warfare, he first claims to be able to speak French. But when asked the simplest possible question—“D’ou veni vou?” [Where are you from?]—he admits: “I neuer learnt so farre, I cannot tell ye that” (E4v). Even when Bunch misunderstands foreign names—he mistakenly calls a character Ferdinando “farting Androw”—the mistake is received as comedic, not insulting (H4r). And like Pistol, Bunch inventively and senselessly revels in the sound of words, at one point praising England for its “fresh Ale, firme Ale, nappie Ale, nippitate Ale, irregular, secular Ale, courageous, contagious Ale, alcumisticall Ale” (B2). By pointing to Pistol’s theatrical lineage in characters like Bunch, I want to suggest that this character type’s particular attitude toward foreign languages—exuberantly interested but strikingly incompetent in them—speaks to the situation of at least some actual Englishmen in this period. These two characters—Pistol and Bunch—would thus have been sites of mixed affective attachment for English playgoers. On the one hand, their roguishness would render them endearing examples of essential English manhood; on the other hand, they would serve as mirrors in which those English playgoers who are themselves monolingual would be invited to laugh at a version of themselves because of their own incompetence in foreign languages. These characters raise playgoers’

60 The Weakest Goeth to the Wall (London: 1600). The first insult is in D3v; the other three are all on E3v. Subsequent citations from the play are given in the text. While the exact date of the play’s first performance is unknown, the consensus is that it was likely sometime in the late 1590s; Martin Wiggins’ “best guess” is 1599, and the play’s editor, Jill L. Levenson, proposes 1595-1600, “probably c. 1597 or 1598” (British Drama, 1533-1642: A Catalogue, vol. IV, ed. Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 146; Levenson, Introduction, A Critical Edition of the Anonymous Elizabethan Play The Weakest Goeth to the Wall (New York: Garland, 1980), 40).
awareness of their linguistic deficiency and make it—as best as they possibly can—into a subject of fun.

The final section of this chapter will discuss the play’s courtship scene between Katherine and Henry, who himself will turn out to play (if not quite to be) another instance of this character type: the linguistically incompetent but charming Englishman travelling abroad. But Henry’s capacity to garner audience identification, sympathy, and attachment can be better assessed against a slightly different (and royal) version of his character type: the English Prince Edward in *The Tragedy of Alphonsus, Emperour of Germany* (ca. 1594-99). Although the play largely revolves around the scheming Alphonsus’ political rise and fall, it at one point brings a monolingual English royal suitor—not a low-born Englishman—before playgoers’ eyes and ears. In *Alphonsus*, the English prince Edward proves himself socially and linguistically unskilled while abroad. His first mistake (reminiscent of Henry’s own with Katherine) is to kiss the Saxon princess Hedewick whom he is courting:

Edward kisses her.

Hedewick. See dodh, dass ist hier kein gebranch,

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61 My reading here assumes that both the English and German portions of the play were written in the 1590s, and therefore that *Alphonsus* is a model for *Henry V*, and not vice versa. The authorship and hence the date of *Alphonsus* are disputed. While the play’s first printing in 1654 attributes it to George Chapman, the Stationers Register attributes it to “John Poole,” and William Winstanley in *Lives of the Most Famous English Poets* (1687) attributes it to George Peele. While cases for Peele’s authorship have been made by Roberton and Sykes, I follow Starck and Bowers in their placement of the play’s composition in the mid-1590s, though not necessarily done by Peele (J.M. Robertson, *Did Shakespeare Write "Titus Andronicus"?* (London: Watts and Co., 1905), 123-31; H. Dugdale Sykes, “Peele’s ‘Alphonsus, emperor of Germany,’” in *Sidelights on Elizabethan drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), 79-98; Taylor Starck, “The German Dialogue in Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany, and the Question of Authorship” *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 15 (1933): 147-64; Fredson Bowers, “The Date and Composition of *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany*” *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 15 (1933): 165-89). A puzzlingly persistent theory contends that the play’s German dialogue “may have been added by [Rudolf] Weckerlin, however, when the play was revived in 1636” (Hoensellars, *Images of Englishmen and Foreigners*, 264-65, n65; cf. Thomas Marc Parrott, *The Plays and Poems of George Chapman: The Tragedies*, 2 vols. (London: George Routledge, 1910), 2:691), despite Starck’s demonstration that the play’s “stage Dutch-German…is more like that in the late sixteenth-century plays than that in the plays of the Stuarts days, which use a jargon far removed from correct Dutch” (163).
Mein Got ist dass dir Englisch manier, dass dich.

Edward. What meaneth this? why chafes my Emperess?

Alphonsus. Now by my troth, I did expect this jest,

Prince Edward us'd his Country fashion.

Edward. I am an Englishman, why should I not?62

Speaking in German, Hedewick’s outrage at the “Englisch manier” would have been largely comprehensible, even for those playgoers who did not know German. And what might be seen as Edward’s multiple areas of ineptitude—he cannot understand German, nor does he know their customs—are framed as a “jest” and an instance of his affable “Country fashion,” both of which are authorized (for both Edward and English playgoers) by his status as “an Englishman.”63 After the Emperor rebukes him for this “fault intollerable,” his uncle, Richard Duke of Cornwall, seeks to excuse Edward because he “did not know the fashion” (D1v). Edward first brashly seems unwilling to give up any ground, claiming that he will “Excuse it thus,” by “doubl[ing] kiss on kiss” (D1v). But when Edward soon relents, the scene begins to resemble the Pistol-La Fer negotiation, with Edward and Hedewick communicating awkwardly through a series of translators. Unlike Pistol (and like Henry), Edward tries at first to learn her language, asking his aunt, the Empress Isabella, to teach him:

Edward. Good Aunt teach me so much Dutch to ask her pardon.

Empress. Say so: Gnediges frawlin vergehet mies, ich wills nimmermehr thuen,

Then kiss your hand three times upsy Dutch.

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62 The Tragedy of Alphonsus Emperour of Germany (London: 1654), D1r. Subsequent citations from the play are given in the text.
63 Offstage, the English apparently had a peculiar habit of kissing, which is remarked upon by several Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (cf. the accounts collected in W.B. Rye, England as Seen by Foreigners in the Days of Elizabeth and James the First [London: John Russell Smith, 1865], 260-62).
Edward. Ich wills nimmermehr thuen, if I understand it,

That’s as much to say, as I’ll do so no more. (D1v)

With his aunt as instructor, Edward tries out German (or “Dutch,” as it is called here), while still acknowledging his clumsiness with the language (“if I understand it”). And by acknowledging his own lack of surety with the language, Edward speaks for that portion of the audience which does not know German, even translating the language for them after he speaks it. Edward then tries again to speak German in what seems to be a comically bad manner:

**Empress.** I pray Cosin [Edward] say as I tell you.

**Edward.** Gnediges frawlin vergehet mies, ich wills nimmermehr thuen.

**Alphonsus.** For wahr kein schandt.

**Hedewick.** Gnediger hochgeborner Furst undt herr

Wan ich konte so vil englisch sprechen ich wolt ewer Gnaden.

Fur wahr ein filtz geben, ich hoffe aber ich soll einmahl

So viel lernen dass Die mich verstrhen soll.

**Edward.** What says she?

**Alphonsus.** O excellent young Prince look to your self,

She swears she’l learn some English for your sake,

To make you understand her when she chides.

**Edward.** I’ll teach her English, she shall teach me Dutch,

Gnediges frawlin, &c.

**Bohemia.** It is great pitty that the Duke of Saxon,

Is absent at this joyful accident… (D2r)
By repeating his attempt to speak German to Hedewick, Edward displays a kind of
shamelessness, a winning vulnerability that seems to turn Hedewick (and presumably the
audience) in his favor. He further openly reveals his linguistic deficiency when he has to ask
“What says she?”, aligning himself with those playgoers who also did not understand
Hedewick’s German. As Bohemia’s lines about the “joyful accident” indicate, the linguistic
barriers between Edward and Hedewick are not fully eliminated, but the couple each promise
to meet the other by learning the other’s language. In his openness to learning a new
language, Edward is no Pistol. In fact, while Pistol at first hardly recognized La Fer’s French
as a separate language, Edward revels in German’s foreignness to him and in his inability to
speak it well. Like the rustic Costard delightedly repeating his newly-learned word
“remuneration” in Love’s Labour’s Lost, Edward repeats the one German phrase he knows
(“Gnediges frawlin, &c”). Most importantly, this scene does nothing to hide Edward’s
incompetence with foreign languages; it instead emphasizes Edward’s awkwardness and his
gameness, displaying these openly in order to garner additional audience goodwill. The
presence of Edward in a play contemporary to Henry V—to which I now return—points
toward a precedent for multiple features of that play’s version of a courtship scene: the
uncustomary kiss, the Englishman’s baldly displayed clumsiness with a foreign language,
and his forthright action according his “country fashion.”

V.

In its management and representation of foreign languages, then, the history play that
we now know as Henry V draws from both early modern comedy (The Weakest Goeth to the
Wall) and tragedy (The Tragedy of Alphonsus, King of Aragon). By approaching the
culminating courtship scene of Henry V by means of contemporary plays, I aim to enhance

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our understanding of how the scene might have affected the assembled London playgoers during performance. Most obviously, comparing Hedewick’s German in *Alphonsus* with Katherine and Alice’s French should qualify claims for the novelty of Shakespeare’s own theatrical practice. More importantly, these other plays illuminate *Henry V*’s use of translated French, untranslated French, English, and broken English in the final scene as attempts to fracture the playgoers’ sense of uniformity that the Chorus has worked so hard to consolidate.

In what has become known in the criticism as “the wooing scene,” Henry cajoles, converses with, flatters, and (indirectly) threatens the French princess Katherine, who is attended by her maid Alice. This scene was predicted in the epilogue of *2 Henry IV*, which had promised playgoers that in a future play “our humble author will…make you merry with fair Katherine of France.” But when does Katherine first appear? While the language lesson scene featured Katherine, there would be no way for playgoers to identify her as such (only Alice is mentioned by name), particularly because there is no precedent for the scene in other versions of the Henry V story. Instead, the women functioned there as stand-ins for the general category of French women under military/sexual threat. Consequently, it is only in this final scene that those women chattering in French back in act three retrospectively become “Katherine” and her servant “Alice.” Their position within the social world—in particular, Katherine’s status as the Princess of France—is only revealed at the point when it matters to the plot.

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65 This claim of Shakespeare’s innovativeness gets repeated in the criticism; in addition to Rackin’s claim (quoted above) that Shakespeare “departs from theatrical convention when he chooses to write the women’s lines in French” (*Stages of History*, 150n7), a more recent example is Alison Walls, who writes that “Shakespeare’s use of French [is] demonstrative of his ability to break with convention for dramatic effect” (“French speech as dramatic action in Shakespeare's *Henry V*,” *Language and Literature* 22.2 [2013]: 129).

66 *2 Henry IV*, Epilogue.27-29.
The epilogue’s lines in 2 Henry IV set the baseline audience expectations for both scenes featuring Katherine: that they will be “merry” occasions, offering a respite from the martial and masculine deeds that occupy most of the play’s other scenes. Yet using Katherine as a “merry” diversion marks a deviation from Famous Victories, in which Katherine—while still very much at her “father’s discretion”—encounters Henry not as a mostly silent, tongue-tied woman besieged by Henry’s barrage of ineloquent eloquence but as an active participant in the post-Agincourt negotiations (F4r). While the Henry of Shakespeare’s play demands her presence, describing her as “our capital demand, comprised / Within the fore-rank of our articles,” in Famous Victories all of Henry’s demands are read aloud, and the “capital demand” has nothing to do with Katherine but is instead “that immediately Henry of England / Be crowned King of France” (5.2.96-97, F3r). We only become aware of Katherine’s presence after the French King has departed with a promise to answer Henry’s demands the next day; Henry then mentions, alone on stage, that he is “thrice unhappie” because he although he has “now conquered the French King,” he has fallen in love “with his daughter” (F3v). It is here that Katherine enters, not as Henry’s prisoner but as his negotiating opponent: “My father sent me to know if you will debate any of these / Unreasonable demands which you require” (F3v). While Katherine is one of the negotiators in Famous Victories, the negotiations in Henry V take place concurrently, off stage. There, Henry has “appoint[ed] some of [his] council” to meet with the King of France and given them “free power to ratify, / Augument or alter…Anything in or our of our demands” (5.2.86-87, 89). In Famous Victories, Katherine is literally one of the negotiators, part of the team that seeks to reduce Henry’s demands. And because Henry is lovestruck—I “loue her, and must craue her, / Nay I loue her and will haue her,” he says—Katherine holds some leverage (F3v). She
uses Henry’s lovestruckness against him, claiming that she will consider him only if he reduces his demands:

I would to God, that I had your Maiestie,

As fast in loue, as you have my father in warres,

I would not vouchsafe so much as one looke,

Untill you had related all these unreasonable demands. (F3v-F4r)

The play also reveals one feature of her negotiating strategy: dissembling. While she reveals in an aside that she actually “thinke[s] myself the happiest in the world, / That is beloued of the mightie king of England,” she withholds this information from Henry to maintain her leverage over him (F4r). Finally—as these quotations make clear—Katherine speaks throughout in perfectly idiomatic English. As we have seen, even foolish characters of high rank in early modern plays—such as the Dauphin in Henry V—tend to speak in idiomatic English, even if their language is studded with foreign phrases. Like that of the other highborn French characters in Famous Victories, Katherine’s language is not marked in any particular way, rendering her Henry’s equal in both linguistic and negotiating savvy. In contrast, Henry V transfers the negotiator role from Katherine to Isabel the Queen of France, who suggests to Henry that she will join the men because “Haply a woman’s voice may do some good / When articles too nicely urged be stood on” (5.2.93-94). Shakespeare leaves Katherine with no clear political agency, characterizing her as nothing more than a pawn in others’ negotiations. The wooing scene can then proceed as if in a separate sphere—even a separate genre—from the political negotiations simultaneously occurring elsewhere. Katherine in Henry V says nothing and knows nothing about Henry’s demands of the French king—other than, of course, that she is his “capital demand.”
This slight inflection that Shakespeare has made to the figure of Katherine helps explain why she speaks as she does. Because Katherine no longer has a meaningful political role, she can be portrayed speaking in a mixture of largely incomprehensible French and broken English. By characterizing her in this way, Shakespeare presents a Katherine who is at far greater disadvantage than her counterpart in *Famous Victories*. When she voices her clumsy version of English, Katherine becomes a figure of fun and an occasion for playgoers to “jest at strangers.” While Henry describes the relevant distinction as one between soldierly plain speaking and the language of courtly love, Katherine denies this, claiming that the real distinction that matters is that between English and French:

King

Fair Katherine, and most fair,

Will you vouchsafe to teach a soldier terms

Such as will enter at a lady's ear

And plead his love-suit to her gentle heart?

Katherine

Your majesty shall mock at me; I cannot speak your England. (5.2.98-103)

For Montgomery, Henry here “den[ies] the politics of language by insisting that his language’s defining characteristic is not its Englishness but its roughness.”

But it is not clear that Henry—or, more importantly, the playgoers—would understand the two categories to be opposed. English was praised in the period, as Fleming points out, as “masculine,” “forthright[,] and virile” on account of its hard consonants (as opposed to French vowels) and “inflexible word order.” In a situation in which to speak English—and as Prince Edward in *Alphonsus* suggests, to *be* English—was to speak roughly, Henry’s repeated reference to

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67 *Europe’s Languages on England’s Stages*, 43.
Katherine’s incapability to speak English further demeans her: he says that he “will be glad
to hear you confess [your love] brokenly with your English tongue”; he is “glad thou canst
speak no better English”; and he also notes her “broken music,” that her “English [is]
broken,” and her “broken English” (5.2.105-06,124,240-41,241,243). While Katherine may
not necessarily be a figure who invites outright contempt from playgoers, her broken English
certainly invites a level of condescension. From the monolingual playgoers’ perspective, a
Katherine who can only speak broken English occupies a position of conspicuous weakness.

But while Katherine’s broken English shows her at a disadvantage, her French—of
which we also hear a good deal in this scene—conversely puts her at an advantage over some
of the playgoers. In other words, Katherine’s “broken English” could have quite different
effects in performance than her full sentences of untranslated French. While her broken
English places her in a position of weakness and outsiderness—as the one who cannot speak
the language of the community—her “true French” in a sense turns the tables on monolingual
playgoers. If they possess a competency in English that she does not, she possesses a
competency that they do not. It is therefore far too simple to claim, as Alison Walls does, that
“Catherine’s French subjugates and liminalises her.”69 When we recall what Greene says
about what foreign words in a playhouse as well as Julius Caesar’s description of a speech in
a foreign language, we should be wary of assuming that the French language was simply and
unproblematically “other” to London playgoers, not least because Katherine is a somewhat-
threatened female character who is exhibited before a playgoing public that is not exclusively
male. Instead, we should see Katherine’s French as capable of producing multiple effects,
depending on the audience; a playgoer who knows French would not necessarily see her as
subjugated and liminal, but perhaps as an occasion for exercising his or her own capacities in

69 “French speech as dramatic action,” 124.
French, capacities that distinguish oneself from others. Even within the fiction of the play, as several critics have pointed out, Katherine’s French also enables her to deflect—if not disable—Henry’s assaults. For Karen Newman, Katherine’s “very disadvantage becomes a strategy of equivocation and deflection,” while Corinne S. Abate sees Katherine’s use of French as an intentional counter to Henry’s use of English, “testing” his “comprehension skills by false-modestly denying the knowledge” she actually possesses of English. When Henry tries to kiss Katherine’s hand, for example, she emits several lines of untranslated French: “Laissez, mon seigneur, laissez, laissez! Ma foi, je ne veux point que vous abaissiez votre grandeur en baisant la main d'une de votre seigneurie indigne serviteur. Excusez-moi, je vous supplie, mon très-puissant seigneur” (5.2.250-54). Importantly, no translation is given for this passage; she is angry, but anger could be indicated in much more succinct forms than the voicing of five lines in a foreign language. Here Katherine states her resistance to Henry’s designs, while the actor performs a similar kind of resistance to the playgoers. As Montgomery writes, Katherine’s “voicing of an alternate language exposes the playgoers, albeit temporarily, to a tongue that is in a sense Queen Elizabeth’s inherited mother tongue, and so to a tongue that could be their own.” Furthermore, for some playgoers French could have been—if not necessarily “their own”—a tongue that they knew. For those playgoers, this moment is one of insiderness, of the “Cicero effect,” when a subset of playgoers is called forth from the group. This moment splits the crowd, complicating its loyalties and rendering the situation something more complex than Henry and the English

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71 Europe’s Languages on England’s Stages, 45.
playgoers arrayed against Katherine and the French. For it turns out that—at certain
moments, at least—the language of “the conquered” is also the language of some of the
London playgoers.

Of course, the language of the conquered is also to some extent the language of Henry
himself. While Katherine’s French positions her outside the community of Englishmen,
Henry’s possession of what Katherine terms “fausse French enough” recalls that of Edward’s
snatches of German in Alphonsus: “Je, quand j’ai le possession de France, et quand vous
avez le possession de moi—let me see, what then? Saint Denis be my speed!—donc votre est
France, et vous êtes mienne. It is as easy for me, Kate, to conquer the kingdom as to speak so
much more French. I shall never move thee in French, unless it be to laugh at me” (5.2.181-
86). As Lance Wilcox writes, “Shakespeare has contrived to present the king and princess as
possessed of almost identical degrees of competence in each other’s language.”72 Like the
other linguistically incompetent Englishmen abroad, Henry’s attempts to speak French would
have marked him as charming and game, up for anything, and winningly open about his
deficiencies. As Henry claims, it is better to speak “plain and uncoined” words than to be a
“fellow of infinite tongue” because one’s ability to move from one tongue to another signals
one’s devious heart (5.2.154,156). Of course, Henry is more than all others the “fellow of
infinite tongue,” able (as he says) to “drink with any tinker in his own language” and who has
(as Warwick says) “studie[d] his companions / Like a strange tongue.”73 Yet in a playhouse
in which playgoers would have possessed different levels of linguistic competency, this is a
complex moment that solicits a diversity of responses from the assembled playgoers. Those
who know enough French to get the jokes at Pistol’s expense in 4.4 could find themselves

72 “Katherine of France as Victim and Bride,” 70.
73 The “strange tongue” quotation is from 2 Henry IV, 4.4.68-69.
offput by Henry’s dismissal of linguistic competence; on the other hand, these are exactly those playgoers who are at an advantage when Katherine, Henry, and Alice move into French because they do not need the translations that—as we will see—are slowly sputtered out among the three speakers. Henry’s dismissals of linguistic skill would speak to those playgoers who do not know French—those hardy, monolingual Englishmen—while at the same time, these are the playgoers who find themselves at a disadvantage in all of the French scenes in Henry V, “struggling” linguistically,” as Mayer writes, like “stranger[s] in a strange land.”

But in the end, however much Henry and Katherine are equally incompetent in the other’s language, the playgoers would be likely to judge those incompetencies differently. Henry’s bad French marks him as “like us,” the monolingual Englishmen, while Katherine’s bad English marks her as a stranger, one who is not part of the community. The normative language of that community, English, is reinforced at the moments in the scene when monolingual playgoers are accommodated. Early in the conversation, for example, the same sentiment is heard first in Katherine’s French, then Henry’s English, and finally in Alice’s broken English:

Katherine  
_ O bon Dieu, les langues des hommes sont pleines de trumperies!_

King  
What says she, fair one? That the tongues of men are full of deceits?

Alice  
_Oui, dat de tongues of de mans is be full of deceits: dat is de Princess._ (5.2.116-21)

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The scene then unfolds under the aegis of this commonplace, which gets said here in three ways so that nobody could possibly misunderstand: the effect here, more than anything, is to comically emphasize the three characters’ inability to understand each other. After the scene proceeds without any intervention from Alice, she returns at the end to help translate French into English. But here, the effect is more unsettling, because Henry turns out not to be the naïf that he has claimed to be. After Henry’s first attempted kiss has been rebuffed, he next offers to kiss Katherine’s lips, to which Katherine responds in French:

Katherine  *Les dames et demoiselles pour être baisées devant leurs noces, il n’est pas la coutume de France.*

King   Madam my interpreter, what says she?

Alice  Dat it is not be de fashion *pour les* ladies of France, – I cannot tell vat is baiser en Anglish.

King   To kiss.

Alice  Your majesty *entend bettre que moi*.

King   It is not a fashion for the maids in France to kiss before they are married, would she say?

Alice  *Oui, vraiment.* (5.2.256-65)

To state Katherine’s basic point—that we don’t do it that way in France—would require one line. Yet ten lines pass before Alice confirms that Henry’s translation is accurate. Again, Henry’s request for Alice to serve as “interpreter” is a request on behalf of the monolingual playgoers—Henry thus aligns himself with them. But this moment also reveals that Henry is not exactly a monolingual Englishman—or that if he is, it is because he has taken on another role. To some extent, he has been playing dumb: Alice points out that he “*entrendre bettre*...
“que moi.” And when Henry then translates the entire sentence into English, he has become his own “interpreter,” distinguishing himself from the monolingual playgoers.

Once again, however, a reading of this scene needs also to account for the presence of those playgoers who actually did know French. For these playgoers, moments of untranslated French actually align them with the French characters, not the English. In one of the only readings of the play that considers, if only in passing, the question of variable linguistic competence among playgoers, Michael Saenger notes that a similar effect occurs in the language lesson scene: “the audience is inevitably alienated: if they understand French, they momentarily become French people out of place in London; if they do not, they momentarily become English people out of place in France.”75 These moments of untranslated French call attention to this particular competence, and—as the Julius Caesar example above suggests—can lead to a feeling of subcommunity consolidation among playgoers.

In sum, the French language in this scene—as opposed to the representation of the French people—would be unlikely to generate the sense among playgoers that they are a uniform tribe, bound by Henry’s charisma against the French and against Katherine as the rejected, excluded, liminal, conquered other. Recalling the differences among playgoers (some know French, while others do not; some are women [like Katherine], some are marriageable [like Katherine], and some are married [like Katherine will soon be]), as well as the play’s attempts to make playgoers aware of those differences should complicate our stories not about what Henry V could have meant, but about what it could have done. Not simply a “band of brothers,” the “happy few” who are “there” at Agincourt inhabiting the affective jet trails of the hardy English soldiers, these playgoers would likely feel themselves

to be separated into smaller subcommunities, aware of their lack of uniformity, despite the Chorus’ hectoring assertions to the contrary.

According to Richard Helgerson, *Henry V* traces “the emergence of English from corruption and barbarism, through self-alienation and imitation, into all-conquering eloquence.” My reading in this chapter suggests that however much the play might represent the English language in the act of “conquest,” it also solicits playgoers’ awareness of the ways in which not all present would be equally invested in the model of a monolingual English nation. Helgerson’s proclamation of English’s triumph requires him to pass over the ways in which other languages stickily refuse to go away, even at Henry’s own request: it is Henry who insists that he be addressed by King of France not in English but in French and Latin, as “Notre très cher fils Henri, roi d’Angleterre, héritier de France; and thus in Latin, Praeclarissimus filius noster Henricus, rex Angliae et haeres Franciae” (5.2.333-36).

Pugliatti reads this moment as an indication that “Henry's linguistic conquest of France is not as successfully performed as his military and political conquest”; while that is true, a complete “linguistic conquest” might not fully suit Henry’s—or Shakespeare’s—purposes. For English truly to “conquer all” would preclude one of the social functions of foreign languages: the reservation of meaning and comprehension to insiders, the exclusion of outsiders, and thereby the formation and recognition of subcommunities.

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Chapter Two:

*Hamlet,* “Inexplicable Dumb Shows,” and the Pleasures of Confusion

In his essay “Of Masques and Triumphs,” Francis Bacon describes the period between scenes of a masque as inducing a peculiar kind of pleasure:

> It is true, the alterations of scenes, so it be quietly and without noise, are things of great beauty and pleasure; for they feed and relieve the eye, before it be full of the same object. Let the scenes abound with light, specially colored and varied; and let the masquers, or any other, that are to come down from the scene, have some motions upon the scene itself before their coming down; for it draws the eye strangely, and makes it with great pleasure to desire to see that it cannot perfectly discern.¹

Bacon describes an experience of pleasurable vagueness about the objects of one’s perception. Far from insisting on organized, clear, and distinct thoughts, Bacon revels in partial, indistinct, and unclear understanding. The “alterations of scenes” both “feed and relieve the eye,” because the eye is not yet “full of the same object.” Not quite understanding what one is looking at, Bacon suggests, leads to a certain kind of pleasure that slips in between the scenes of the masque itself. Bacon delights in the literal in-significance of the moment, in which undifferentiated sensory material seems to *mean* nothing at all: all one can see is “light, specially colored and varied,” as well as the unspecific “some motions” of the masquers. Yet these sensations, Bacon concludes, make one want to know *more*: it “draws

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the eye strangely, and makes it with great pleasure to desire to see that it cannot perfectly
discern.” In his description of the failure to “perfectly discern” leading to “desire” and
“pleasure,” Bacon describes the pleasure of inhabiting a cognitive space somewhere in
between knowledge and ignorance, in which one has an imperfect comprehension of what
one sees.

This chapter argues that dumb shows in early modern plays were one means of
producing this indistinct transitional phenomenal state; that this vaguely confused state was a
source of pleasure to early modern playgoers and thereby was one effect that playmakers
aimed to achieve; and that the particular consequences of this pleasure for the relationships
among playgoers altered during the early modern period. As dumb shows migrated from Inns
of Court plays into public theater plays late in the sixteenth century, their effects changed:
while dumb shows in earlier plays could divide audiences into insiders and outsiders, later
dumb shows flattened any distinction among playgoers, forming a crowd based upon a
shared ignorance. I use the dumb show in Hamlet to focus my analysis, arguing that while
Hamlet’s own characterization of dumb shows as “inexplicable” provides a fundamental
insight into audience response to early modern dumb shows, Shakespeare ironizes Hamlet’s
claim that dumb shows are suitable for only for “groundlings.”

The first section provides a theoretical account of the dumb show and its reception, as
well as a more expanded account of the argument of the chapter. I then provide a historical

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2 I take the term “crowd” from “crowd studies,” and in particular from Kai Weigandt, for whom a proper
“crowd” is defined as “a group of people united by the bond of particular psychological mechanisms,” which
can be distinguished from a simple “mass,” which is any “great number of people.” “[W]itnessing a play,” he
writes, “entails a certain degree of crowd formation. The theatre crowd is in a latent state—no longer a mass,
not yet an active crowd.” A crowd’s crowd-ness thus lies precisely in its ability to feel in a unified manner (Kai
Weigandt, Crowd and Rumour in Shakespeare (Farnam: Ashgate, 2012), 3-4). I take the terms “insiders” and
“outsiders” from Frank Kermode, who describes a tradition of “secrecy” that runs through the gospels and into
the 20th century novel, according to which “Outsiders must content themselves with the manifest, and pay a
supreme penalty for doing so,” while only “insiders can hope to achieve correct interpretations” (The Genesis of
account of the dumb show, beginning with *Gorboduc*, showing how the dumb show’s use and effects shifted during the early modern period. Section three reads *Hamlet* for its particularly interesting dumb show—one that lacks a presenter—as well as for Hamlet’s situating of dumb shows within a specific dramatic theory, arguing that Hamlet’s engagement with the dumb show is one piece of his articulation of a particular theory of dramatic practice and dramatic reception. The chapter’s conclusion considers the implications of the dumb show as enigmatic for early modern playgoing more broadly, arguing that the persistence of dumb shows indicates that early modern playgoers seemed to have enjoyed the experience of sharing a state of communal bafflement.

Throughout I approach these plays with an eye to the performance practices implicit in their texts. Nevertheless, we cannot simply assume, as W.B. Worthen has warned, that “the text grounds the potential meanings of its enactment.” Instead, “Theatre goes well beyond the force of mere speech” precisely because what Worthen terms the “force” of performance is produced by “the disciplined application of conventionalized practices—acting, directing, scenography.” These conventions or “regimes” of performance are historically specific, and understanding the conventions of early modern theater is one goal of this dissertation. But I look to play texts in this chapter because much of the evidence that we have of those early modern conventions is contained in the extant play texts. Thus while my use of play texts should not be taken to imply that the text simply tells performers what to do—as if there were no gap between what a text says and the force of a performance—I do think that we can understand the conventions of early modern theater in part through those play texts themselves. Although a performance is not fully determined by its text, it seems

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4 Ibid., 9.
too extreme to hold that the text tells us nothing about early modern performance. For example, when characters discuss the weather in a play—when Hamlet says “The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold” and Horatio responds “It is nipping, and an eager air”—it seems perfectly legitimate to assume that an early modern player might shiver at this moment, taking his cue from the play text.5 But this shiver, to further Worthen’s point, would have a different force in different settings: during a performance on a hot, humid afternoon, the shiver would merit a laugh, while in a cold-weather performance the line would be played straight. In sum, I want to use our extant play texts to better understand the historically specific conventions of a particular kind of performance: the early modern London public theater.

II.

What is a dumb show? Dieter Mehl defines a dumb show as an instance in a play “where one or more characters advance and retire without having spoken,” but I exclude from consideration here processions and dances—because of their lack of narrative content—even though printed texts sometimes mark these as “dumb shows.”6 The dumb shows that I discuss in this chapter are narrative pantomimes, not “extensive masque-like performances…accompanied by speeches or…dialogue.”7 As a musty, unbeloved device seen as “medieval” and out-of-date—especially when inserted into a play like Hamlet that has so often served as a harbinger of modernity itself—the dumb show presents a unique

7 Ibid., xii.
problem that can be encapsulated in a single term: “redundancy.”

Why would Hamlet signal in a dumb show the summary of the play before the play begins, especially in a conscience-catching play in which surprise is essential? Why does Ophelia, immediately after the dumb show, ask what it “means,” “imports,” or “meant” (3.2.123,126,129)? Why are so many dumb shows in early modern plays followed by a verbal statement by a presenter-- either a prologue, chorus, or character—of what was just presented? From the perspective of contemporary critics, overexplanation attends dumb shows; yet dumb shows seem “overexplained,” I suggest, only because reading a stage direction for a dumb show makes what it represents much clearer than witnessing a dumb show in performance. Performed dumb shows, I suggest, tended to be difficult to understand.

“Difficult to understand” does not mean “impossible to understand,” however. Onstage pantomimes could communicate some information, and they were, of course, capable of producing effects other than communication. But dumb shows do seem to have been complex enough that playwrights could not be sure that they would or could be understood by all playgoers in each performance. A playgoer’s experience of witnessing a dumb show can be usefully compared to that of a reader perusing an emblem. The poet and emblematist George Wither introduces his 1635 Collection of Emblems by calling them “dumbe-shewes,” suggesting that the dumb show functions somewhat like the emblem. The

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9 Collection of Emblems (London: 1635), 66. The dumb shows in, for example, Locrine—in which an allegorical dumb show is followed by a one line Latin phrase—resemble emblems brought to life on stage,
emblem—composed of a short opening inscriptio, a pictura, and a concluding verbal subscriptio—resembles the dumb show in several respects. Though it lacks the opening inscriptio, the dumb show (a kind of pictura) tends to be followed by a verbal account or interpretation of the dumb show (a kind of subscriptio). In the emblem, as Peter M. Daly writes, “the pictura is central and primary in that the reader perceives the picture first”; similarly, for the dumb show, the pantomime comes first, followed by the verbal account or interpretation. Though critics have noted the similarity of the dumb show to the emblem before, I want to emphasize here the way that the dumb show also displays what John Manning describes as the emblem’s “self-conscious mysteriousness, and teasing obscurity which invites and demands explication.” Thus the meanings of the emblem’s pictura of the dumb show’s pantomime, though not completely obscure, are nevertheless not always self-evident. As the emblemmatist Geoffrey Whitney writes, the emblem is “something obscure to be perceived at the first, whereby, when with further consideration it is understood, it may the greater delight the beholder.” More recent critics such as Walter Benjamin have understood the Baroque emblem as a “set of fragments” or “half-finished products” onto

though I consider even non-emblematic dumb shows to function like emblems, inasmuch as they as composed of a pictura and subscriptio.

10 Peter M. Daly discusses the thorny problems involved in defining the emblem; his “minimal description” of the emblem is that “emblems are composed of symbolic pictures and words; a meaningful relationship between the two is intended; the manner of communication is connotative rather than denotative” (Literature in the Light of the Emblem: Structural Parallels between the Emblem and Literature in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 8).

11 Literature in the Light of the Emblem, 45.

12 In her study of the English emblem, Rosemary Freeman understood the dumb show as “only a more elaborate version of the pictures in an emblem book,” an insight taken up by Deiter Mehl, who holds that emblems’ “technique is remarkably similar to that of the early dumb shows and reveals the [a] liking for puzzles and allegories” (Rosemary Freeman, English Emblem Books (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), 15; Mehl, The Elizabethan Dumb Show, 13. John Manning, “emblems,” in The Spenser Encyclopedia, ed. A.C. Hamilton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 247).

13 A Choice of Emblemes (Leyden: 1586), **4r.
which “meanings are conferred.”\textsuperscript{14} For Albrecht Schöne, the subscriptio that followed the pictura suggested that “that which is depicted means more than it portrays. The res picta of the emblem is endowed with the power to refer beyond itself; it is a res significans.”\textsuperscript{15} The dumb show’s pantomime, I suggest, had a similar effect; it suggested that it might “refer beyond itself.”

Despite these similarities, however, the dumb show and the emblem do not always work in the same way. For one, as Daly writes, “the manner of communication” between the symbolic pictures and the words in an emblem “is connotative rather than denotative.”\textsuperscript{16} Certainly, the relationship between the pantomime and its explanation in “emblematic” or symbolic dumb shows (such as those in Gorboduc or Locrine) is connotative, but as we will see, in later dumb shows the relationship between the pantomime and its verbal account will be straightforwardly denotative. Nevertheless, in part because of the close relation between the emblem and the dumb show, I understand the dumb show as an enigmatic technique of early modern drama.\textsuperscript{17} As I explained in the Introduction, I define an enigmatic technique as a specific kind of performance that in some way withholds information, leaving some portion of the playgoers in a state of incomprehension. That state of incomprehension can range from mild to severe, but it is always a state of which playgoers are made aware. Enigmatic techniques, in sum, raise playgoers’ own awareness of those things that they do not yet understand, of knowledge the lies beyond their grasp. The dumb show’s pantomimic element, like the emblem’s pictura, suggests that it means more than, or something other

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Emblematik und Drama im Zeitalter des Barock}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Munich: Beck, 1968), 22. Translation by Peter Daly in \textit{Literature in the Light of the Emblem}, 44.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{17} I am not, however, trying to claim that all emblems are enigmatic. Despite the riddle-like qualities of many emblems, Daly has warned against simply assuming “that enigma and riddle are essential to the emblem genre.” Ibid., 6.
than, what it simply shows. In this way, the dumb show hints that some other meaning is present, a meaning that, we will see, the verbal explanations that follow the dumb show are in a position to unfold. Whether those verbal explanations actually do explicate the dumb show or merely complicate it, however, is another question.

The emblem thus provides the structure in which dumb shows were presented on the English stage, in which a *pictura* or pantomime was followed by a *subscriptio*, or verbal account of the pantomime. This format was maintained for dumb shows even after they ceased to be “emblematic”—after they ceased to pantomime symbolic action. Even after the *res significans* of the earlier, emblematic dumb show became a *res picta* in the later dumb show, the pantomime was still formally treated as if it meant more than itself—as if there was something more to be unfolded than was immediately obvious.

In claiming that dumb shows did not communicate information especially well, I do not mean to imply that the only effect or purpose of a dumb show—or of early modern theatrical performance in general—was to communicate information. Obviously, theatrical performances do many things other than just communicate information to playgoers: they thrill, bore, excite, arouse, amuse, frighten, and so on. My focus on the dumb show’s communicative difficulties should not imply that the dumb show does nothing else. Early modern dumb shows do, however, lean upon the subsequent language of presenters to unfold, interpret, or elaborate the meaning of the initially enigmatic—though not simply incomprehensible—pantomime. As a theatrical device intended to communicate something to playgoers (among other purposes) but which apparently consistently fails to do so effectively, the dumb show encapsulates some of the quandaries of early modern performance in general. As a visual medium that repeatedly depends on a verbal medium
(i.e., the words of a presenter) to make itself fully understood, the dumb show raises a host of problems in early modern culture concerning the meaningfulness and perspicuity of images, words, and gestures. While critics have studied these issues in the light of the Reformation, I read the dumb show’s relation with these issues as more theatrical than properly theological. Specifically, the dumb show’s awkward mode of communication lays bare the potential divergence between what Jean Alter terms theater’s “referential” and “performant” functions. Theater “fulfills a referential function,” Alter writes, when it “refers to an imaginary story” and is thereby “involved in a process of communication…carried out with signs that aim at imparting information” (31-32). On the other hand, theater’s performant function is to “satisf[y] our natural desire to achieve or witness something extraordinary” (32). The performant function can be glimpsed when one views theater not as a means of telling a story, but as “a public event, a spectacle or a show, attempting to please or amaze the audience by a display of exceptional stage achievements” (32). The distinction between referential and performant functions should not be drawn too starkly, however; obviously, every performance communicates something, even facts as mundane as the color of the performers’ hair, their height, the sounds they make, and so on. But Alter’s notion of the performant function allows us to isolate those features of theater that “operate outside the communication process whereby a story is told to the audience” (52). Correspondingly, the performant/referential distinction does not entail a strict opposition between the two functions but only the claim that watching a play as telling a story—with references to

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19 A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 32. Subsequent citations are given in the text.
places, characters, and events represented onstage—involves a different kind of playgoer attention than watching a play as a performance: as a site of spectacular achievements with no reference beyond themselves, like a pole-vaulting competition.

Accordingly, the dumb show has two functions: a referential function, in which the dumb show uses “signs that aim at imparting information,” and a performant function, in which the dumb show aims to provide something interesting and wonderful to look at and listen to. During a dumb show, I argue, the performant function tends to overwhelm the referential function because the dumb show requires playgoers to puzzle out what it means or represents. The referential function tends to reassert itself after the dumb show in the presenter’s explanation of what the dumb show just represented. Because the dumb show communicates so poorly, its function is almost entirely performant, and it produces a space of what Alter calls “play” (39). The dumb show thus resists the mimetic theory of drama that Hamlet espouses in his advice to the players in 3.2, whereby the “purpose of playing” requires the coordination, not divergence, of the performant and referential functions, or what Hamlet calls “action” and “word” (3.2.18-19,16). As we will see, Hamlet associates this mimetic theory of drama—and its attendant rationalized and streamlined dramatic mode—with a subset of the theatrical public that he terms “the judicious” (3.2.24). The opposing group of “groundlings,” he says, cannot comprehend the pleasures of this mode and are “capable” only of the “inexplicable” bits of drama, such as “dumb shows and noise.” The paradox of Hamlet’s division of the audience into two groups, however, is that the dumb show in The Murder of Gonzago places all playgoers onto the same level of awareness: everyone is incapable of understanding it.
The dumb show’s ability to make an audience feel unified or divided requires finally that we revise our current understanding of how and how much individual members of a theater audience related to and were aware of one another. Recent critics have emphasized the unity of playhouse audiences: Jeremy Lopez, for example, argues that “a collective experience…is what plays try to provide,” and that “[t]heatre is most successful when it seems to erase distinction between the members of its audience.” Similarly, Alison Hobgood’s explorations of the “dangerously vibrant affective interplay between theatergoers and the English Renaissance stage,” whereby “playgoers were altered by encounters with ‘catchable’ dramatic affect,” understand “playgoers” as a unified group. Yet early dumb shows, I will argue, divided audiences into those who understood them and those who did not. And although Hamlet’s dumb show does finally “erase distinction[s]” within the audience, the impact of this erasure depends on the initial creation of the distinction between groundlings and judicious. Certainly, many plays often aim to provide “a collective experience,” but plays do other things, too: including dividing their audiences and making them aware of the possibility of subgroups within the collective. Depending on its setting and the particular conditions of production, the dumb show could have either effect. While early dumb shows performed in courtly settings tended to divide their audiences into insiders and outsiders, the dumb shows of the public stages tended to have the opposite effect of uniting nearly everyone into a single group. Except in the rare cases in which a printed argument may have been distributed, a dumb show in a public theater (before it is explained by a presenter) would have made every playgoer of every class a groundling, an outsider, one to whom the “secret”—whatever it may be—is not revealed.

III.

The early dumb shows in the English theater tradition—those performed in Inns of Court settings between roughly 1560 and 1590—had the effect of dividing an audience into insiders who understand what is going on and outsiders who do not. Even if everyone in fact was holding a printed argument that explained the dumb shows, the device nonetheless created a sense of mystery, of something held back, of secret knowledge. Dumb shows appearing in plays of the first decades of the public theaters still hold these associations. But the public theaters erased the distinction between insiders and outsiders by having a presenter explain the dumb shows to everybody present. The dumb show’s migration from a “courtly” to a “popular” setting can thus be understood as an instance of the public theater’s participation in what Paul Yachnin calls “the populuxe market,” which he defines as “an area of trade that centered on the selling of popular, relatively inexpensive versions of deluxe goods.”

In partial response to this importation of upmarket entertainment from courtly settings to the public theaters, a discourse of theatrical “judgment” arose around 1600. While Hamlet invokes this discourse to separate one group of playgoers from another, the performance of Hamlet, with its presenter-less dumb show, united audiences into a situation of communal incomprehension.

The story that scholars have told of the dumb show in early modern English drama—with gestures toward earlier forms of pantimome, such as mummings and pageants—usually

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begins with *The Tragidie of Ferrex and Porrex*, better known as *Gorboduc.*\(^{24}\) First performed in late 1561 or early 1562 as part of the Inner Temple Christmas revels, the play contains the first recorded use of the term “dumb show,” which appears in the stage directions.\(^{25}\) A dumb show precedes each of the play’s five acts and a chorus concludes the first four acts by recapping the just-presented action and, at the ends of acts one and two, interpreting the dumb show. This gap between dumb show and choral explanation means that in performance, the dumb shows would have been left unexplained for some time. Yet the first two dumb shows in particular cry out for further interpretation. The first features “six wild men clothed in leaves” performing some kind of allegorical show:

> the first bare on his neck a fagot of small sticks, which they all, both severally and together, assayed with all their strengths to break; but it could not be broken by them. At the length, one of them plucked out one of the sticks, and brake it; and the rest plucking out all the other sticks one after another, did easily break them, the same being severed; which being conjoined, they had before attempted in vain. (1.0.3-9)


\(^{25}\) On the date of the play, see Irby B. Cauthen, Jr., introduction to *Gorboduc, or, Ferrex and Porrex* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), xi-xii. Subsequent citations are given in the text. Though performed several years earlier, the play was not printed until 1565. Thus EEBO lists the first use of the term in English in Laurence Humphrey’s *The Nobles* (London: 1563). The Oxford English Dictionary lists *Gorboduc* (which it dates to 1561) as the first use of the term. *OED Online*, s.v. “dumb show, n.,” accessed January 13, 2015, [http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/Entry/58396](http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/Entry/58396).
This supposedly stately, stilted, classical, neo-Senecan tragedy—the very origin of English classical drama—begins with this puzzling dumb show featuring “wild men” attempting, failing, and then succeeding to break apart sticks. What was the effect of this dumb show? The scene appeals to the audience in several ways. For one, the stock exoticism of the “wild men” and their leaved costumes, as well as the potentially comic failure of each man “assay[ing] with all their strengths to break” the sticks would appeal to the eye. The cracking of the sticks, as well as the noises of frustration and joy attending the attempted stick-breaking, would appeal to the ear. But Norton and Sackville’s intended meaning is obscure from the performance of the pantomime itself. With no introduction preceding it (this dumb show is the play’s first scene), the meaning of the scene given in the printed text would not have been known by anyone present. The printed text itself recognizes the obscurity of this dumb show’s meaning. The dumb show section is entitled “The Order of the Dumb Show Before the First Act, and the Signification Thereof,” and the description of the dumb show in the printed text contains its explanation: “Hereby was signified that a state knit in unity doth continue strong against all force, but being divided, is easily destroyed” (1.0.11-13). In performance, however, this instant explanation was not present; instead, those in attendance had to wait for the first act to pass before the act’s concluding chorus indicates the meaning of the broken sticks:

The strength that, knit by fast accord in one
Against all foreign power of mighty foes,
Could of itself defend itself alone,
Disjoined once, the former force doth lose.
The sticks that sundered brake so soon in twain
In fagot bound attempted were in vain.

(1.2.376-81)

The chorus interprets the dumb show emblematically, thereby bypassing the performant features of the dumb show: the appearance of the wild men, their wild antics, and so on. But Norton and Sackville want to make their point clear: defending against potentially invading foreign “wild men” necessitates political “accord.” So while the chorus’ explication of the dumb show does not simply reproduce what happens in the dumb show, its presence does suggest that the intended meaning of the dumb show would not have been especially clear. The play’s other dumb shows follow the same pattern: the dumb show begins the act and the chorus explains its meaning at the act’s end, but the printed text inserts an interpretation of the dumb show immediately after its description.

Even if, as Dieter Mehl suggests, *Gorboduc*’s dumb shows’ “meaning and application presented no difficulty to” “the more educated spectators,” the chorus’ explanation of them suggests that not everyone was expected to understand them (31n). Indeed, a manuscript account of a 1562 Inner Temple performance refers to the dumb shows as “shadowes” that were “declared by the chore.”

The word “shadow,” evoking the Christian practice of reading the Old Testament as a dimly-perceived “shadow” of the manifestations of the New Testament, suggests that the dumb shows could be partially understood. They received their “manifestation,” so to speak, in the chorus’ account. Despite the dumb shows’ ability to...
evade or exceed the chorus’ official explications, Norton and Sackville nevertheless presume that some audience members would not understand their intended meaning. As pantomimes that must mean something (they are in a play, after all) but whose meaning is deeply unclear, the dumb show appears as a riddle that holds back a secret.

It might be objected, however, that the chorus’ unfolding of the dumb shows’ meaning at the end of the first and second acts stands as evidence less of presumed audience incomprehension than as evidence of the playwrights’ desire to make their meaning as clear as possible. In this reading, the seeming redundancy of the chorus’ explanation is exactly the point: Norton and Sackville were fully aware of repeating themselves and used repetition of key points as part of their strategy of offering counsel. But this explanation does not account for the ways in which the descriptions of the dumb shows offer more or different information than the chorus’ interpretation. In the fourth dumb show, for example, three Furies whip and drive across the stage three kings and queens who “unnaturally had slain their own children” (4.0.8-9). But while the printed text discloses the names of the kings and queens—“Tantalus, Medea, Athamas, Ino, Cambises, Althea”—the chorus at the end of act 4 never refers to them by name, reading the murderous child-slayers as figures of Videna, the mother of Ferrex and Porrex. The “dreadful Furies,” the chorus says, made “the mother [i.e., Videna] kill her only son” (4.0.10-11; 4.2.277,282). In other words, the chorus at times fails to transmit basic information about what the dumb show represented.

Furthermore, a comparison of the printed text’s detailed explications of the dumb shows with the chorus’ rather scant explications does not suggest that most educated spectators understood such shows. Instead, I suggest the likelihood that some kind of printed or manuscript “argument” (containing what the printed text calls the “order and signification
of the Dumb Show[s]”) was distributed to Queen Elizabeth and other guests of honor in attendance. In other words, Gorboduc’s combination of highly complex dumb shows, detailed explanation of the dumb shows in the printed text, and relatively minimal explanation by the chorus suggest not that the dumb shows were comprehensible in themselves but that an additional explanatory aid, such as an argument, was distributed as part of the performance.  

27 As Tiffany Stern writes, the distribution of such “arguments” (sometimes also called “plots,” “devices,” “subjects,” or “models”) in early modern performances can “indicate an insecurity on the part of the author: a fear that his deeper meaning cannot emerge merely through performance.”  

28 Importantly, these arguments would not have been available to every audience member, but only “to a particular tier of audience.”  

29 The anonymous attendee of Gorboduc, mentioned above, was not part of this tier but was instead what I am calling an “outsider”: for him, the dumb shows were explained by the “chor[us],” not an argument. He experienced the dumb shows as “shadowes” in need of further explanation, as riddles that held something back. Distributed arguments were one means of offering that explanation and were sometimes used, Stern writes, for “first or court performances” and for “particularly important and visual productions…thought to need extra elucidation.”  

30 The detailed explanation of the “signification” of Gorboduc’s dumb shows in the printed text indicates someone’s (Norton’s, or Sackville’s, or someone else’s) belief that

27 For a detailed discussion of “arguments,” or texts distributed to an audience for a performance, see Tiffany Stern, Documents of Performance in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63-80. Even Mehl, confident that the first dumb show “could be understood even without commentary” (31) and that in the second dumb show “the significance of every gesture is immediately obvious” (33), entertains the possibility of “written notices” as an aid to understanding the fourth dumb show: “One can probably take it for granted that the audience was quite clearly informed—either by written notices, typical costumes or recognizable emblematic designs—as to the identity of the figures whose names the reader finds in the printed edition. We can also be sure that their symbolic significance and their relation to the action of the play did not escape the audience” (37-38).  

28 Stern, Documents of Performance, 68.  

29 Ibid., 65.  

30 Ibid., 66, 65.
the “order” of the show needed some “extra elucidation.” My suggestion is that this “elucidation” occurs not, as Mehl suggests, primarily through the chorus, but through a printed or manuscript argument that would have been distributed in performance.31

True, my hypothetical argument is not extant, and its existence might seem implausible. But the curious dumb shows in Gorboduc require that we choose between three options: that the dumb shows would have been understood without any aid; that they would not have been understood and that Norton and Sackville were content to leave Queen Elizabeth in the dark for an entire act; or that an argument would have been distributed to the Queen, at the very least. Although lacking any direct material evidence, the third option in my view is the most plausible. If such an explanatory aid were present in performance then we cannot explain the lack of on-stage explanation of the dumb shows by appealing to the education or sophistication of the spectators. While Mehl is “sure” that the presence of “educated spectators” at the Inns of Court explains “why the dumb shows in Gorboduc are not explained straightaway, as in most popular plays, but only at the end of the act,” I suggest that the dumb shows in fact are explained “straightaway,” but not by the chorus; they are more likely to have been explained by a handheld argument (31n).

The other dumb shows in extant early plays are presented similarly: they lack a presenter in performance, but they do contain written explanations in the printed text. For example, the elaborate allegorical dumb shows in George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmershe’s Jocasta (1566), a Gray’s Inn play, are not explained by a presenter and are only indirectly glossed by the chorus at the end of the act. Instead, the stage directions indicate what each respective show is “representing,” “signifying,” “betokening,”

31 Stern cites several examples of representations of this practice from early modern English plays, including Women Beware Women, The Lover’s Melancholy, The Spanish Tragedy, and The Knave in Graine, New Vampt. Documents of Performance, 66-69.
The dumb shows in another Gray’s Inn play, *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (written by Thomas Hughes and others in 1587), are similarly unexplained in performance, and the printed text indicates what each show was supposed to have “signified,” “represented,” or “meant.” As these Inns of Court plays are the first uses of the dumb show in English drama, the dumb show thus began as an aristocratic, upmarket device. Only later will dumb shows be associated with the degraded theatrical tastes of groundlings.

Consequently we need to supplement Mehl’s still-valid thesis regarding the dumb show that the English theater sees “the gradual replacing of the allegorical and mythological figures by the characters from the actual play” (20). In the end, Mehl writes, the dumb show “became less and less distinctive in the course of its history, until at last it merged completely into the drama” (29). While in earlier plays—such as *Gorboduc, Locrine,* and *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington*—the dumb show’s explanation tended to be performed by a prologue, chorus, or presenter, the explanation in seventeenth-century plays—such as *The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi,* and *The Prophetess*—tends to be folded into the diegetic world of the play itself. What I want to add to Mehl’s narrative, which I think essentially correct, is that as the dumb show’s location changed—as it migrated from courtly settings onto the public stages in the late 1580s and early 1590s—so did its effect on audiences. While early dumb shows split an audience into a group of insiders and outsiders (those who understood the dumb shows, and those who didn’t), the movement of dumb shows into the

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32 *Jocasta,* in *Four Old Plays,* ed. Francis James Child (Cambridge: George Nichols, 1848), 133, 154, 192, 214, 232. The quoted verbs are taken from the descriptions of each of the five dumb shows.

33 *The Misfortunes of Arthur,* in *Certaine deu[s]es and shewes presented to her Maiestie by the gentlemen of Grayes-Inne at her Highnesse court in Greenewich, the twenty eighth day of Februarie in the thirtieth yeare of her Maiesties most happy raigne* (London: 1587), A1r, B2v, C3v. The quoted verbs are taken from the descriptions of each of the first three dumb shows.
public theater led to a flattening of this distinction. Instead of the dumb show being comprehensible to some but not to others, the dumb show in public theater plays was first enigmatic to all (when it was first performed) and then (after a presenter had explained it) comprehensible to all. The earlier distinction between insiders and outsiders was being erased, and it was not until around 1600 that we find the arrival of a new kind of distinction (voiced in *Hamlet*, among other plays) among playhouse audiences: this time between the judicious and the groundlings.

This distinction emerged within a context in which dumb shows were explained immediately after performance by a presenter, who in the 1590s could be either a character in the play or an allegorical personification. In the case of allegorical or symbolic or emblematic dumb shows, the meaning is explicated. In Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1586-90), for example, Hieronimo explains the “mystery” of the “pompous jest” he stages for the court; in the anonymous *Locrine* (c. 1585-94), the dumb shows are explained by a presenter named Ate; and in the anonymous *A Warning for Fair Women* (before 1599), the dumb shows are explained by a presenter named Tragedy. But every kind of dumb show—not just allegorical ones—seem to call for explanation. Even the basic points of a dumb show—who is whom, what they are doing, much less what the show signifies allegorically—tend to be explained by a presenter in early modern public theater plays. For example, the “Bardh, or Welsh Poet” presents the dumb show in Robert Armin’s *The Valiant Welshman* (c. 1610-15), introducing the dumb show before explaining it:

Now *Cornewall, Gloster*, twinnes of some *Incubus*,

And sonne and heyre to hells Imperiall Crowne,

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The Bastard Codigune, conspire the death
Of olde Octauian. Those that faine would know
The manner how, obserue this silent show.

Enter a dumbe show, Codigune, Gloster, and Cornwall at the one dore: After
they consult a little while, enter at the other dore, Octauian, Guiniuer, and
Voada, the sister of Caradoc: they seeme by way of intreaty, to inuite them:
they offer a cup of wine vnto Octauian, and he is poysoned. They take
Guiniuer and Voada, and put them in prison. Codigune is crowned King of
Wales.35

But simply to “obserue this silent show” does not seem to suffice. Immediately after this
dumb show, the Bardh then explains exactly what was just shown, including in his
description both the identities of the characters and what they did:

The trecherous Bastard, with his complices,
Cornewall and Gloster, did inuite the King,
Fayre Guiniuer and beautious Voada,
The sister of renowned Caradoc,
Vnto a sumptuous feast, vvhose costly outside
Gaue no suspition to a foule intent.

………………….so beguiles

The Syrens songs, and teares of Crocodiles.

At this great banket, great Octauian

Was poysoned, and the wife of Caradoc,

Together with his beautious sister led
Vnto a lothsome prison, and the Crowne
Inuested on the head of Codigune
The enuious Bastard. 36

True, the Bardh does not simply reproduce in emotionless verse what was represented in the
dumb show; he moralizes somewhat (Codigune the Bastard is “treacherous” and “enuious,”
Octavian is “great”), and he lingers over the disjunction between the banquet’s “costly
outside” and its hosts’ secret “foule intent.” But much of the Bardh’s subscriptio to this dumb
show’s pictura is simply plot summary, and the distinction between what the dumb show
represents and what the presenter says it means should not be overstated. To the reader of
The Valiant Welshman, this explanation of the dumb show is more or less redundant: it tells
the reader exactly what the reader just read in the textual description of the dumb show, and
nobody needs a presenter to learn that murdering one’s guest is an act of a “treacherous”
person. But the explanation’s presence indicates that the dumb show was not trusted to
communicate even basic information—who, what, where—on the early modern stage. This
repeated practice of presenting a dumb show, and then having someone, either a presenter or
a character within the play itself, explain the dumb show suggests that the dumb show—
despite its pose as a vehicle for information delivery—failed to tell its story and fulfill its
referential function effectively. 37

36 Ibid., C4v-D1r.
37 Excluding plays discussed in the body of this chapter, a selective list of plays with dumb shows that perform
this sequence—first dumb show, then explanation—includes the following (arranged by probable date of first
performance): Edmund Ironside, (c. 1587), Four Prentices of London (1594), Weakest Goeth to the Wall, (c.
1595-1600), Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington, (before 1598 sometime?), Death of Robert Earl of
Huntington, (1598), Thracian Wonder (1590-1601), Fair Maid of the West, Part 1 (1597-1604), The Divils
Charter (1606), Pericles (1608), A Christian Turn’d Turk (c. 1609-12), Henry VIII (1613), Hengist, King of
Kent (1615-20), Herod and Antipater (1619-22), Two Noble Ladies (c. 1619-23), The Jewes Tragedy (c. 1626),
and Bloody Banquet (c. 1617-39). Sometimes the dumb show’s explanation comes only or mostly before the
This practice points to a curious contradiction surrounding the dumb show. On the one hand, presenters of dumb shows often claim that a dumb show is deployed for the sake of economy. For example, the presenter in Thomas Heywood’s *Four Prentices of London* (1594) says that dumb shows will be used because if what they show were “writ at large, / [It] Would aske a long and tedious circumstance.” At moments like these, the dumb show’s technique of “feast[ing] your eye, and staru[ing] your eare” (as Heywood’s presenter puts it) implies that visual spectacle can simply replace language as a means of communication. But dumb shows are almost always followed by a verbal account, explanation, or interpretation immediately after they occur, as if dumb shows do not quite communicate what they are supposed to. In *Spanish Tragedy* (ca. 1586-90), for example, Hieronimo explains his “pompous jest” by saying that John of Gaunt “by his Scutchin plainely may appeare,” even though the King has already stated that the “mystery” of the show was not at all plain. Some dumb shows’ presenters display both of these tendencies together in the same place: they first proclaim the self-sufficiency of the dumb show but then explain the dumb show afterwards. In Shakespeare and Wilkins’ *Pericles* (1607), the presenter Gower explains what

dumb show, as in *The Travels of Three English Brothers*, *The Golden Age*, and *The Silver Age*. Since nearly every play that has a dumb show also has an explanation, the exceptions are more significant, and I discuss a some of them below. Mehl’s appendix in *The Elizabethan Dumb Show* has a list of dumb shows, and Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) lists all of the stage directions that include the phrase “dumb show” (which is not exhaustive of all dumb shows, some of which do not use the term). Finally, playtexts sometimes mark processions or dances as “dumb shows,” but I exclude these from consideration here because these are non-narrative dumb shows, and thus require (and receive) no explanation.

38 Thomas Heywood, *Four Prentices of London* (London, 1615), sig. B4v. The appeal to economy is also voiced by the presenter in Gervase Markham and William Sampson’s *Herod and Antipater* (London, 1622), sig. F4r.
happens after the dumb show, but he introduces it as if his words were unnecessary: “What need speak I?”

One might object, however, that these two modes—the speech of the presenter, and the pantomime of the dumb show—simply operate independently and that both are fully sufficient means of signification. According to this reading, a purely verbal account cannot simply displace the obscure visual one: they both communicate, but they communicate different things. Furthermore, a determinate character with a determinate appearance sometimes voices the “verbal” account; when Gower gives an account of a dumb show, the effect is not simply repetitive, in part because playgoers know that John Gower (and not just a generic “presenter”) is the speaker. It is certainly true that the presenter’s account often interprets the dumb show in addition to describing what it represents, and many presenters’ interpretations do leave out or amplify certain features of the dumb shows. Nevertheless, the impact of the character or figure who takes on the role of presenter should not be overemphasized. For example, although Time is the presenter in the anonymous university play *Tom A Lincoln* (c.1607-11), his mode of introducing and explaining the dumb show performs largely the same function that it does in other plays featuring unnamed presenters. Introducing the first dumb show, Time says: “what afterward befell / mark what ensues and yt will plainly tell,” even though Time then goes ahead and explains what happened in the dumb show afterwards anyway. The unspecified “Chorus” in a play like Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Prophetess* is largely indistinguishable from Time in *Tom A Lincoln*. Like Time, the chorus in *The Prophetess* insists before a dumb show that “with such Art the Subject is conveigh’d, / That every Scene and passage shall be cleer, / Even to the grossest

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understander here," even though he also offers a 28-line explanation of the dumb show immediately after it occurs. In sum, however much presenters claim that (as the presenting “Conjurer” says in Webster’s *The White Devil*) the content of their dumb shows is “most apparent” and that “your eye…can inform you / The engine of all,” the floods of words that invariably describe dumb shows that we just watched suggests that the “eye” could often discern very little.

A few extant documents from early modern performances also indicate that dumb shows were particularly difficult to perform well. These large manuscript sheets, known as “plots” or “plats,” were probably hung in the backstage tiring house during performances for ease of reference. Plots might list entrances, casting lists, and stage properties to be used, among other information. The plots thus included information that was absolutely crucial to a successful performance (who should enter, and when; what they should carry with them; when sound was needed, etc.). Only seven plots survive, and of these only five consist of more than fragments, three of which contain what Evelyn Tribble calls “very full descriptions

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43 *The Prophetess*, ed. George Walton Williams, in *The Dramatic Works in The Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, gen. ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), IX: 1.17-19. Other examples include Peter Quince as Prologue in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, who echoes the language of the sufficiency of the eye (though ironically) when he introduces the Rude Mechanicals’ dumb show: “by their show, / you shall know all, that you are like to know” (William Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Arden, 1979), 5.1.116-17). In *Captaine Thomas Stukeley*, the chorus first tells the audience to “Reguard this shew and plainly see the thing,” after which the dumb show is shown and the chorus gives a long explanation of what just happened (*Captaine Thomas Stukeley* (London, 1605), sigs. K1r-v). Before the last dumb show of Thomas Heywood’s *Brazen Age* (1611), the presenter Homer justifies the dumb show for its economical ability to replace “word” with “show”—“Our last Act comes, which lest it tedious grow, / What is too long in word, accept in show”—even though he uses more “word[s]” to explain the show immediately afterwards (*The Brazen Age* (London, 1613), sigs. I3v-I4r).


of dumb shows.” The dumb shows in the plot of The Second Part of the Seven Deadly Sins, for example, “could probably be performed only from an informed reading of the plot itself,” without ever consulting the playbook. Dumb shows’ extreme proneness to miscarry during performances accounts in part for their prominence on these plots. These plots were made necessary by a repertory system of acting in which forgetting one’s lines or one’s entrance—what was known as being “out”—was a constant problem. Rehearsals were infrequent, “perfunctory and practical,” and lacked the modern practice of “blocking” scenes by determining the movement of actors. In such a system, dumb shows present a particular problem. Consisting of nothing but movement, the dumb show intrinsically depends on “blocking”: arranging the movement and spacing of actors’ bodies. Some moments of actorly failure—when an actor missed his cue to enter or begin speaking—could be managed or patched up with the aid of a “prompter.” But dumb shows would have been less susceptible to this kind of correction on the fly. With no actor’s lines serving as cues (e.g., “come hither”), and in a theatrical culture in which actors did not “memorize” all of their lines, entrances, exits, and movements in the way that contemporary actors do, the dumb show was a particularly fraught site of performance, one which seems to have been extremely likely to fail to be understood.

But how do we know that this was so? Perhaps we should simply interpret the verbal appendices to dumb shows as another instance of what M.C. Bradbrook called the

46 Tribble, Cognition in the Globe, 45.
47 Ibid., 49.
48 As Stern writes, “early modern players did not perform in ‘long runs’ and had such heavy learning and performance schedules that they often found themselves ‘out’ or ‘at a non plus’ on stage” (Documents of Performance, 219).
50 On prompting, see Stern, Documents of Performance, 219-27.
“Elizabethan habit of making everything explicit and of stating everything in the verse itself.” In his book-length study of the dumb show, Mehl takes a similar position:

The figure of the presenter reflects the tendency, so typical of the popular Elizabethan drama, to make everything as clear and impressive as possible. Everything had to be said more than once, using different artistic means, in order to impress it on every single member of the audience...The drama as well as the prose literature of the time expresses a strong desire for explicitness and repetition. To be considered effective, everything had to be said more than once, if possible in continually new and hitherto untried ways. (12,17)

Because Mehl understands the dumb show to communicate effectively, its explanation by a presenter is merely an instance of “repetition” and not, as I am arguing, explication. Yet Mehl tries to have it both ways; at certain moments he also argues that presenter’s commentaries are evidence that dumb shows were difficult to understand and that the presenter truly does offer new information. The Spanish Tragedy’s audience, Mehl suggests, must have been very much more heterogeneous and must have included many less educated playgoers. Consequently the dramatist had to be more explicit about the meaning of the dumb show and the king’s admission, “I sound not well the misterie,” probably expressed the feelings of most of the spectators very accurately...[Therefore] the use of the presenter [in the play proper, instead of in the play’s frame] made it possible to present more complicated incidents in pantomime and to explain them fully afterwards. There was no need for the audience to understand the dumb show immediately. (65, 66)

Mehl thus waffles between understanding the presenter’s commentary as repetition and as explanation. But the ubiquity of these commentaries suggests their necessity. However much contemporary readers experience them as repetitions, they served as true explanations of and expansions on the dumb show. Jeremy Lopez makes a similar point about scenes of exposition, in which “rapid-fire dialogue” puts “into narrative form events that could be (and often are later) more clearly presented on stage.”52 Consequently “exposition, which we tend to think of as a making-clear, tends to be confusing. The language does not put out information, but instead almost requires us to dig into it to extract information.”53 Dumb shows have a similar effect: their primary effect is less to communicate than to make playgoers aware of what they do not yet know.

Finally, we should keep in mind that the one mention from early modern drama about playgoer response to dumb shows comes from Hamlet itself, in which Hamlet dubs them “inexplicable.” Absent a presenter or some other interpretive aid, dumb shows were unable to be (as the term “inexplicable” suggests) unfolded, explained, plumbed, or understood. Hamlet’s impressions of early modern theater, of course, cannot always be taken at face value, and his dramatic theory certainly seeks to elevate the verbal over the visual. Nevertheless, Hamlet’s claim is born out through an examination of the term “dumb show” in early modern English culture more generally, in which the term tended to refer to something poorly understood or not understood at all. A 1619 devotional poem, for example, says that only the man “of heauenly race, / Hast power to decipher this dumbe show.”54 “Decipher[ing]” was thus assumed to be the viewer’s response to a dumb show. Furthermore, English religious reformers often used the language of “dumbness” and “mumming” in their

52 Lopez, Theatrical Convention and Audience Response, 88.
53 Ibid., 91.
54 A.G., The vviddoves mite (Saint-Omer: 1619), M5v.
objections to what they viewed as an unnecessarily obscure Catholic sacramental practice. In
1584 the cleric and scholar John Rainoldes (later the author of *Th’overthrow of Stage-Playes*)
charged the Catholic custom of “vttering the words of consecration secretly” with turning the
Mass into a “dumbe shew.”  

For the reformers, the Catholic Mass was “dumb”: it could be
seen but not heard. Indeed, the dumb show and the Catholic Latin Mass share some features:
both emphasize visual spectacle, do not use audible words, and invite further interpretation.
Critics have noted these associations of the dumb show with Catholic liturgical practice and
theology, which was said to privilege the eye over the ear and the image over the word.  

These similarities might suggest that the dumb show can be best explained through
Reformation controversies over the efficacy and comprehensibility of the image and the
word. But while Reformation controversies are a major source and site of early modern
thinking about these problems, the vast majority of dumb shows in early modern plays have
no religious or theological valence. The recurrence of concerns with dumbness and dumb
shows in religious discourse does suggest, however, that this split impulse within early
modern theater culture has a clear analogue in religion: the combination of a faith in the
communicative power of the visual and spectacular with doubts about that very faith.

IV.

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56 Huston Diehl, for example, argues that *Hamlet* “articulates the qualities of an ideal *Protestant* theater,” one
whose scorn for “inexplicable dumb shows” is based on a rejection of (in Sidney’s words) *phantastike* art in
favor of *eikastike*, or imitative, art (*Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage*, 82-83). Michael O’Connell traces the
way that the epistemological conflict between image and word is a function of the fundamental premises of
Christian theology, culminating with a study of sixteenth English drama. He argues that unlike Jonson, who
“frequently seems half in agreement with [the Puritans’] critique of visual spectacle,” Shakespeare’s plays
“indicate a willingness to assert visual experience and spectacle in the economy of theater…confirming himself
as a *visual* as well as a verbal artist” (*The Idolatrous Eye*, 13).
I have been arguing that dumb shows in early modern plays would have been enigmatic to playgoers and that they therefore would have benefitted from explication. That explication involved not only an unfolding of a dumb show’s meaning but also of its most basic features: who is meant to represent whom and what they are doing. Yet there are some exceptions; not every dumb show in early modern plays is explained by a presenter afterwards. While it is possible that some of these “missing explanations” can be accounted for by positing a once-present but now-lost hand-held paper argument, not every missing explanation can be explained away in this way. Furthermore, simply appealing in all cases to the existence of a lost document seems a more convenient explanation (because it requires no proof) than a likely one.57 The question remains: why were some dumb shows not explained? How can we account for these exceptions? My answer, briefly, is that these were not explained because part of their purpose was to generate confusion in at least a portion of their audiences. As a device that seemed to mean something (but what that something was was unclear to the audience), the unexplained dumb show stands as an especially powerful deployment of the enigmatic mode in early modern English theater. Through the unexplained dumb show playwrights sought to create a sense of division in an audience, between those who understood what the dumb show was about, and those who did not. I have already discussed the delayed explanation to the dumb show in Gorboduc, one of whose effects was to separate those who understand the dumb shows (those who were in possession of an

57 Despite this disclaimer, however, I would posit the likelihood that an argument would have been distributed for Tancred and Gismund (c. 1566-67), which was “compiled by the gentlemen of the inner temple, and by them presented before her majestie” (Tancred and Gismund [London: 1591], *1r). The location of the dumb shows (or “Introductio[s]”) at the very end of the printed text suggests their detachability from the rest of the text, and they do not appear in either of the manuscripts of the original play, entitled Gismond of Salerne (John W. Cunliffe, introduction to Early English Classical Tragedies [Oxford: Clarendon, 1912], lxxxvi). Hence I think it quite likely that a sheet with these descriptions was circulated at a royal performance. And because these are not allegorical dumb shows, they do not require interpretation of their meaning; they only require that someone indicate who is whom in the dumb shows.
argument) from those who need to puzzle out the meaning of the “shadowes.” I turn now to the most famous example of an unexplained dumb show in early modern drama: the dumb show in *Hamlet*.

The dumb show in *Hamlet*, like so many of the play’s features, has occasioned a host of thorny questions. Why does Hamlet denigrate “inexplicable dumb shows” just before the play that he has requested—*The Murder of Gonzago*—presents a dumb show (3.2.10-11)? Why does Claudius wait until the play has begun before he rises? Perhaps he rises when he does because he recognizes that the action of the play mirrors (at least indirectly) his own actions, which would lead either to his open confession (like that of the “guilty creatures sitting at a play” who have “proclaimed their malefactions”) or at least to his recognition that Hamlet knows the truth of how Old King Hamlet died (2.2.566, 569). But if that were the case, then why did he not rise during the dumb show, which represents the same actions? What did the dumb show not do that the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* did? The answer, I suggest, indicates something important about early modern theatrical culture: about the place of confusion, and more importantly, feelings of confusion in the early modern playhouse. The dumb show in *Hamlet* generates feelings of confusion to make the entire audience—both groundlings and judicious--feel like outsiders, as if they don’t know something that others do.

A presenter-less dumb show like *Hamlet’s* resembles an unsolved riddle. *Hamlet’s* dumb show thus resembles Hamlet the character: both present enough information for audiences and critics to be aware of what they do not know. Hamlet variously calls this unknown something “that within that passeth show” (1.2.85), “the heart of my / mystery” (3.2.335-36), or “much music, / [and] excellent voice, in this little organ” that Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern “cannot / …make…speak” (3.2.337-39). Furthermore, the feelings of frustration associated with engaging a solution-less riddle are precisely those on which Hamlet discourses at such length. The dumb show, in short, produces the feeling—associated with Hamlet, *Hamlet*, and interpreters of both—that some secret or mystery is being held in reserve.\(^{58}\)

The precise question of why Claudius rises when he does sparked a vigorous exchange between W.W. Greg and John Dover Wilson nearly 100 years ago.\(^{59}\) Obviously, the Greg-Dover Wilson debate is no longer current, although interest in their exchange has revived in recent years.\(^{60}\) Nevertheless, their exchange and the critical conversation that they inaugurated about the dumb show in *Hamlet* (which flourished until the mid-1940s) provides a helpful setting in which to clarify and refine some basic assumptions and conventions about how early modern English theater functioned, communicated, or failed to do so. What their debate over the dumb show unearthed are questions about theatrical norms and audience expectations that still preoccupy critics today.\(^{61}\)

\(^{58}\) Stephen Booth describes this feeling as “a not wholly explicable fancy that in *Hamlet* we behold the frustrated and inarticulate Shakespeare furiously wagging his tail in an effort to tell us something.” What that something is, of course, remains unclear (“On the Value of *Hamlet*,” in *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Norman Rabkin [New York: Columbia University Press, 1969], 138).


\(^{61}\) Classic works on the subject include Alan Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) and *Recovering Shakespeare’s Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); also Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). More recent works include Lopez, *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama*; William West, “‘But this will be a mere confusion’: Real and
Greg argued from the apparently minor crux of the dumb show to a major conclusion: that Hamlet had hallucinated the story that the Ghost of King Hamlet told him. Greg’s attack on what he repeatedly calls the “orthodox” view of *Hamlet* sparked a vigorous response from Dover Wilson, who nonetheless called Greg’s article “a turning-point in the history of Shakespearean criticism.”

Offering an alternative interpretation of what he called “the dumb-show business,” Dover Wilson argued that Claudius did not see the dumb show because he had been whispering with Polonius and Gertrude during its performance. Dover Wilson and Greg’s disagreement masked, however, an underlying shared assumption. Both assumed that the dumb show would have been comprehensible to Claudius in the first place and that simply viewing the dumb show would have been sufficient to comprehend its meaning. This assumption continues to the present day: “[d]umb-shows,” writes Tiffany Stern, “provided alternative ways to give advanced warning for what was going to happen: the dumb-show in *Hamlet* gives the whole story to follow.” My survey of early modern dumb shows suggests, however, that this assumption is untenable: even if some of the characters are identifiable (the King from his crown, for example), who was supposed to represent whom in the dumb show would have been far from obvious (who is this poisoner?), nor would some of the actions (what is that fellow doing over by the King’s ear?). Consequently Claudius’ failure to rise during the dumb show requires neither Greg’s nor Dover Wilson’s ingenious explanation. I suggest a simpler one: Claudius did not feel accused by the dumb show because he quite simply was unsure what it represented or meant.

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62 What Happens in Hamlet, 23.

63 “The Parallel Plots in Hamlet : A Reply to Dr W.W. Greg,” 131,155.

64 Stern, *Documents of Performance*, 79.

65 I am not the first to make this claim. In a 1936 article Alice Walker seems to have been the first critic to propose “that Claudius did not understand the dumb-show” (“‘Miching Malicho’ and the Play Scene in
know that Claudius is aware that the play has an “argument” but that he has not read it—he trusts Hamlet to have read it, in fact—so Claudius is not holding the argument that would explain the dumb show in his hand. Like other internal audiences in early modern plays who proclaim their bafflement at dumb shows, Ophelia indicates the dumb show’s enigmatic quality through her barrage of questions: “What means this, my lord?”; “Belike this show imports the argument of the play”; “Will a tell us what this show meant?” (3.2.123,126,129).

In terms of form and content, however, Hamlet’s dumb show is utterly typical:

_Hautboys play. The dumb show enters. Enter a KING and a QUEEN very lovingly, the QUEEN embracing him. She kneels and makes show of protestation unto him. He takes her up and declines his head upon her neck. He lays him down upon a bank of flowers. She, seeing him asleep, leaves him._

_Anon comes in a fellow, takes off his crown, kisses it, and pours poison into_
the King’s ears, and exits. The QUEEN returns, finds the KING dead, and makes passionate action. The poisoner, with some two or three mutes, comes in again, seeming to lament with her. The dead body is carried away. The poisoner woos the QUEEN with gifts. She seems loath and unwilling a while, but in the end accepts his love. Exeunt [the PLAYERS.] (3.2.122.1-14)

Like so many other dumb shows, this one includes music (“Hautboys play”), multiple entrances and exits, and mimed emotions (“protestation,” “passionate action,” “seems loath”). And like so many other dumb shows, this dumb show would have been extremely difficult to understand, both in content (what action is being represented) and in significance (what the show’s relationship is to the play that follows). Yet critics have tied themselves into knots explaining how this dumb show is, as Hamlet says of all dumb shows, “inexplicable” while avoiding the conclusion it is inexplicable in the most obvious sense of the word. Mehl, for example, writes that “[a]t first sight it seems to be anything but ‘inexplicable.’ There is no allegorical and symbolic disguise as in the older dumb shows” (112). Mehl is forced to conclude that though the dumb show is itself “immediately intelligible, [it] is very like some of those ‘inexplicable dumb shows’” “in its form” (114). It is not the content of the dumb show (what is happening) but its “significance,” Mehl writes, that “was not immediately obvious to an Elizabethan audience” (117). Mehl’s reading of the show as “very like” an “inexplicable” dumb show “in its form” strikes me, like Greg’s and Dover Wilson’s readings, as overly ingenious. The dumb show is not “inexplicable”

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Steevens glosses the term as “shows which are too confusedly conducted to explain themselves” (qtd. In Furness, ed., Hamlet, note to 3.2.11). As an example he offers an impossible-to-stage direction from Heywood’s The Four Prentices: “Enter TANCRED with BELLA FRANCA, richly attired, shee some-what affecting him, though she makes no shew of it” (1615 ed., p. F3v). W.W. Robson glosses “inexplicable” as referring to the way that older dumb shows hinted “so obscurely and symbolically” at what was to follow (W. W. Robson, “Did The King See The Dumb-Show?” Cambridge Quarterly 6 [1975]: 305).
because its relation to the “play [that] was to follow” is unclear (117). The dumb show is inexplicable in the most basic way: as an extended scene of mimed action, it struggled to communicate effectively even the very basics of what it represents.

Mehl rightly notes the unusual fact that Hamlet’s dumb show lacks “an explanatory prologue or presenter,” without which, he argues, “the significance of the pantomime for the play that is to follow could not be immediately intelligible” (117). In this regard, the missing presenter stands as yet another way in which Hamlet makes an audience aware that it does not know something. Over and over the play suggests something hidden, something unknown or just out of reach, without ever indicating what that something might be. Paul Yachnin calls this a “depth-effect,” and arguments surrounding Hamlet’s production of these effects have continued to the present day.68 Just as the discussion surrounding what lies within Hamlet generates a sense that Hamlet knows something we don’t, the dumb show generates a sense in playgoers that someone knows something we don’t—and that the revelation of what that something is lies just out of reach.

Who exactly was confused by the dumb show, and why? Furthermore, who thought whom was confused? Answering this question requires that we return to a slightly earlier scene in the play, when the players first arrive at Elsinore. As has long been recognized, a discussion of the rivalry between the London boy companies and the “common players” of

68 Anthony Dawson and Paul Yachnin, in The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England, 48. Yachnin also argues that “Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights...invent, not interiority, but rather a new kind of theatrical pleasure, one based on the pleasures of the unseen rather than on the delights of the spectacle” (The Culture of Playgoing, 70). Similarly, Dover Wilson calls Hamlet “a dramatic essay in mystery; that is to say it is so constructed that the more it is examined the more there is to discover” (What Happens in Hamlet, 19). See also Katharine Eisaman Maus, Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and more recently, Graham Holderness, “‘The single and peculiar life’: Hamlet’s heart and the early modern subject,” Shakespeare Survey 62 (2009): 296-307. Maus is responding especially to Francis Barker, The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984) and Catherine Belsey, The Subject of Tragedy (London: Methuen, 1985). Margreta DeGrazia argues in Hamlet Without Hamlet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) that emphasis on Hamlet’s subjectivity and what lies within has obscured the play’s investments in other issues such as land and inheritance.
the public theaters immediately precedes Hamlet’s request to the visiting players for a “passionate speech” about the death of Priam (2.2.334,414). This dispute between what Alfred Harbage called the “rival traditions” was one factor contributing to a growing critical awareness among London playwrights, who gradually produced a discourse of “judgment” in their prologues and inductions.69 Between 1599 and 1613, Leo Salingar writes, “the keyword in a dramatist’s approach to his public was…the word judgment,” a word he traces through a series of plays, from Every Man In His Humour through Hamlet to Bussy d’Ambois.70 As Robert Weimann notes, the term “judicious” carried “profoundly divisive connotations”; its use in prologues was a means of dividing an audience into two groups: those with taste, and those without it.71 In each of these plays, the “judicious” or those of “judgment” are invoked as the subset of the audience whose approval is sought. While this group is usually only implicitly opposed to the rest of those present, in Hamlet, those in the out-group are explicitly named as “groundlings.” But Shakespeare is not Hamlet; as we will see, Shakespeare in fact distances himself from Hamlet’s (and other playwrights’) attempt to divide audiences into these two categories.

This context should inform our understanding of Hamlet’s discussion of the kind of “passionate speech” he wants to hear, a speech from a play that Hamlet says was either “never acted, or if it was, not above once; for the play, I remember, pleased not the million. ‘Twas caviar to the general. But it was—as I received it, and others whose judgements in such matters cried in the top of mine—an excellent play…” (2.2.416-20). Hamlet’s opposition of his taste and the tastes of those of superior “judgments” to those of “the

million” and “the general” recurs in his famous advice to the players at the beginning of 3.2. Hamlet’s comment on “inexplicable dumb shows” arises while expressing his distaste for acting that lacks “smoothness” and is not done “gently”: “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” (3.2.7,5,7-11). Although these lines are often read as a reference to Edward Alleyn, the leading man of the Admiral’s Men, they cannot be taken at face value, as Hamlet disdains a model of acting that he had just praised two scenes earlier. After the First Player weeps during his speech describing the death of Priam, Hamlet compares the player’s fictional motive with his own “motive and cue for passion” (2.2.538), focusing on the aural and visual aspects of playgoing. If the player had Hamlet’s own motivation for grief, Hamlet says, he would “amaze indeed / The very faculty of eyes and ears” (2.2.542-43). In 2.2, the model for powerful acting that Hamlet praised for its ability to produce a kind of visual and auditory overload is precisely what he disdains in 3.2 as “split[ting] the ears of the groundlings” with “inexplicable dumb shows and noise.”

Why does Hamlet praise one kind of acting, and then disdain it soon after? Jeffrey Knapp has argued for a “self-various” Hamlet, one who, like Shakespeare, is both a player and an author. Consequently “Shakespeare’s own self-variousness as player-author means that his sympathies in Hamlet are never wholly on one side or the other of the battle-line Hamlet draws between scripting and clowning.”72 Furthermore, the context matters here. It is in his role as playgoer that Hamlet praises the player’s speech. Conversely, it is in his role as author of those notorious “dozen or sixteen lines” that Hamlet positions himself on the critical avant-garde by positing a two-tiered audience composed of the “judicious” and the

“unskilful”: “Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of which one must in your allowance o’erweigh a whole theatre of others” (2.2.518, 3.2.22-25). The actors are to please the “one” (as opposed to the “whole theatre of others”) through a kind of moderation or middle course. They should act with “temperance” in the midst of “passion,” use “discretion,” and follow “the modesty of nature” to render their performance neither “overdone” nor “tardy” (3.2.7,6,15,18,22,23). Similarly, Hamlet enjoins clowns to stay within their bounds, speaking only what “is set down for them” and avoiding “pitiful ambition” which is manifest by “set[ting] on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh” (3.2.36-37). Hamlet’s point is clear: a performance that is moderate, neither too passionate nor too cool, will please those whose opinion matters, while a performance that is either excessively passionate or clownish will please only “the groundlings,” “the unskilful,” and “barren spectators.”

But in what sense is the lower tier of playgoers “capable” only of “inexplicable dumb shows and noise”? The majority of Hamlet’s complaints in 3.2 concerns excessively passionate acting (“noise”), not “dumb shows.” Yet dumb shows fall afoul of Hamlet because, like Marlovian strutting, they violate the canons of Hamlet’s mimetic theory of drama, according to which one should “suit the action to the word” (3.2.16). “The dumb show,” as Ned Lukacher writes, “is a stylistic device that perforates the illusion of theater as the space of good imitation.” Just as actors who “strut…and bellow…imitate…humanity so abominably,” so do dumb shows imitate poorly enough that they require some further explication (3.2.29,31). As an “inexplicable” theatrical device whose performant function

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diverges so widely from its referential function, the dumb show fails to hold “the mirror up to
nature” or “imitate…humanity” (3.2.20,31).

In this light, the dumb show in *Hamlet* appears less as a way of trapping the king or
parodying a rival company’s performance style than as a conspicuous effort to muddy
everyone’s—but especially the judicious’—understanding of what is going on. The
playgoers’ experience of being confused at this moment could involve the peculiar kind of
pleasure described by Bacon, in which there is “great pleasure to desire to see that [one]
cannot perfectly discern.” Ironically, this pleasure is the result of a performance that violates
Hamlet’s dramatic canons: through mime, it involves overacting, or is “overdone”; and
through silence, it involves underacting, and “come[s] tardy off.” Hamlet critiques the dumb
show as a dramatic device because it makes everyone – including the judicious—a
groundling by placing everyone on the same level of awareness. The judicious, Hamlet says,
can understand things that groundlings can’t. But dumb shows, by baffling everyone present,
turn the judicious into groundlings.

The dumb show in *Hamlet* thus enables the transformation of a groundling/judicious
composite into a unified collective through the circulation of the affects of bafflement.74 As
an affective state produced by a cognitive lack, bafflement denotes the feeling that attends an
awareness of one’s own ignorance, while alienation refers to the feeling of outsider-ness.
Paradoxically, *Hamlet* produces a group whose shared quality is outsider-ness. Hamlet

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74 By arguing for circulating affects’ ability to join people together into a collective, I join Teresa Brennan and
Laurent Berlant, who argue that (in Berlant’s words) “affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and that
bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find
Transmission of Affect* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004]). I connect affect and epistemology via
Susan James, who argues that in the Renaissance, “the experience of passion is a kind of involuntary thinking
that goes on in and between the bodies of individuals, binding them together or forcing them apart” (*Passion
solicits the formation of a playgoing collective bound not by commonly-held interests or knowledge, but by a commonly-held ignorance.

V.

One implication of this chapter’s argument is that understanding was not an especially high priority for early modern playgoers. In some sense, critics have long known this. From Jonson’s prefaces to texts like Thomas Dekker’s *The Gull’s Hornbook*, we have evidence that many playgoers were interested in many things other than the play itself, including display of oneself, one’s status, and one’s “judgment.” But as literary critics whose task is to create new “knowledge” about these very plays, overlooking the ways in which early modern drama has investments in domains other than knowledge can be all too easy. Certainly, some recent critics have begun to attend to the affective and sensory impact of early modern drama, arguing that these modes of experiencing drama are also essential to understanding the appeal and the nature of early modern theatrical experience. But I argue that we can understand some of the affective qualities of early modern playgoers without necessarily turning away from questions of cognition, knowledge, and understanding. Instead, by focusing on the moments when cognition, knowledge, and understanding fail to occur or are partially blocked, we can see how these moments themselves were essential to the appeal and nature of early modern playgoing.

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To state my claim more positively: the production of dramatic opacity of the kind that I identify here—in which dumb shows could make playgoers aware of their own ignorance in a communal setting—was a source of a certain kind of pleasure to playgoers. Puzzling something out as a group seemed to be an attractive feature of early modern playgoing, and, more importantly, puzzling something out when in a group would have felt differently from doing so alone. Francis Bacon remarks on the difference between a solitary person and a group of playgoers as well as the affective openness, even vulnerability, of the latter: “the minds of men in company are more open to affections and impressions than when alone.” Bacon’s comment suggests the permeability of individual playgoers to the “affections and impressions” of others around them, an experience that—as anyone who has attended a live sporting event or a theater performance can attest—has its own analogues today. As a mode of pantomimed performance that was far from clearly understood, the dumb show was one method of inducing what Henry Peacham called “delectable darkness.” The explanation offered by a presenter or interpreter after the dumb show helped playgoers “fynde at last” its meaning.

*Hamlet*’s dumb show, unlike almost all others, is not followed by a verbal account, in part, I suggest, as a way of doubling down on the enigmatic mode, shaping a performance that seems to offer the possibility of moving from Peacham’s delightful confusion to a state of understanding. If Hamlet had told us what his mystery was, or if a presenter had offered an account of the dumb show after it, playgoers would have had this experience. But none of these things happen. The move that Shakespeare makes in *Hamlet* is to delight playgoers, even when they are left in a state of darkness. *Hamlet* allows playgoers to enjoy the
experience of darkness without ever glimpsing what Peacham calls “the meaning of [the] darcke riddle,” simply by multiplying the “darcke riddles” throughout the play.

The dumb show’s generation of confusion, in other words, is wholly of a piece with the entire play’s technique. I thus would revise William N. West’s claim that after the early 1590s “theatrical practices move from the riskiness of real confusions to the representations of confusion more familiar to us from the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.”76 West argues that in the performances of the first two decades of the public theaters, “the baffling sounds, gestures, and wordplay of performances sometimes left their audiences actually confused about what they were watching and how to respond to it.” Hamlet’s complaint about “inexplicable dumb shows,” West writes, “recalls anxieties about real moments of disorder in the theatres, confusions not merely represented, as in Hamlet, but actual.” Yet my account of the dumb show in Hamlet suggests that the days of confusion had not yet passed in the London public theaters—indeed, that as long as dumb shows were being staged, some level of confusion remained. Shakespeare’s method in Hamlet was to make an entire play revolve around a character who produces confusion. In other words, Hamlet, like a dumb show, is encountered by characters and playgoers as a riddle.

So does Shakespeare have a secret? Is he engaging in “esoteric writing”?77 Greg holds that in Hamlet, Shakespeare does actually have what Jonson called a “more remou’d

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76 “‘But this will be a mere confusion’: Real and Represented Confusions on the Elizabethan Stage,” 217. All quotes from West’s article are taken from p. 217.
myster[y]” which he wants to indicate to “other humaner minds” who read carefully (419). Greg represents a group that, in different ways, has argued for an esoteric Shakespeare, yet this is a group that I decline to join. Yes, Shakespeare tells us that he has a secret. But the only thing we don’t know is what we’ve never known, and never will: whether there is anything inside that black box. The peculiar pleasures of *Hamlet* depend on keeping that box tightly shut.

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78 Greg says that the esoteric truth that Shakespeare wants to communicate is that ghosts are not real. Ben Jonson, *Hymenaei*, in *Ben Jonson*, vol. 7, eds. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, lines 18-19.
Chapter Three:

“I am I,” “I am not what I am”: Tautology, Contradiction, and Enigmatic Clowning

Even at this late date, Iago—that dominant and ubiquitous force of Othello—is still said to possess a “motiveless malignity.”¹ This fact presents a paradox: if Iago speaks so much during Othello, how does he also manage to say so little? His contradictory act of self-definition in the play’s first scene points toward an answer: “I am not what I am” (1.1.64). Like God revealing his name to Moses in Exodus 3:14, Iago offers an ontology of himself, but in reverse. While the ontology of God—“I am who I am”—is defined as that which perpetually exists, Iago’s ontology is defined as that which negates and that which does not exist. He is not who he is. Logically, Iago’s sentence is a contradiction: a statement by definition false that cannot be anything other than false. Iago thus reverses God’s name in Exodus (“I am who I am”), which is the opposite of a contradiction: a tautology, a statement by definition true that cannot be anything other than true.² By the end of the play, Iago will

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Coleridge’s Shakespearean Criticism, vol. 1, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 49. Coleridge’s view, though modified somewhat, is still the standard. Stephen Greenblatt, for example, dubs the “inadequacy” of “Iago’s murky attempt to account for his obsessive, unappeasable hatred” as part of Shakespeare’s overall strategy of “excision of motive[s],” or “strategic opacity.” A.D. Nuttall refers to Iago as “motiveless” in the sense that Iago’s hatred lacks an “intelligible public reason.” Marjorie Garber, holding that none of Iago’s stated motives—“sexual jealousy, political envy, and reputation…seems convincing,” argues that “his motivations seems deliberately crafted…made up after the fact to explain the unexplainable” (Stephen Greenblatt, Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare [New York: W.W. Norton, 2004], 326,324; A.D. Nuttall, Shakespeare the Thinker [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007], 283; Marjorie Garber, Shakespeare After All [New York: Pantheon, 2004], 605).

² I use the terms “tautology” and “contradiction” in their more modern senses, as they have been deployed in propositional logic, especially by Wittgenstein, discussed immediately below. Stated briefly, I use the terms tautology and contradiction to describe clauses with the structure “X is X” or “X is not X.” In early modern England, in contrast, tautologia was a rhetorical, not a logical, term, understood as a linguistic vice and defined by Richard Sherry as a “a vayne repeting agayn of one word or moe in all one sentence” and by Henry Peacham as “an unprofitable and wearesome repeticion of all one word, or…of one matter.” George Puttenham defines “Tautologia, or the Figure of Self-Saying” slightly differently: as the excessive use of “words beginning all with a [same] letter.” Kant understood tautology as a logical term and argued that “[t]autological propositions are virtually empty” because “if we can say nothing more of a man, than that he is a man, we know nothing more of him at all” (Richard Sherry, A treatise of schemes [and] tropes [London: 1550], C1r; Henry Peacham, The Garden of Eloquence [London: 1577], F3r; George Puttenham, The Art of English Poesy, eds. Frank Whigham
eventually find his way from contradiction to tautology: “What you know, you know” (5.2.300). Like other early modern stage villains, Iago openly discusses his schemes with the audience and even other characters. Yet Iago retains a sense of mystery, as if something more remains untapped. I suggest that this effect is achieved in part through the enigmatic effects produced by tautology and its counterpart, contradiction.

In modern propositional logic, contradictions and tautologies share a common feature, one pertinent to Iago’s curiously prolix secrecy: neither contradictions nor tautologies communicate any new information about the world. “Tautologies and contradictions show that they say nothing”; they “are not pictures of reality,” Wittgenstein writes in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). The tautology “does not stand in any representational relation to reality” because of its ability to admit “all possible situations,” while the contradiction admits no possible situations (41). In other words, both tautologies and contradictions are in a sense independent of the world because their truth or falsity never depends on the world being a particular way; in Wittgenstein’s words, “A tautology has no truth-conditions, since it is unconditionally true: and a contradiction is true on no condition” (41). The contradiction and the tautology are thus grammatical forms through which one can attempt to remove oneself from the world and to detach oneself from one’s surroundings by speaking in a form that does not depend on any particular state of affairs. Iago effects his own detachment in part, I argue, by speaking in these closed and impermeable linguistic forms: contradiction and tautology. Yet, as Othello’s editors have endlessly glossed, Iago’s contradictory statement seems to mean something quite simple: he is not what he seems to be. But the fact


remains: Iago did not say “I am not what I seem,” but “I am not what I am.” During a performance, the effects of each line would differ; “seem” would make immediate sense and pose no difficulty to comprehension; “am” would be initially jarring, causing the flow of meaning to trip and playgoers’ comprehension to stumble, if only for a brief moment.

In this chapter I will focus on these sorts of moments in early modern English plays: when contradictions or tautologies obstruct, if only momentarily, playgoers’ comprehension of an actor’s speech. These momentary blips in comprehension are often produced by actors playing roles—clowns and villains—that are uniquely detached from, or in-between, the setting of the actual performance (a London afternoon, around 1600) and the imagined world of the play (ancient Illyria, Renaissance Venice, etc.). Through their direct audience address and their display of awareness of the scene of performance, early modern clowns and villains are partially detached from both their imagined worlds and from the other actors, most of whom are playing their roles largely “straight,” without address or reference to the setting of the performance. The clown’s and the villain’s stances of distance, detachment, and interruption mirror and are produced by these momentary “detachments” from the expected flow of meaning that contradictions and tautologies produce during performance. As forms of language whose meaning is both entirely on the surface and seemingly always receding, tautology and contradiction can create enigmatic moments in which playgoers know that they do not know something. Iago, for instance, poses an unanswerable question: if we know what we know and that he is not what he is, do we know everything or nothing? And how might we ever tell the difference?

These moments of hermeneutic recalcitrance were one method through which early modern plays produced a sense of character. Paradoxically, that sense of character was
achieved not by increasing the drama’s illusionistic features—whereby a play could be more and more understood as mimetic, as an imitation of the world and the kinds of people populating it—but instead by maintaining a tension between the actor’s relationship to the playgoers and the character’s relationship to the world represented in the play. Saying everything and nothing at once, the tautology, like the clown and the villain, is intimate, obvious, and open—yet also recalcitrant, withholding, and mysterious. Tautology thus does what clowns and villains do: it declines to engage with others, while seeming to do so; it offers its meaning on the surface, while suggesting that perhaps its meaning is hidden somewhere else; and it seems to provide everything at once, while providing nothing at all. Through tautology and contradiction, clowns and villains can make themselves, their designs, and their meaning enigmatic to early modern playgoers and to other characters within the plays.

I link clowns and villains here partially because in Iago the villain and the fool combine, as indicated in part by Iago’s repeated use of the terms “fool,” “foolish,” and “folly.” Similarly, in his inversion of the divine tautology, Iago resembles the vices of the moralities who traffic in “corruptions of the sense and sound of liturgical and biblical expressions.” And in his ability to “bleed” but “not [be] killed,” Iago further resembles the deathless vice (5.2.285). E.A.J. Honigmann notes that Iago seems to be based in part on the clever slave of Roman comedy, and his clown-like features have given rise to suggestions that Iago was played by Robert Armin. Iago further resembles the stage clown in his role as the recipient of playgoers’ violence and ill-feelings. As Richard Preiss has argued, the clown

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4 Iago uses "fool" eight times, "foolish" five times, and "folly" twice.
is not simply a descendant of the stage vice of the morality plays; the clown was also a
descendant of the “Jack-a-Lent,” an effigy who was paraded around towns near the end of
Lent, just before the death-and-resurrection rites of Easter. An “object of universal blame,”
the Jack-a-Lent received the anger and violence of the people, although he was always
resurrected and was thus unable to be killed permanently. Tracing the clown’s debt to the
Jack-a-Lent suggests that instead of simply being a marginal wit, the clown could be central
to a performance (if not always to a play), as well as the potential recipient of the assembled
playgoers rage, anger, and violence. *Tarltons Jests* tells of one performance in which one
playgoer threw two apples at Tarlton, one of which hit him in the face. (Both times Tarlton
responded with insulting verse, which surely prompted the second apple.) Like the Jack-a-
Lent, then, the clown could at times find that his “opponent was the audience at large—the
customer, tellingly, now become the rival—and he invited it to beat him.” The clown’s role
as a contesting, resistant figure toward playgoers can be difficult to discern in part because
our playtexts tend not to record the ways that the clown took on this role: in contest-like
“themes,” “merriments,” and jigs, all of which might appear before, after, or in the middle of
what we now think of as “the play.” Yet once we recognize that one of the clown’s roles
could be to receive and absorb the ill-will of the playgoers, we can see how Iago—who
clearly has this same function, among others—closely resembles a stage clown.

As both friend and enemy, the early modern stage clown occupies a mediating
position during early modern performances, one that was central to creating these mixed

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8 Ibid., 69.
9 *Tarltons Jests* (London: 1613), B2r.
effects of intimacy/detachment and openness/opacity. One of the clown’s functions during an early modern performance was to establish the authority of the players to perform what we now call “the play,” and he did so by cordoning off a literal and imaginary “space apart” for the players. Standing “on the threshold between the play and the community occasion,” the clown, as Robert Weimann writes, had a “dual perspective” and “Janus-like status”: his “position is not derived solely from within the framework of the play but also partly from without.” For Weimann, the clowns could speak from a “downstage” position, in the platea, the site of “audience-actor contact,” whereas characters speaking from the “upstage” locus, the site of mimesis, “could assume an illusionary character” and were less likely to engage directly with the audience (80,79). One of the clown’s functions during a performance was thus to separate the players and the world that the players represent from playgoers, while remaining himself between both groups. As perpetual travellers between domains, clowns are therefore fundamentally “strangers,” to use Preiss’ term (2). But clowns’ role as mediators extends beyond the playgoer-performer relationship; clowns also performed mediating roles in the represented worlds of the plays. They might deliver letters, as in Love’s Labour’s Lost, in which Costard is assigned to carry a letter from Armado to Jaquenetta; or they might be open to alliances with multiple groups of characters, like Simplicity in Three Ladies of London (1581), whose allegiances are neither wholly with the virtues or the vices. Ithamore in The Jew of Malta (1589) initially works for Barabas, but later blackmails him after Ithamore’s allegiances shift to Bellamira and Pilia-Borza. The

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12 Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of the Dramatic Form and Function, 43, 11, 45. Subsequent citations from Weimann are given in the text.
clown thus mediates on two different levels: between characters within the world of the play, and between the players and playgoers.

The dramatic dynamic that the clown and the villain create is further illuminated by their common predecessor: the vice. In earlier Tudor performances, the vice held a similarly mediating position: mediating “between fiction and reality, the drama and the social occasion,” the vice figures of earlier Tudor plays stood “between the fiction of the moral action and the audience’s festive expectations.”13 And like stage clowns, vices also could play mediating roles within the represented world of their plays. John Heywood’s interlude *The Play of the Weather* (1519-28), the first play in which the term “vice” is applied to a dramatic role, features as its vice “Mery Reporte,” who proclaims himself “indifferent” to the question under dispute.14 After identifying himself to Jupiter by tautologically proclaiming “I am I,” Mery Reporte then acts as a liaison between Jupiter and the eight suitors who approach his court. In Heywood’s *Play of Love* (1534), the vice’s in-between position is marked in his very name: Neither-Lover-Nor-Loved. Similarly, the vice Ambidexter in *Cambyses* (1561) works both for and against King Cambyses, and Ambidexter introduces himself as one open to working for and with all sorts: “To all kinde of estates I meane for to trudge.”15 The vice and the clown, in short, belong to nobody; however much they might observe or mediate the businesses of trade, marriage, politics, or friendship, they tend not to


  | Jupyter. | Why, what arte thou that approchyst so ny? |
  | Mery Reporte. | Forsothe and please your lordshyppe it is I. |
  | Jupyter. | All that we knowe very well, but what I? |
  | Mery Reporte. | What I? some saye I am I perse I |
  | But what maner I so euer be I |
  | I assure your good lordshyp I am I. |

get caught up in them, and ultimately have little at stake in these domains of human life.\textsuperscript{16} Just as the vice and later the clown are unaffiliated roles, so are tautologies and contradictions unaffiliated language. Because tautologies and contradictions are (respectively) always or never true, no matter what the state of affairs happens to be, neither tautology nor contradiction link up with the world of contingency and change. Tautologies and contradictions are independent: they depend on no particular state of affairs. Similarly, as a purveyor of only the “illusion of interactive discourse,” the clown adopts a stance of self-containment, self-enclosure, and incommunication toward the world around him.\textsuperscript{17} His tautological or contradictory language enables him to do so.

The first section of this chapter explores how tautologizing clowns create this distancing effect in two early modern Plautine comedies: the anonymous comic interlude \textit{Jack Juggler} (1562) and Thomas Heywood’s \textit{The Silver Age} (ca. 1610-11). Both plays feature a servant who finds himself a victim of identity theft. Beaten, confused, and finally sent away by the stealer of their identities, these servants occupy the role of the stage clown—the hapless fool who receives a beating—and each clown’s sputterings include contradictions and tautologies. Although each attempts to reassert his identity through tautology, both attempts will fail. In this Plautine tradition, the weak can merely assert, but not secure, their identities through tautology.

This self-enclosed language of tautology will morph into more complex assertions of self-ownership and self-dependence in other early modern plays, especially in Shakespeare’s

\textsuperscript{16} There are obviously exceptions; Bottom, for example, is a weaver, and is presumably engaged in trade. But Bottom’s possession of a specific trade, it seems to me, reduces his distance from the represented action, and renders him less of an outside, or mediating perspective on the action.

\textsuperscript{17} Preiss, \textit{Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre}, 199.
There the clown Feste’s use of tautology and contradiction achieves a similar effect as his nonsense language. Feste uses tautology, contradiction, and nonsense as he does (proclaiming, among other things, that “That that is, is,” while in disguise as “Sir Topas”) to eschew any social identity, establishing himself as a pure cipher, mediator, and catalyst within both the moment of performance and within the represented world of Illyria. While stage clowns have been credited with acting as physicians, prince’s counselors, and the voice of “realism and good sense,” I argue that some stage clowns are better understood as those who refuse participation in what David Schalkwyk terms a “world of fragile dependence and reciprocity”—and that they effect and signify that lack of engagement by means of tautology.19

The chapter’s conclusion addresses the curious paradox whereby these figures most associated with creating “audience intimacy” on the early modern stage—clowns and villains—are also the most detached from playgoers. This condition arises in part because of the peculiar situation of the early modern theater, in which a nascent art form’s struggles to establish its authority to perform entailed that any player-playgoer interaction was always tinged with an adversarial quality. The players could employ different strategies to establish this authority, and this chapter outlines one of those means: the use of tautology and contradiction to impede the flow of communication.

II.

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18 On the date, see Keir Elam, ed., Twelfth Night, by William Shakespeare (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2008), 93-96. Subsequent citations are given in the text.
Two Plautus adaptations in the early modern theater—the anonymous *Jack Juggler*, and Heywood’s *The Silver Age*—illustrate the association between tautology, contradiction and the clown. In this Plautine tradition, the only resistance that the clown can offer to identity theft is tautology: to claim that he is himself. Through tautology and contradiction, these clowns become disengaged—against their wills—from the world of the play. In Plautus’ comedy *Amphitryon*, the template for these two plays, the Theban general Amphitryon returns home to his wife Alcmena, who is (unbeknownst to her) having an affair with Jupiter, who is disguised as Amphitryon. When the real Amphitryon sends his servant Socia ahead with a letter for Alcmena announcing his imminent arrival, Jupiter’s “servant” Mercury disguises himself as Socia and prevents him from entering the house by exerting brute force and by claiming that he (Mercury) is himself Socia. In Plautus, the knockabout comedy culminates in Socia’s ridiculous questionings and assertions of his identity: Socia can finally only lamely declare, “I’m certainly the same I’ve always been.”  

*Jack Juggler* stages a similar case of early modern identity theft, in which the vice, Jack Juggler, impersonates and baffles a servant, Jenkin Careaway, by wearing his same clothing. Though Jack Juggler lacks the godlike powers of Mercury—and Jenkin Careaway, unlike Socia, has been carousing all afternoon—the situations of the two plays are the same. As in *Amphitryon*, the servant Jenkin tries to enter his master’s house to deliver a message, but Jack Juggler claims that he, Jack, is in fact Jenkin and that Jenkin therefore has no right to enter. A scene of comic scuffling ensues, but the hapless Jenkin, confused by the situation, can only try to claim his identity through a tautology: “And yet woll I stiell saye that I am

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While Plautus’ Socia is certainly baffled by the situation, his language is far less outlandish than Jenkin’s absurdly tautological language. Socia affirms his continuous identity in time using straightforward and unexceptional language: “I’m certainly the same I’ve always been” (equidem certo idem sum qui semper fui). In contrast, Jenkin’s language emphasizes the preposterousness of the situation, falling not only into tautology, but also contradiction. Looking at Jack dressed as himself, Jenkin finds himself forced to admit that “Who soo in England lokethe on him stedelye / Sall perceiue plainlye that he is I”; in comically tangled language, Jenkin also “marvayll[s] greatlye” that “he I escaped, I me beat thus” (570-71,917,918). Jenkin further emphasizes the absurdity of the situation by referring to Jack as “that other I” (949). During performance, these contradictions and tautology could create a different, more jarring, effect than Plautus’ more smoothly comprehensible idem sum qui semper fui. Whoever the author of Jack Juggler actually was, he went out of his way to have Jenkin speak in these forms that disrupt the normal logic of language. Furthermore, Jenkin’s language is unpersuasive to everyone, especially his master, Boungrace, because—as Wittgenstein points out—contradictions and tautologies do not link up with the world in any meaningful way. No matter what particular state of affairs obtains in the world, a contradiction will always be false, while a tautology will always be true. These are irredeemably asocial forms of language, bespeaking and enforcing a character’s isolation from their world.

Jenkin’s tautology takes on an additional charge in a Christian context, as his affirmation of identity echoes God’s name in Exodus 3:14—“I AM THAT I AM”—which


22 For a brief summary of the authorship debate, see Tracy Sedinger, “‘And yet woll I stiell saye that I am I’: Jake Juggler, the Lord’s Supper, and Disguise,” English Literary History 74.1 (Spring 2007), 240.
the Geneva Bible glosses as referring to the God’s unchangeability: “The God who haue euer bene, am, & shal be.” As is clear from the case of Iago’s parodic “I am not what I am,” the divine tautology lends considerable freight to tautological formulations of this sort in the early modern period. But Jenkin’s tautology, unlike God’s, is in the end an empty, impotent affirmation: Jack holds his ground, and Jenkin eventually has to depart. Jack Juggler’s play of switched identities and clothed disguises has been read as mocking the supposedly “juggling” Catholics’ doctrine of transubstantiation, which was said to entail belief, as one character disbelievingly says to Jenkin, “That man may have too bodies and too faces… / And that one man at one time may be in two placys” (786-87). Jenkin tries to claim that his clothing defines him: that he “may be be in two placys” at once because two people are wearing his clothes simultaneously. But his failure to persuade anyone renders him a hapless servant, one who can neither claim his own identity for himself nor disavow the actions that Jack Juggler had performed in Jenkin’s name.

Act two of Heywood’s The Silver Age, one of a series of Heywood plays written for the public theater staging stories from classical mythology, takes up the plot of Amphitryon but follows Plautus more closely than Jack Juggler. As in Jack Juggler, one character asserts to another that he is in fact someone else. Yet The Silver Age further demonstrates both the link between contradiction and tautology and how a character’s connection to the social world can be keyed to these grammatical formulations. The more a character speaks in contradiction and tautology, the less engaged the character is with his social world. The play features a confrontation between Ganimede, Jupiter’s page, and Socia, Amphitrio’s page. When Socia arrives with the letter for Amphitrio’s wife Alcmena, Ganimede prevents Socia

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23 The Bible and Holy Scriptvres conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament (Geneva:1560), G1r.
24 Sedinger, “‘And yet woll I stiell saye that I am I’: Jake Juggler, the Lord’s Supper, and Disguise,” 240.
from entering by claiming that he (Ganimede) is himself Socia. After Ganimede beats him, Socia is willing to tell him anything he wants: that Socia serves “the time,” that his name is “Nothing,” that his “businesse” is “To bee beaten,” and that Ganimede is “What you will.”25 After Ganymede finally clinches that he is truly Socia, Socia comically laments his loss of identity:

   I am gone, I am gone, somebody for charity sake either lend mee or giue me a name, for this I haue lost by the way…as he hath got my name, hee hath got my shape, countenance, stature, and euerything so right, that he can bee no other then I my owne selfe. (D2v)

Socia’s lament culminates in a contradiction—“he can be no other than I my owne selfe”—that forces him to reconsider his first conclusion: “but when I thinke that I am I, the same I euer was, know my Maister, his house, haue sence, feeling, and vnderstanding, know my message, my businesse, why should I not in to deliuer my letter to my Lady” (D2v). This absurd scene, filled with slapstick and stage business, should surely not be pressed on too earnestly to yield philosophical insights. Nevertheless, Socia’s “turn” from believing that another is himself to believing that he is himself is notably marked by the movement from contradiction to tautology. “[H]e can be no other than I my owne selfe” has become “I am I.” From this tautological affirmation, Socia moves outward into affirmations of his social roles (his relation to his “Maister,” his “house,” and his “businesse”) as well as his baseline human faculties (“sence, feeling, and vnderstanding”) to reaffirm that he is the one to perform the task set to him: “to deliuer my letter.” Of course, Socia fails to perform his task; physically blocking the gate, Ganymede sends Socia on his way, and Socia returns to contradiction: “Farewell selfe,” he says while departing (D2v). Socia’s account to his master of what

25 Thomas Heywood, *The Silver Age* (London: 1612), D1r. Subsequent citations are given in the text.
happened similarly abounds in comically contradictory formulations that trip up the normal flow of sense:

I am at home; do you heare? I am heare: do you see? I spake with my Lady at home; yet could not come in at the gate to see her: I deliuered her your letter, and yet haue it still in my hand. Is not this plaine…I stood there to keepe the gate a great while before I came at it. (D3v, D4r)

As utterances entirely self-enclosed and disengaged with actual states of affairs in the world, Socia’s contradictions simply anger and confuse Amphitrio. But the frisson of such language for playgoers is produced by its ability to mean nothing and something at the same time: for it to sound like sensible nonsense.

The mixture of qualities finds perhaps its most striking embodiment in one of the more tonally inconsistent characters in Shakespeare: the Bastard Philip Falconbridge in *King John*. The Bastard most clearly and confusingly combines the features of the stage villain and the stage clown, rendering him a seemingly uneven character in an uneven play, a character who refuses to hold still. As a character whom critics have viewed as both Shakespeare’s own mouthpiece and an ironic undercutter of patriotic pieties, the Bastard has baffled those seeking to discern consistency of character.26 On the one hand, he acts much like a clown: he is referred to as a “A good blunt fellow” and “a madcap” (1.1.71,84). On the other hand, the Bastard is from the beginning actively engaged in changing his position within the social

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26 Samuel Johnson, for example, noted the Bastard’s “mixture of greatness and levity,” and Eugene M. Waith his “unexpectedly total commitment to the cause of his country” in the final scenes. David Womersley notes the play’s “interrupted texture” and the fact that “in the second half of *King John* [the Bastard’s] Vice-like characteristics are muted,” while John Watkins describes the Bastard’s shift from “a vice figure” at the play’s beginning to the “quintessential English patriot” by the end (Samuel Johnson, ed., *The plays of William Shakespeare*, vol. 3, by William Shakespeare [London: 1765], 503; Eugene M. Waith, “*King John* and the Drama of History” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 29.2 [Spring 1978], 211; David Womersley, “The Politics of Shakespeare’s *King John*,” *The Review of English Studies* XL.160 [1989], 500, 505; John Watkins, “Losing France and Becoming England,” in *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, eds. Curtis Perry and John Watkins [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 82).
world, first attempting to assert his lineage as a Falconbridge and then seeking his fortune by affiliating with the Plantagenets. Yet like a stage villain, the Bastard uses tautology to reveal and affirm his independence from family obligations. Just after giving up his claim to be a Falconbridge and being knighted as Sir Richard Plantagenet, illegitimate son of Richard Coeur de Leon, he asserts his importance to his [Plantagenet] grandmother, Queen Eleanor. He affirms that he is Eleanor’s grandchild, possessing what Eleanor calls “the very spirit of Plantagenet,” but in an off-kilter way.27 He has the Plantagenet spirit, though

Something about, a little from the right,

In at the window, or else o’er the hatch:

Who dares not stir by day must walk by night,

And have is have, however men do catch.

Near or far off, well won is still well shot,

And I am I, howe’er I was begot. (1.1.170-75)

The proverbial, jingling, rhyming lines of the Bastard give him an archaic air, as if he is a vice figure from an earlier play like Mankind. Like the vices of the moralities, the Bastard is in one sense unaffiliated, and he disclaims the importance of how he “was begot”; all that matters, he says, is that “I am I.” The Bastard affirms his brute selfness in an attempt to circumvent the ways that custom excludes bastards from entering meaningfully into the political world: he does so, in short, to demonstrate that he will depend on nobody but himself.

As a performative, the phrase “I am I” tells playgoers nothing at all, leaving the question of the Bastard’s paternity (for the moment) blank, mysterious, and unsolvable. And indeed, at this point in the performance, familial relations seem largely to be matters of

personal choice; the Bastard makes himself a Plantagenet through his own decision to give up his claim as a Falconbridge and accepting Eleanor’s offer to make him a Plantagenet, not through learning the truth of his paternity. Yet the Bastard’s movements toward villainous self-definition are soon halted and trail off as the play continues. Later in the first scene, his mother affirms that “King Richard Coeur-de-lion was thy father,” lessening the potentially unnerving arbitrariness of the Bastard’s decision to claim a lineage as a Plantagenet (1.1.253). The Bastard remains somewhat inside and outside the world of the play, often addressing the audience directly at the end of scenes, but trailing and assisting King John throughout. As an assistant, however, the Bastard turns out to be more a clown-like mediator than villainous social climber. He mediates between King John and the English monasteries when he is sent to collect money, and between the innocent Hubert and the nobles when they accuse Hubert of murdering Prince Arthur. Like Richard III, who similarly claims “I am myself alone,” the Bastard’s claim of self-definition turns out to be a delusion; but the Bastard’s claim is shown to be unsustainable not through a grand tragic fall, but through the more mundane playing out of the activities of a mid-level royal retainer.²⁸ It is that position of quotidian mediator—a position similarly marked by tautology—that will be taken up by the clown Feste in *Twelfth Night*.

III.

Although *Twelfth Night*’s clown is named Feste, in the play itself his role as “clown” and “fool” receives much more emphasis than his proper name. The playtext’s stage directions and speech prefixes refer to him exclusively as “Clo(wne),” and the other

characters call him “fool” throughout (he is referred to as “Feste” only once, at 2.4.11).

Accordingly, Feste is best understood less as a particular character with his own backstory and hidden motivations and more as a locus of indefinition in the play. Feste, hardly possessed of a proper name, is also the one who seems most psychologically inscrutable, least socially located, and, accordingly, most liable to be found speaking in enigmatic language—including tautology.29

_Twelfth Night_ as critics have noted, is sodden with other low-level enigmas that can easily escape notice. For example, Viola says that she will present herself as a “eunuch” to Orsino’s court, but later (in her persona as Cesario) she speaks of her love for another woman (1.2.53). Maria says that Feste—“the fool”—will “make a third” in the group of those looking on while Malvolio opens his letter, but when the scene comes, it is Fabian, not Feste, who appears (2.3.168-69). And what, really, does “M.O.A.I.” mean? “M.O.A.I. doth sway my life,” Malvolio reads from the forged letter sent by “Olivia” to him (2.5.109). As I discussed in the Introduction, critics have worked tirelessly to solve this unsolvable conundrum: a fact that should put us on guard as we approach the similarly enigmatic language of Feste.

Critics have repeatedly looked to Feste as a key to understanding _Twelfth Night_ as a whole.30 Elizabeth Freund argues that Feste’s “verbal conduct…exhibits an exuberant

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29 Tautology and contradiction, of course, appear elsewhere in the play. Sir Andrew Aguecheek tautologically concludes that “to be up late is to be up late” (2.3.4-5); and Orsino is baffled into contradiction when confronted with the visual tautology of Viola and her brother Sebastian: “One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not” (5.1.213).

30 Keir Elam calls Feste “the best guide we have to the play’s underlying themes” (Introduction to William Shakespeare, _Twelfth Night, or What you Will_, 11). Similarly, Cynthia Lewis suggests that “[m]any readings of the play…hinge on how Feste is understood” in part because “[h]is manipulations…raise questions of tone that radiate throughout the entire play” (“Whodunit? Plot, Plotting, and Detection in _Twelfth Night_,” in _Twelfth Night: New Critical Essays_, ed. James Schiffer [New York: Routledge, 2011], 267-68). For Robert Hillis Goldsmith, Feste “functions near the center of the play’s meaning,” and for Hermann Ulrici, in Feste “the meaning of the entire poem is as it were concentrated” (_Goldsmith, Wise Fools in Shakespeare_, 104; Hermann
awareness of the topsy-turveyness of language,” allowing him to “claim total release…from the tyranny of meaning” in a play whose “ur-plot” is a “narcissistic passion for rhetoricity.”

Though Freund perhaps overstates her point, she is undoubtedly correct that Feste’s language continually disrupts the flow of conversation, meaning, and understanding. As a purveyor of “[m]isprision in the highest degree” claiming not to be Olivia’s “fool, but her corrupter of words,” Feste repeatedly offers speech that is corrupt, or (to use a term from linguistics) “anomalous” (1.5.51, 3.1.34-35). An “anomalous” expression is semantically ill-formed; while each word may have a referent, the phrase as a whole lacks sense: “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously” is a classic example. Some of Feste’s opaque language is anomalous, lending it (much like “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously”) a vaguely profound and proverbial air: “Malvolio’s nose is no whipstock, my lady has a white hand and the Myrmidons are no bottle-ale houses,” Feste tells Sir Toby and Sir Andrew (2.3.25-27).

Similarly, in his role as Sir Topas the curate, Feste amplifies his use of fabricated, aphoristic authorities by also employing tautology:

Byons dies, Sir Toby. For as the old hermit of Prague, that never saw pen and ink, very wittily said to a niece of King Gorboduc, “That that is is”; so I being Master Parson am Master Parson, for what is “that” but “that,” and “is” but “is”? (4.2.12-16)

As “Sir Topas,” Feste has come to exorcise Malvolio of the demon that possesses him. Yet while in the person of a curate, Feste moves from his more standard anomalous riddle-like


31 “Twelfth Night and the Tyranny of Interpretation,” ELH 53.3 (October 1, 1986), 479, 480, 482.
snatches to what John Kerrigan terms “ontological riddling” and “enigmatic quibbling.”

Like the two Plautine clowns discussed above, Feste appeals to tautology to certify his own identity, although the appeal here is of course ironic: the logic of tautology may be ironclad, but Feste is most certainly not “Master Parson.” Adage, aphorism, and syllogism surround Feste’s tautology; tautology thus contributes to the speech’s fustian air. Feste’s lines here are muddled: he moves from arcane-sounding references (“hermit of Prague,” “King Gorboduc”) to a statement that sounds gnomically aphoristic (“That that is is”). He concludes with an application of the “aphorism” to himself in language that is difficult to parse. Unlike the Folio text and unlike early modern performances, modern editions of the play usually add quotation marks for ease of comprehension. The logic of the application presumably runs as follows: just as the word “that” is identical to the word “that,” and the word “is” is identical to the word “is,” it therefore follows that “Master Parson” is identical to himself: “Master Parson.” As should be clear from my belaboring of this passage, Feste sounds like he is saying something interesting, drawing on ancient lore, proverbs, and scholastic logic, as would befit a real-live curate touched with a case of pedantry. But because Feste’s tautology can never be anything but true, it tells us nothing we didn’t already know. As Freund writes of this passage, “There is nothing as unrevealing as tautology…and yet the emptiness of tautology is the completest, most accurate form of identification.”

Feste’s trick here, however, is to make tautology an inaccurate “form of identification”: he is not, in the end, actually Master Parson. Feste’s language thus invites playgoers to travel through a laborious maze, following him to a remote place (Prague) and time (Gorboduc) through a labored mode of scholastic argumentation, all to end up exactly where they started. As Ernest Gilman

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34 “Twelfth Night and the Tyranny of Interpretation,” 479.
writes, “‘A nose is a nose’ says everything and nothing about a nose.” Feste’s tautology, in short, works like much of the rest of his language in the play: it includes everything and says nothing.

The “Sir Topas” moment is emblematic of how Feste works throughout the play, as both a character in the world of Illyria and as a stage clown managing the scene of performance in an early modern playhouse. As the proclaimer of “Nothing that is so is so,” Feste traffics in Lewis Carroll-style nonsense throughout (4.1.8). In addition to the “hermit of Prague,” Feste cites other learned-sounding “facts” derived from non-existent sources in a bout of what one critic terms “sham sententiousness.” At one point Feste is praised by Sir Andrew Aguecheek for his recent tale “of Pigrogromitus, of the Vapians passing the equinoctial of Queubus” (2.3.22-23). He cites another false authority when speaking to Olivia’s household: “For what says Quinapalus? ‘Better a witty fool than a foolish wit’” (1.5.33-34). (Quinapalus is right, of course, even if there is no Quinapalus). At these moments Feste is speaking nonsense, a mode which “plays on a contradiction between form and content,” in which the form suggests treatment of “high matters” but the content is “perversely inconsequential.” Like tautology, nonsense offers “the form of meaning while denying us the substance,” leaving behind what Lear’s Fool elsewhere terms a “shelled peascod.” Feste’s nonsense is furthermore unoriginal. At the Middle Temple revels of 1597-1598, John Hoskyns’ “fustian answer” includes several Feste-sounding lines:

38 Ibid., 14; *King Lear*, 1.4.178.
I am therefore driven to say to you, as Heliogabalus said to his dear and honourable servant Reniger Fogassa, If thou dost ill (quoth he) then much good do thee; if well, then snuffe the candle…For what said Silas Titus, the Sopemaker of Holborn-bridge?…Therefore wisely said the merry-conceited Poet Heraclitus, Honourable misfortunes shall have ever an Historical compensation.\(^{39}\)

After reading Hoskyns, Feste can be seen to be deploying standard tropes of nonsense: “Heliogabalus” speaking to “Reniger Fogasssa” becomes “the old hermit of Prague” speaking to “a niece of King Gorboduc”; “what said Silas Titus?” becomes “what says Quinapalus?”; and the maxim “Honourable misfortunes shall have ever an Historical compensation” becomes “Better a witty fool than a foolish wit.” This kind of nonsense, as Wim Tigges writes, simultaneously “invite[s] the reader to interpretation and avoid[s] the suggestion that there is a deeper meaning”; in nonsense, “a meaning is suggested and simultaneously taken away.”\(^{40}\)

Tautology produces a similar effect as nonsense: both give the impression of hidden depth, even if in the end they say nothing at all.\(^{41}\) Yet to disregard tautologies on account of their being “mere nonsense” would be overly scrupulous and assume that language is best understood under the microscope of formal logic. If, instead, we were to follow Wittgenstein and “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,” then we might ask what tautology and other forms of nonsense (including Feste’s red herring references) do as

\(^{39}\) Le prince d'amour; or the prince of love. With a collection of several ingenious poems and songs by the wits of the age (London: 1660), 38-39.


\(^{41}\) Admittedly, Wittgenstein argues that although tautologies “lack sense,” they “are not, however, nonsensical,” because they “are part of the symbolism, much as '0' is part of the symbolism of arithmetic” (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 41). However, for the purposes of this chapter, which explores questions in literary criticism rather than the philosophy of language, this distinction between lacking sense and being nonsensical is moot.
opposed to what they mean. In other words, these forms of language are best understood not as descriptive propositions about how things are in the world—as if they only lack good solid editorial gloss before they can made sense of and dispatched—but as performatives: language that does something. Viewing tautologies as performatives allows us to ask what tautologies and other forms of nonsense can do, without assuming that all tautologies do the same thing. As Adam Zucker argues, we can understand what certain words and phrases do, even when we don’t know what they mean. The mere “sound of ‘Quinapalus,’” he writes, “does more work—both within the imagined world of the play and for the audiences who encounter it—than its infinitely receding literal meaning ever could.” Even though finding out exactly who “Quinapalus” was is extremely difficult, even impossible, its effect—to sound like a learned reference to an author buried deep in the pages of Erasmus’ *Adages*—is not at all difficult to comprehend.

Despite the heroic efforts of editors and scholars, then, nobody really knows what Feste is talking about in *Twelfth Night*. Some critics have offered rousing calls to battle:

43 Strictly speaking, tautologies and contradictions cannot be true performatives because they “rest…on no clear-cut conventional form such as promising, warning, crowning or declaring war.” Schalkwyk terms language like this “quasi-performatives,” which lack that “conventional form” but, like illocutionary performatives, still do not abandon the “utterance[s] to a merely rhetorical or perlocutionary force (Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Plays*, 37).
Leslie Hotson intones that “Our failure to find the meaning here is no excuse for continuing to sidle past…The only respectable course left us is to launch one more assault, for what it is worth, on this chateau galliard, this feste Burg of Feste.” Yet it seems far more wise at this point to refrain from further speculation. Even if, as Horace Furness writes, “a curiosity, almost invincible, possesses us all to know something more of these Vapians,” that way madness lies, leading to readings that (for instance) parse “Quinapalus” as an anagram for “PAUL and [Thomas A]QUINAS,” or “Pigrogromitus” as referring to “Pont. Grigorius” (Pope Gregory XIII), or to Furness’ own suggestion that “in the distorted ‘Pigrogromitus’ I think we may possibly find Sir Andrew’s version of the Tetragrammaton.”

Instead, I propose to ask what effect these puzzling words and phrases could have had in performance. Feste sounds like he is citing authoritative, up-to-date, hot off the press travel guides to the wonders of the world when he mentions “Pigrogromitus,” “Vapians,” or “Queubus.” These moments of uninterpretability—including tautological language, tangled pedantry, and references that are only red herrings—should be understood as challenges to at least some portion of playgoers. It is significant that they come from the mouth of a playing company’s chief champion: the clown. They resemble Tarlton’s “themes” that he would trade with playgoers, in which the goal was to stump the opponent, and in which Tarlton at times positions himself as the playgoers’ antagonist. For Feste, as I suggested above, is best approached as a role, not a character: like all clowns’ lines, his are spoken with an eye

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48 See, for example, Tarltons Jests (London, 1613), B2r, B3r.
toward both the represented characters in the world of the play and toward the playgoers. As Weimann writes of Tarlton, the clown “performed not so much for an audience as with a community of spectators who provided him with inspiration and, as it were, acted as a chorus….The audience was both the challenger and the challenged” (213). Clowns challenged audiences in part by refusing to make themselves understood: a clown like Tarlton, as Preiss writes, offered a “performed self so hermetically sealed it both defied and demanded probing.”

Similarly “def[y]ing and demand[ing] probing,” Feste’s moments of linguistic difficulty are best understood as challenges to playgoers, as parries of playgoers’ own hostilities and challenges. Clowns, including Feste, could thus act as recalcitrant figures whose orientation toward playgoers could be tinged with antagonism.

The clown can thereby create a specific kind of mixed effect in performance. Through tautology, contradiction, and nonsense, the clown can communicate without communicating, posing a “paradox of stupidity and intelligence, of mimetic flatness and hidden depth.”

Tautology, contradiction, and nonsense are “flat” statements inasmuch as they communicate no new information about the world; on the other hand, their very flatness—their seeming patency and openness—can also create an impression of depth. Robert Armin, the fool who likely played Feste in early performances, described himself as a trafficker in enigmas: someone whose role was, as he wrote, to be “bold to busie your braine with any darke Enigma.” As Preiss writes, for Armin, “the fool is a solipsism, an absence, his ‘dark

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49 Preiss, Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre, 77.
50 Ibid., 76.
51 This effect can be especially clearly seen in John Ford’s Perkin Warbeck, in the foolish John A-Water’s canny tautologies spoken to Henry VI: “kings must be kings and subjects subjects; but which is which, you shall pardon me for that.” In this case, tautology allows a character to speak nonsense and to avoid committing to speaking anything all, but—through implication and indirection—the character also calls into question the self-evidence of Henry VI’s claim to the throne. John Ford, Perkin Warbeck, in The Works of John Ford, vol. II, ed. Alexander Dyce (London: James Toovey, 1869), 206.
52 Robert Armin, Foole upon Foole, or Six sortes of Sottes (London: 1600), F4r.
enigma’ consisting in the illusion of interactive discourse.” 53 Fools can offer the form of communication, or delivery of information or consideration of one’s hearers, without actually doing so.

Feste thus offers a particular kind of experience to playgoers: temporary access to a world outside of the conventional circuits of interpretation, language, and meaning. Feste’s language engages the interpretive function of the human mind, but by refusing to lead playgoers into a settled understanding, it also allows playgoers to turn off their interpretive faculties. Of course, as E.H. Gombrich writes of the duck-rabbit image, “to see the shape apart from its interpretation…is not really possible.” 54 Yet the duck-rabbit image makes one aware of that inaccessible land beyond, a place where, as Heidegger describes it, one might “grasp something free…of the ‘as.’”: to see a thing not as any particular thing at all. 55 For Heidegger, this activity can occur only after one has first grasped something “as” something: after one has, in Heidegger’s terms, “understood” it. Similarly, Feste’s language first asks playgoers to “understand” it and grasp it “as” something; in other words, playgoers are first invited to take Feste’s language as somehow referential, as being about something. But these moments that I am highlighting here—in which language turns out to be about nothing at all—allow playgoers to secede from seeing things “as” particular things, to (in Heidegger’s words) “merely stare” at language, and to avoid (temporarily) engaging in what he calls “the structure of interpretation.” 56

53 Preiss, Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre, 199.
56 Ibid., 190.
For Heidegger, this “grasping which is free of the ‘as’” is related to his desire to move from the ontological (how we talk about Being) to the ontic (Being itself); Paul Fry describes this movement as driven by the desire “to escape interpretation into being.” I am not claiming that Shakespeare and early modern playwrights were Heideggerians before their time. However, Heidegger’s notion of seeing “free of the ‘as,’” where it feels like one might potentially see things-in-themselves, does help to explain the intuitions of earlier critics about the dislocating effects of stage clowns. In this long critical tradition, clowns have the ability to position playgoers in a different kind of space by seeming to tap into a different kind of wisdom, in which the fool (as various critics have written), “touched by divinity,” “may be truly wise in the sight of God,” “raised high above this earthly existence” while “recreat[ing] a visionary world.” What has not been recognized is the way that this effect can be created by particular kinds of language—tautology and contradiction—that first invite but then block playgoers’ attempts at interpretation, leading playgoers into a mixed state of unknowing comprehension, what Heidegger calls “just-having-it-before-us.”

In addition to his disengaged language, Feste himself, as with stage clowns in general in early modern drama, is “free of the ‘as’” in the sense that he belongs to nobody and nobody belongs to him. Although Weimann describes Shakespeare’s fools as “firmly integrated into the action as a whole,” even pointing to Feste’s role as “Olivia’s court fool” as evidence, Feste is in fact decidedly dislocated and marginal (192). His employment at Olivia’s court, for example, turns out to be less than secure. In Feste’s first appearance

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57 Paul Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (Yale University Press, 2008), 202. Fry is at this point triangulating Wordsworth and Heidegger.
onstage, Maria, Olivia’s maid, harangues Feste “for being so long absent,” and Feste, for no apparent reason, resolutely refuses to reveal “where [he] hast been” (1.5.15,1). (In the end, we never find out where he has been: another unsolved enigma of Twelfth Night.) He seems to wander from house to house and in between. We learn in 2.4 that Feste had played music in Orsino’s house the night before, that he is currently “about [Orsino’s] house,” and that although “Olivia’s father took much delight in” Feste, at the moment Olivia (according to Feste) “will keep no fool…till she be married” (2.4.12-13; 2.4.12; 3.1.32). Feste later quibblingly tells Viola that he “live[s] by the church; For, I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the church,” suggesting that he lives somewhere other than at Olivia’s (4.1.6; 3.1.6-7). And in the same conversation, Viola reminds the audience of Feste’s movements by mentioning that she saw him “late at the Count Orsino’s” (3.1.36). Feste’s lack of clear affiliation, however, does not mean that he does not depend on others; his odd placelessness is precisely what requires him to beg or receive money from Sir Toby (2.3.30), Sir Andrew (twice) (2.3.24,32), Orsino (2.4.67), Viola (twice) (3.1.42,52), and Sebastian (4.1.18-19). Viola, in fact, remarks on this dependence, the way that he “must observe their mood on whom he jests” (3.1.60). Strangely, then, in a play that has received so much attention for what Kerrigan calls the “ambiguities of service” (especially in the cases of Malvolio and Viola), Feste tends to not be considered by critics as one engaged in “service.” Clearly, Feste is a kind of servant, but one who, unlike Malvolio and Viola, refuses to engage in the social climbing that service could entail. Disengaged from all of these affairs, Feste seems in fact to have no social position at all, as if he were somehow outside of the domain of competition and rank that the others inhabit.

Feste is detached from the world around him, just as his tautologies are detached from the conditions of truth and his nonsense is detached from the obligations of reference. Feste seems to comment on, but not engage with, the world around him, just like tautology does. As Robert Bell writes, Feste is a “finally unknowable” figure of “chilling detachment” who “repeatedly and ultimately positions himself outside the community.” Feste’s nonsense authorities, invented astrological facts, and tautological affirmations give his language the structure of meaning, even when his words lack reference or sense. Only marginal figures in the drama, however, can speak this way. Only clowns, disengaged from the plots centering on marriage, family, and politics, have the license to be enigmatic in a wholly unfathomable way.

This obscurity is felt less by Feste’s first constituency—the wellborn but cantankerous Illyrian aristocracy—and more by his second: the paying audience. I have been arguing that the fool was a figure who could challenge playgoers and present himself at times as their opponent: someone who resists being simply the playgoers’ paid servant. Feste’s modes of linguistic concealment (tautology, contradiction, and nonsense) enable him to decline to interact with the playgoers. In this regard, clowns can do what protagonists cannot. Other early modern characters say things that people do not understand: Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, for example, proclaims to his enemies, “never shalt thou force me to reveal / The thing which I have vow’d inviolate,” and Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale* asks (or declares?) “May’t be / Affection? Thy intention stabs the centre.” But however much critics and editors disagree over what these lines mean because of their obscure reference, this sort of language depends for its effect on the audience’s assumption that there is an actual

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61 Bell, *Shakespeare’s Great Stage of Fools*, 27, 75, 27.
referent: that Hieronimo really does have a secret that he will not “reueale,” and that there is some inchoate but real feeling that Leontes struggles to express. In contrast, Feste’s language works differently: neither stating that something is unstated (like Hieronimo’s) nor obscuring its meaning through knotty syntax (like Leontes’), Feste’s nonsensical language cheerfully wears its nonsensicalness on its surface. This language does not engage with the world around him; it lacks, as Wittgenstein says of tautologies, any “representational relation to reality.” It is Feste’s undefined social position that allows him to avoid engagement with his world, and this lack of engagement marks him as someone lacking definite social position, as if he were somehow only tenuously connected to the represented world of the play.

As the characters described earlier in this chapter indicate, Feste is not the only character in early modern plays who uses tautology to mark and effect his disengagement from others. But he is a particularly interesting instance of a character who is generated in part by modes of language that inhibit understanding. Understanding entails communion and affiliation, which are intrinsic features of social life and of many dramatic performances. In the cases of these characters, however, blocking playgoers’ understanding turns out to generate a different kind of theatrical pleasure, one grounded in an experience of the enigmatic.

63 Two editors, Philip Edwards and Andrew Cairncross, have suggested that the text is corrupt, but Katharine Eisaman Maus suggests that “perhaps Kyd is merely dramatizing a hopeless inability to grasp Hieronimo’s theatrical point.” Similarly, Stephen Orgel surveys editors’ attempts to render Leontes’ lines comprehensible but he himself suggests that perhaps the lines’ incomprehensibility was exactly the point (Philip Edwards, ed., The Spanish Tragedy, by Thomas Kyd [London: Methuen, 1959], xxxvi; Andrew Cairncross, ed. The First Part of Hieronimo and The Spanish Tragedy, by Thomas Kyd [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967]; Katharine Eisaman Maus, Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995], 70; Stephen Orgel, “The Poetics of Incomprehensibility,” Shakespeare Quarterly 42.4 [Winter 1991]: 433-34.
IV.

I have argued that tautology and contradiction, linguistic features distinctive to early modern clowns and villains, create enigmatic effects during early modern performances. As means that characters use to refuse meaningful engagement with other characters and playgoers, these linguistic modes thus signify and effect two kinds of detachment for clowns and villains: detachment from their social worlds represented within the plays, and detachment from the players and playgoers, positioning them in a mediating position between both groups.

While some contradictions involve repetition (“Nothing that is so is so”; “I am not what I am”), all tautologies are by definition repetitive: “What you know, you know”; “that that is is”; “I am I.” In the case of a more recent tautology—Gertrude Stein’s “Rose is a rose is a rose”—repetition leaches the word “rose” of meaning, shifting readers’ or hearers’ attention away from the meaning of the words and toward their sound, their appearance, and their rhythm.64 As the line continues, our sense of what “a rose is” slowly recedes. C. Namwali Serpell writes that similar receding of a “sense of reality” can occur in cases of narrative repetition: “[r]epetition, taken to an extreme, can actually trouble our sense of reality. In this sense, repetition works against itself, undoes itself as it intensifies…Uncertainty grows as repetition disturbs the originality, integrity, and continuity of objects, persons, and events.”65 Serpell’s concern is the late twentieth-century American novel, but her basic point pertains to the effect of tautology—a more miniature form of repetition—in the early modern theater. Tautology erodes playgoers’ sense of the trustworthiness of what they hear the characters of this chapter say. Correspondingly,

tautology can erode playgoers’ sense of these characters’ personalities. If the early modern theater at times created a sense of individuated character and interiority through strategies such as the monologue and direct audience address, the revelations produced by these strategies were tempered at other times by the players’ resistance to reveal exactly what they—and the characters they represented—were doing. That resistance toward the playgoing public was produced by the at times adversarial relationship between players and playgoers, and the clowns—and their shadows, the villains—were the mediating figures between these two groups.

The fool, with his uniquely intimate relation with the playgoers, was often the primary spokesman for the acting company during a performance. Accordingly, in *Twelfth Night* Feste has the final lines, a song addressing the audience directly, promising to “please you every day”: “you” here referring to the paying playgoers. Like all moments of direct audience address, this is a moment of intimacy; yet other moments of direct audience address, as this chapter has shown, can combine a sense of intimacy and revelation with more recalcitrant affects: disenchantment, disengagement, and detachment. The recurrence of these moments suggests that playgoers, as Feste promised, could be “please[d]” especially when players related to playgoers in this mode of paradoxically intimate disengagement.
Chapter Four:
Whispering, Politics, Prophecy, and King Lear’s “one word in private”

In the opening scene of William Davenant’s *The Fair Favorite* (1638), Thorello and Saladine, two marginal courtiers, remove themselves from the bustling court and resolve to whisper to each other. Fully aware of their actions’ effects on others, Saladine says:

‘Tis a full Court!
Let’s hasten to the privy gallery,
And whisper there a while; for so
We may be ta’en for cabinet Statesmen,
And at least be held secret, if not wise.¹

Deploying the well-worn trope of the “whispering statesman,” the lines constitute a dig at pompous court advisors, who by whispering in the public eye ostentatiously display the fact they are withholding something.² Saladine wants the others at court to know that they do not know something: the news that he and Thorello hold “secret.” As Saladine describes it, whispering in court could create a very specific effect among onlookers: interest from others and a corresponding surmise that those who possess desirable tidbits of information are tantalizingly “secret,” perhaps even “wise.” Of course, this moment’s effect in performance depends on the actual playhouse audience knowing something that the internal audience—the

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² “Whispering statesmen” had been a trope long before this play; Ben Jonson’s epigram 92, “The New Cry”, describes statesmen who “talk reserved, locked up, and full of fear; / Nay, ask you how the day goes, in your ear. / Keep a Star-chamber sentence close twelve days, / And whisper what a proclamation says” (vol. 5 in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, eds. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 17-20).
other inhabitants of the “full Court”—do not: that Saladine and Thorello actually possess no secrets at all, having nothing to hide.

At this moment we find Davenant reflecting upon and indicating the effects on playgoers of what was a theatrical as well as courtly technique: whispering. Here, Sorello suggests that one effect is a sense of mysteriously-charged political significance. My argument in this chapter is that early modern plays at times deploy this theatrical technique of having two actors speak visibly but inaudibly together in order to elicit anticipation, interest, and an ambient sense of impending (often political) turmoil. When whispering’s associations with prophetic utterance and political conspiracy are activated onstage, whispering can produce a certain kind of enigmatic playgoing experience of expectant incomprehension, a forward-looking anticipation of a revelation that is sometimes (but not always) fulfilled.

By “whispering” I mean any instance of two or more actors speaking visibly among themselves in a manner that would be inaudible to playgoers. I include within this category any stage directions or indications for actors to perform this action, such as “confer aside,” “whisper aside,” be “busy in conference,” and to speak or whisper “secretly,” “in secret,” or “in private.”3 The term “whispering” thus serves as a shorthand denoting any conversation whose existence—but not content—is represented for playgoers.

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In most instances of onstage whispering, the content of the two characters’ conversation is eventually revealed. But at other times, when playgoers never find out what was whispered—and why they would want to know—they are put into an outsider position, one at times akin to that of political authorities who know of the existence but not the content of their subjects’ whisperings. As an enigmatic theatrical technique, whispering poses a question to playgoers—“what are they whispering about?”—that implies an answer, even if that answer never arrives in performance. Like the moments of tautological speech discussed in the previous chapter, some of these whispering moments unite the audience in a state of shared ignorance: nobody knows what is being said, so all are positioned in an outsider status, waiting for some kind of revelation—and perhaps political upheaval. Through whispering, early modern players and playwrights can infuse performances with political and prophetic affects. Political critique and divine judgment are all the more powerfully felt when only their presence—but not their content—is known.

II. Whispering and Forward-Looking Expectation

As the inset “audience” of The Fair Favorite suggests, one important effect of whispering in early modern plays is to increase the playgoers’ sense of mystery—a sense that something important is just out of sight (or, more properly, of hearing). In almost all cases of onstage whispering, however, the content of what was whispered does not remain unknown. Whispering at times simply heightens dramatic expectation by delaying the delivery of information. For example, when Prospero whispers to Ariel in The Tempest, instructing him to “Hark in thine ear,” playgoers soon find out what Prospero’s instructions were when Ariel

Obviously, not all of these qualify as what I am calling “whispering,” as some of the stage directions simply indicate that the printed dialogue that follows should be spoken as if it is not heard by all of the characters onstage.
returns, singing to Ferdinand. Sometimes whispering can also be used to have someone “say” something that cannot be said aloud for reasons of propriety. In *Bartholomew Fair*, for example, Dame Overdo whispers of her need to urinate; similarly, in *The Roaring Girl*, Goshawk whispers his advice to Mrs. Gallipot to retaliate against Mrs. Openwork by having sex with him. Whispering can also draw and enhance the playgoers’ attention while soliciting interpretation; in *Othello*, Iago is pleased to see Cassio and Desdemona “whisper” together (“ay, well said, / whisper”) because he knows that Othello learning of such an action will grow in suspicion. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes stands as another example of a jealous husband construing whispering as proof of wifely infidelity. Speaking to Camillo about his suspicions of Polixenes and Hermione, Leontes asks: “Is whispering nothing?”; he also imagines the content of people’s gossip about him: “whispering, rounding, / ‘Sicilia is a so-forth.”

Each of these instances of onstage whispering carries the expectation that whispering will guide, focus, and enhance playgoers’ attention. This expectation is voiced aloud in *The Tempest* when Ferdinand and Miranda serve as the inset audience for Prospero’s masque. At one point, the stage direction reads “*Juno and Ceres whisper, and send Iris on employment,*” an action which Prospero instructs Ferdinand and Miranda to heed: “Sweet now, silence! / Juno and Ceres whisper seriously. / There’s something else to do. Hush and be mute, / Or else our spell is marred” (4.1.124sd, 124-27). Guiding the responses of his own playgoers,

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Prospero here voices his own supposition about what a proper response to whispering should be: silent, increased attention to what follows. This moment further suggests the communal effects of whispering: Ferdinand and Miranda are directed to “hush and be mute” as a single collective, one summoned to hearken to an undefined “something else” that is about to occur. Even though in this case the whispered plans of Juno and Ceres are soon revealed in the masque, the moment still demonstrates an important feature of whispering in early modern theater: its solicitation and direction of playgoers’ shared attention.

This moment in *The Tempest* makes explicit that whispering was expected to have this kind of silencing, unifying, and focusing effect. The whisper can thus give rise to a certain kind of unified playgoing collective because whispering does not require an unevenly distributed expertise or capacity to be understood—whispering by definition is what nobody can understand. Its comprehension does not require possession of a certain competence in a foreign language, nor a particular expertise in the deciphering of visual tableaux, nor even a certain position within the playhouse that enables one to see or hear what other playgoers cannot. Instead, whispering gathers all playgoers together in a single collective, one that is defined by its inability to know what is being said. This collective is defined by its ignorance and a commonly-felt condition of outsiderness.

At other times, whispering is called for because of an “indecency” that is neither sexual or execratory but rather political. In *Julius Caesar*, Cassius “entreat[s] a word” with Cicero as “They Whisper” together while planning the killing of Caesar; one may whisper but not speak about killing kings onstage.\(^8\) In this case, whispering is necessary because whispered conversations can name or even effect political changes. The whispering indicates that these characters are planning something dangerous and politically explosive. Even

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though the content of what the conspirators whisper is revealed soon afterwards, this moment of forward looking anticipation followed by revelation contributes to the playgoers’ sense of the play’s events as inevitable. Whether predicted by the soothsayer or whispered by conspirators, then, the death of Caesar is framed on all sides as an unavoidable and logically necessary event. Whispering here serves as one element that creates for playgoers a sense of the action’s tragic inevitability.

In all of the examples given above, whispering generates a sense of anticipation which is then satisfied, the theatrical experience of tension and release that leads Bert States to claim that “discovery” or “unconcealment” is “a main source of our pleasure in reading or witnessing plays.” Yet I propose to set aside these moments of straightforward “unconcealment” and focus on moments of unresolved enigma, when these kinds of revelations of “what was whispered” never occur. Because of the inbuilt disciplinary assumption that our domains of knowledge merit recording more than our domains of ignorance, these moments and their peculiar character have mostly escaped critics’ attention. Their existence within the corpus of early modern drama, however, suggests that States’ point calls for refinement. While unconcealment is undoubtedly a source of one kind of theatrical pleasure, the anticipation of unconcealment offers another. It is the prospect as much as the fulfillment of discovery that can generate powerful theatrical affect and pleasure. Accordingly, one of my aims in this chapter is to show how early modern plays can offer the prospect of “unconcealment,” even if not the thing itself.

Another moment of whispering in The Winters Tale stands as one example of a whisper whose content remains on some level unrevealed—and whose effect depends in part

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upon that concealment. Just before Leontes enters to imprison Hermione, their son Mamillius banters with his mother and her attendants, promising to tell a “tale”:

Hermione. What wisdom stirs amongst you? Come, sir, now I am for you again. Pray you sit by us, And tell’s a tale.

Mamillius. Merry, or sad, shall’t be?

Hermione. As merry as you will.

Mamillius. A sad tale’s best for winter. I have one Of sprites and goblins.

Hermione. Let’s have that, good sir. Come on, sit down, come on, and do your best To fright me with your sprites. You’re powerful at it.

Mamillius. There was a man--

Hermione. Nay, come sit down; then on.

Mamillius. Dwelt by a churchyard—I will tell it softly, Yon crickets shall not hear it.

Hermione. Come on then,

And giv’t me in mine ear.¹⁰

Obviously, playgoers are given some details about what Mamillius says: it is a “sad tale” containing “sprites and goblins,” featuring a “man” proximate to a “churchyard.” Yet his decision to “tell it softly” in Hermione’s “ear” creates what one critic calls a “curious absence”: the story itself.¹¹ The scene stages “the act of storytelling, and the rituals that

¹⁰ *The Winter’s Tale*, 2.1.21-32.
surround it” while leaving out the actual story. Why exactly Mamillius feels compelled to whisper instead of speak his tale is somewhat opaque, yet its effect in performance seems fairly straightforward. This is a whisper that signals and creates a mother-child intimacy, an intimacy that will soon be broken. Indeed, immediately after this moment Leontes enters, spouting anger and resentment toward the now-absent Polixenes. When he then turns to Hermione and Mamillius, he focuses specifically on separating the two from each other: “Give me the boy,” he commands, before banishing Mamillius from the scene: “Bear the boy hence: he shall not come about her. / Away with him.” Leontes’ boorish entrance moves the plot forward, resisting its arrest by the unheard, meandering “winter’s tales” of Mamillius. But it also situates playgoers in a complex position, one that aligns them with both Leontes and with the female attendants at once. Like other moments of theatrical whispering, the playgoers are outsiders to this scene, like Leontes. But while Leontes’ anger is in some respect fueled by a feeling of exclusion, the playgoers’ position of exclusion is not supposed to be felt as alienating. Instead, their status as outsiders to Hermione and Mamillius aligns them more closely with the attendants, outsiders content to be witnesses to this moment of mother/child intimacy. Whispering here solicits a range of reactions from characters within the play, while also underscoring the treasured relationship that will soon be broken in the tragic section of the play that immediately follows.

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12 Ibid., 248.
13 Accordingly, critics have tended to leave the question of Mamillius’ “motive” to the side and have instead described the scene in psychoanalytic terms, as an encounter of The Mother and The Son. For Chiara Alfano, for example, “It is a lovely, intimate scene: a child whispering a story into his mother’s ear. Here the original union with the mother is presented as a union of common language, a story that only Hermione and Mamillius know” (“Sounding Shakespeare: Acts of Reading in Cavell and Derrida” [Ph.D. Diss., University of Sussex, 2012], 55); the same move is found in Gail Kern Paster, The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 268-70.
14 The Winter’s Tale, 2.1.56. 2.1.59-60.
A moment in *The Spanish Tragedy* serves as a quite different example of theatrical unrevelation. In this case, whispering evokes a sense of an uncomfortable and undesired intimacy, one that accordingly playgoers do not have access to. After Lorenzo has cooperated in the murder of Horatio, the lover of his sister Bel-imperia, Lorenzo imprisons Bel-imperia in her chambers to prevent her from revealing him as the murderer to their father. As Lorenzo says, he had to make an excuse to their father for Bel-imperia’s absence from court, but to playgoers this excuse remains obscure. Speaking alone with Balthazar, Lorenzo reminds him that “you heard me say / Sufficient reason why she kept away.”15 He repeats this “sufficient reason” to Bel-imperia slightly later on, but continues to keep that information from the audience:

Bel-imperia. Hath not my father then enquired for me?

Lorenzo. Sister, he hath, and thus excused I thee.

(He whispereth in her ear.)

But, Bel-imperia, see the gentle Prince,

Look on thy love, behold young Balthazar. (3.10.76-79)

What is the excuse, and why is Lorenzo so secretive about it? Nothing in the playtext that follows suggests an answer. While this form of whispering suggests a certain kind of intimacy between brother and sister, it also contributes to the play’s atmosphere of uncanny confusion, as well as the opacity surrounding the motives of those in the Spanish court. In the case of Hieronimo, for example, the line between madness and sanity is at times unclear, as is the distinction between concealment and revelation: Hieronimo’s promise that “never shalt thou force me to reveal / The thing which I have vow’d inviolate” oddly follows upon his

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open confession of why and how he has achieved his revenge (4.4.187). Yet this moment of whispering has usually been interpreted as if we can know what Lorenzo said. Thinking perhaps of moments like Dame Overdo’s request to urinate in Bartholomew Fair, David Bevington remarks that “[t]he audience presumably understands that Lorenzo whispers some indelicacy by way of his having excused her absence, or this stage business would have no point.”16 William Empson, on the other hand, is bizarrely confident regarding the content of this “indelicacy”: “I take it that the audience presumed him to whisper, perhaps falsely, that he had told her father she was procuring an abortion.”17 The editors of the recent Arden edition manage the problem by citing the work of Carol McGinnis Kay, for whom this scene has an “unsettling effect” in which “[t]he thwarting of our desire to know here is typical of the Kydian world.”18 Others have argued that Lorenzo could not actually at this moment be “whispering”—as in, speaking visibly but inaudibly. According to Alan Dessen, for example, while stage directions for “a figure to whisper…almost always involve not an aside but rather a conversation that is not heard by the playgoer,” this moment in The Spanish Tragedy is “an exception to this practice.”19 This is actually an audible “speech aside to Bel-Imperia that is not to be overheard by Balthasar,” although it is to be heard by the audience.20 Andrew Gurr judges Dessen’s explanation “more likely” than the Empson/Bevington/Kay alternative.21

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18 Carol McGinnis Kay, “Deception through Words: A Reading of The Spanish Tragedy,” Studies in Philology 74.1 (1977), 29. Kay cites other examples of known unknowns in the play: “Just as we never knew why Prosperine had smiled or what she had whispered to Pluto, so later we never know whether Pedringano's claim that Bel-Imperia has written love letters to Horatio is fact or fiction, [and] we never know the contents of several letters brought to the Portuguese Viceroy in III, 1” (29).
20 Ibid., 234n17.
Dessen and Gurr seem uncomfortable with the implications of the other view: that this theatrical moment seems to withhold permanently from playgoers some bit of expected information. But Dessen and Gurr at least recognize this moment as a crux; in contrast, almost all of the play’s recent editors simply ignore it, presumably considering questions of performance dynamics unimportant or at least of far less interest than Balthazar’s comparison of Bel-imperia’s hair to “Ariadne’s twines” at line 89, a line that receives an explanatory note in nearly every edition. In short, critics and editors have tended to shy away from this moment—and those like it—in part because of what it suggests about early modern theater: that paying playgoers were not always given the information that they wanted. “Whispering” could be one of those times.

### III. Whispering and Political Upheaval

Whispering can generate expectations among playgoers of looking forward to something else, and we can begin to specify that “something” somewhat by studying the kinds of knowledge that were associated with whispering. The category of activity described as “whispering” in early modern England was commonly understood to be uncontained, unknowable, and politically dangerous. Most simply, whispering sometimes denotes the pathway of rumor, Fama. In *The Fair Favorite*, for example, secret accusations against the

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queen are described as “forged whispers” (213), and as the Queen laments, the court gossip in which individual courtiers “reveal… what he should / Conceal” is passed along in “needless whispers to his Prince” (226). Yet whispering could also denote a more explicit politically potent form of speech, as in *Thomas of Woodstock*. Representing the downfall of Richard II’s plain-spoken advisor, the play also dramatizes the resistance of English commoners to Tresilian, Richard’s sinister Lord Chief Justice. Quite strikingly, one scene presents a sequence of three unjustified arrests for three different offences, each of which is categorized as a form of “whispering.” In this play, the concept of whispering gathers together a disparate group of activities of political resistance: the “privy / whisper[ing]” of a Farmer and a Butcher; the poetic speaking of “treason in the ninth / degree” of a Schoolmaster and a Serving-man; and the “whistl[ing] treason” of a character known only as “Whistler.”23 Despite their different activities, all five characters are arrested and charged as “whisperers.” Whispering thus comes to denote politically resistant activity in speech, song, and even mere tune. Even when the action does not involve the literal speaking of words to another in a soft voice, what makes the term “whispering” apt for each of these activities is their aspiration to a kind of privacy and remove from the ears and eyes of power. Whispering here denotes any form of shared political resistance by indirect means. Indirection is precisely the opposite strategy of that used by the play’s titular character, “Plain Thomas” of Woodstock, the blunt and honest counselor to Richard II. Set against Thomas’ bluntness—which issues only in his murder—whispering thus becomes a way to conceptualize the possibility of political resistance that is never localized in one particular person.

23 *Thomas of Woodstock*: or, *Richard the Second, Part One*, eds. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 3.3.151-52, 211-12, 244. Subsequent citations are given in the text.
The phrase “privy whispering” (or “privy whisperers”), which carries associations of court intrigue, underscores the importance of whispering’s lack of openness. In *Thomas of Woodstock*, “privy whispering” is a grave charge that indicates the subterranean troublemaking of unknown persons who are closely connected to the court.24 Similarly, in one 1626 sermon, John Donne describes the whispering of the Pharisees against Jesus in precisely these terms:

> That which they [i.e., the Pharisees] say of Christ, they say not to Christ himself, but they whisper it to his servants, to his Disciples. A Legal and Juridical Accusation, is justifiable, maintainable, because it is the proper way for remedy: a private reprehension done with discretion, and moderation, should be acceptable too; but a privy whispering is always Pharisaical. The Devil himself, though he by a Lyon, yet he is a roaring Lyon; a man may hear him: but a privy Whisperer, we shall onely hear of him.25

For Donne, the threat of the “privy Whisperer” derives from both his unknowability and unlocatability. That which cannot be clearly located cannot be opposed and stopped, leading to mistrust and separation between Jesus and his disciples: “By privy whisperings and calumnies, they would aliene Christ from his Disciples, and his Disciples from him; the King from his Subjects by some tales, and the Subject from the King by other.”26 Here Donne explicitly connects the relation between Jesus and his disciples to that between King Charles

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24 For example, Tresilian instructs his henchmen “To mark who grudges or but speaks amiss / Of good King Richard, myself, or any of his new counselors. / Attach them all for privy whisperers” (3.1.131-133). Later on, another character relates that “twenty gentlemen are all arrested / For privy whisperers against the state” (4.3.3-4). Similarly, in *The Spanish Tragedy* Lorenzo fears that his plans might become known at court through “privy whispering” (3.4.84).


26 Ibid., 64-65.
I and his councilors. Both groups can be divided from their leader. Though Donne’s sermon was delivered perhaps thirty years after *Thomas of Woodstock* was first performed, the sermon serves almost as a gloss on the play’s instances of “whispering.” In early modern England, it seems, “whispering” is one means through which one can sow division and mistrust between a King and his councilors.

John Ford’s *Perkin Warbeck* demonstrates how whispering and its attendant actions (such as “muttering” or speaking “in private”) could draw the attention of others for its promise of politically sensitive information. Furthermore, the play illustrates this association between whispering and politically sensitive speech that indicates or creates a division between an English king and his advisors. The play stages the rise and fall of Perkin Warbeck, who claimed to be Richard, duke of York, the second son of Edward IV who had not, as had been thought, been murdered in the Tower of London at the command of Richard III. Warbeck’s authority derives solely from his charisma—his ability to persuade others that he is who he claims to be. Conversely, Henry VII’s power seems to depend in part on his skill at concealment; he guards information closely and even disguises his mechanisms of power through secret payments. The play thus explores the political power that accrues to ambiguity and secretiveness, especially in one particular scene of guarded, visible, inaudible speech.

In this scene we find a case not of explicitly named whispering but of language “muttered…not to be heard,” although clearly seen. When the Spanish ambassador Hialas visits Henry VII’s court on his way from Spain to Scotland, his departure prompts Henry to ask his chaplain Urswick to see Hialas out and offer him a bribe. When Urswick returns,
Henry asks him what Hialas had said just out of earshot, leading to Urswick to contradict himself:

Henry. What was’t

‘A muttered in the earnest of his wisdom,

‘A spoke not to be heard? ‘Twas about—

Urswick. Warbeck;

How, if King Henry were but sure of subjects,

Such a wild runagate might soon be caged,

No great ado withstanding.

Henry. Nay, nay; something

About my son Prince Arthur’s match.

Urswick. Right, right, sir.

‘A hummed it out, how that King Ferdinand

Swore that the marriage ‘twixt the Lady Catherine

His daughter, and the Prince of Wales your son,

Should never be consummated as long

As any Earl of Warwick lived in England,

Except by new creation.

Henry. I remember,

‘Twas so indeed. The king his master swore it?

Urswick. Directly, as he said.27

27 John Ford, Perkin Warbeck, in Tis Pity She’s a Whore and Other Plays, ed. Marion Lomax (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 3.3.46-60.
To Henry’s questions about what Hialas had “muttered” Urswick gives two different—and flatly contradictory—answers. Urswick first says that Hialas was speaking about Henry’s defective mode of rule, which prevents him from being “sure of subjects.” When challenged by Henry, who seems to have caught some of the muttered speech, Urswick then says that Hialas was speaking about Prince Arthur’s match. The contradiction suggests that Urswick has come up with the first account on his own and that he is using the cover of another person, who “muttered” and “spoke not to be heard” to offer his own counsel to his king. When Henry rejects this counsel (“Nay, nay”), Urswick reports something that, because Hialas only “hummed it out,” could never be verified, by either the audience or Henry. Either way, both statements are correctly said to be “muttered” because they are moments of reproach to Henry’s governance, neither of which can be stated openly. This shadowy, uncertain moment is in fact characteristic of how Ford presents Henry throughout the play. Miles Taylor has argued that Ford “leave[s] unstaged much of Henry's policy” to suggest that Henry’s statecraft “is inimical to the dramatist’s art.”28 I want to suggest, by contrast, that “the dramatist’s art” can also involve leaving some things “unstaged”—or, rather, staging them in an enigmatic mode. To indicate that a conversation is beyond audiences’ earshot can generate their interest, inquiry, anticipation, and even longing. It is true that Urswick is a chaplain, not a prophet. But it is nevertheless apt that the one who cannily speaks about what cannot be spoken in one’s own voice turns out to be a man of God.

Most importantly, however, this moment stages a character responding to two other characters whispering, suggesting something of the expected audience response to a whisper. Henry’s observation of two people in private conversation—someone speaking “not to be

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heard”—focuses his attention and generates intrigue. Henry’s position is at first that of the playgoers, as outsiders who cannot know the secret conversations of others. For this brief moment, the play positions playgoers and kings in parallel: both are outsiders looking in on those privately whispering about affairs that could cause or reflect political turmoil.

Consequently, *Perkin Warbeck* affords a theatrical experience in which *not* knowing how the various parts of the play fit together is intrinsic to a playgoer’s experience. The deep designs of the string-pulling characters are not laid out for the audience to see, as were those of (for example) morality play vices, Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, or Iago in *Othello*. Instead of playgoers witnessing the unfolding of the action from a position of superior knowledge to the characters, they are positioned at times as knowing less. *Perkin Warbeck*’s audience is thus positioned less as godlike overseers than as frustrated unknowers. The pleasure of this play entails in part not enjoying one’s position as a knower but coming to terms with one’s shared status as an outsider.

**IV. Whispering and Prophecy**

A particular form of covert speech, whispering was what some prophets—or at least some of those who claimed to be prophets—were said to do. Yet whispering and prophecy might at first seem like surprising companions, especially in light of what Barbara Lewalski describes as early modern English prophecy’s “public mode”—its aspirations to mediate “the prophet’s inspired visions of transcendent reality or of apocalyptic transformations, present or future.”  

Prophecy most certainly does have a public face in the period, as scholars have

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richly documented. Furthermore, Biblical models of prophecy are often noisy and public: “Crye aloud, spare not: lift vp thy voyce like a trumpet,” God commands Isaiah. Yet some Biblical prophecies are nonetheless guarded and enigmatic. When God instructs Ezekiel to pack his “stuffle” as if entering “into captiuitie” and to dig through the city wall, it is essential that Ezekiel do so “in their sight” so that he will be asked: “What doest thou?” Ezekiel’s visibly enigmatic actions are positioned as if in a theatrical situation—he performs in a certain way to invite questions from onlookers that he can then answer. Similarly, in 2 Samuel 12 the prophet Nathan reproves King David not straightforwardly but through the fable of the rich man who steals the poor man’s sheep. Nathan’s rebuke succeeds precisely because David does not initially understand the meaning of Nathan’s story. These Biblical models illuminate a more roundabout style of would-be prophets in the early modern period, one that could be understood less as a shouting from the rooftops than as an invitation to inquire more deeply.

The particular fear that Catholics would whisper false prophecies that could disrupt the peace of the state recurs in writings of the late sixteenth century. Thus does Laurence Ramsey’s poem “The Practise of the Diuell” (spoken in the voice of Satan) report that Catholics “whisper” in others’ ears that a restoration of Catholics to power is imminent. Ramsey writes that they spread “blinde Prophecies, and whisper in their eare, / That ere long

31 THE BIBLE AND HOLY SCRIPTURES CONTEYNED IN THE OLDE AND NEWE Testament... (Geneva: 1560), Eee4v (Isaiah 58:1).
33 On the riddle as one kind of prophetic mode, see Avraham Oz, The Yoke of Love: Prophetic Riddles in The Merchant of Venice (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 5-13 as well as Dobin, Merlin’s Disciples, 22-25.
we shall haue, great chaunge of this geare.”34 Whispering seems to be the proper mode of this kind of false or “blinde” prophecy, the kind that purports to promise “great chaunge” in the political order. Responding to a threat perceived as at once omnipresent and invisible, writers often attempt to fend off the threat of these prophecies and self-proclaimed prophets by dismissing them as “blind” or “cold,” but the threats nonetheless are felt to be very real. There is a collective sense that there are people who position themselves as would-be prophets, whispering of political change.35

This same constellation of political upheaval, prophecy, and whispering also appears in Shakespeare’s King John, though without explicitly Catholic reference. Whispering and prophesying occur in the wake of the French invasion of England, the death of Prince Arthur, and the dissolution of King John’s authority:

Hubert. My lord, they say five moons were seen to-night:

Four fixed, and the fift did whirl about

The other four in wondrous motion.

King John. Five moons?

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34 Laurence Ramsey, The practise of the diuell (London: 1577), B2v. Other examples include the clergyman John Bridges, who while defending the superiority of the king over the church in opposition to the Catholic position, warns of rebellious priests who, once displeased with a king, “will provide another” by “al ways possible, by practises, conspiracies, whisperings, murmurings, railings, blind prophecies, curses, treacheries, seditions, treasons, rebellions, murders, sorceries, poisonings” (The supremacie of Christian princes over all persons throughout theor dominions, in all causes so wel ecclesiastical as temporall [London: 1573], EEEeee4v). Similarly, the controversialist William Fulke mocks those Catholics who predict “the decaye of Protestants and professors of the truthe of Gods word,” a lie that (Fulke claims) “the cold prophet fooreseeth, by some trayterous deuise, whispered among his pewfellowes at Louayne or Dowaye” (A retentiue, to stay good Christians, in true faith and religion [London: 1580], E1v).

35 This association between Catholics and dangerous whispering continues into the seventeenth century, in, for example, Phineas Fletcher’s short epic poem “The Locusts” about the Gunpowder Plot, in which the “Fiends” who inhabit the treasonous Jesuits have “fowle hearts, sear’d conscience, / Lust wandring eyes, eares fil’d with whispering” (Locustae, vel Pietas Jesuitica [Cambridge: 1627], H3r). In 1641, a tailor named Thomas Beale testified to Parliament that he heard “cruell and mercilesse Papists” whispering together their plans to commit what the title page terms “horrible and bloody treason and conspiracie against the Protestants of this kingdome in general.” Beale claims to have overneard “certayne fellowes talking and whispering together about their intended plot and machinations”; he “also over-heard them to whisper about some great plots or treacheries in VVales now intended against England” (A discovery of a horrible and bloody treason and conspiracie against the Protestants of this kingdome in general [London: 1641], A2v).
Old men and beldams in the streets

Do prophesy upon it dangerously:

Young Arthur’s death is common in their mouths:

And when they talk of him, they shake their heads

And whisper one another in the ear;

And he that speaks doth gripe the hearer’s wrist,

Whilst he that hears makes fearful action,

With wrinkled brows, with nods, with rolling eyes.

The wonder of the five moons occasions “prophecy,” or an event’s interpretation that involves judgment upon the king, and (additionally) the possibility of political change. This prophecy circulates amidst a cluster of actions commonly associated with political turmoil: head shaking, whispering, nodding, and other furtive forms of communication. As one editor points out, prophesying here is the activity of “expounding the phenomenon itself, making it the text of a dangerous discourse.” This “dangerous discourse,” the content of which is necessarily vague, is “whisper[ed to] one another in the ear,” meant to be circulated just beyond the surveillance of political authorities.

Collectively, this set of texts indicates some of whispering’s associations and range of effects during early modern performances. In particular, they suggest that whispering could be associated with prophecy that is politically dangerous and consequently cannot be spoken

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37 A similar moment occurs in Shakespeare’s Richard II, when the Welsh captain reports that the soldiers will no longer wait for Richard’s arrival in part because of the whispering of prophets: “The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the earth, / And lean-looked prophets whisper fearful change…. / These signs forerun the death or fall of kings” (King Richard II, ed. Charles R. Forker [London: Arden, 2002], 2.4.10-11, 15).
38 See, for example, Antonio’s Revenge: when a rebellion is imminent against the villainous Venetian Duke Piero, Pandulphus reports “observe[ing] / The graver statesmen whispering fearfully. / Here one gives nods and hums what he would speak” (John Marston, Antonio’s Revenge, ed. G.K. Hunter [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965], 5.2.32-34).
in one’s own voice. When registering political protest, commoners whisper in *Thomas of Woodstock*; a priest makes use of another’s whispering in *Perkin Warbeck*; and prophecies are themselves whispered in *King John*. Whispering can be a harbinger of political change and a sign of divine judgment upon the king, associations that can be activated by on-stage whispering in early modern drama to create a forward looking expectation that something important but unknown is about to happen.

**V. Whispering, Politics, and Prophecy in *King Lear***

Whispering is one theatrical technique by which *King Lear* conjures a feeling of a inconclusiveness that is shaded by hints of political upheaval, prophecy, and apocalyptic unveiling. I want to home in on a mostly-overlooked instance of whispering in 3.4 of *King Lear*, when Lear rages on the “heath” amidst a storm.40 Addressing Poor Tom as “this philosopher,” “learned Theban,” and “Noble Philosopher,” Lear makes a request: “Let me ask you one word in private” (3.4.150, 153, 168, 156). This “one word” is never revealed to the audience: unlike most whispered conversations in early modern drama, it remains “private.” This particular omission occurs at the culmination of the scene that critics have long felt is the play’s heart, and here I want to argue for its power to contribute to a particular effect in an early modern playhouse: an anticipation of impending apocalyptic revelation, one that can agglomerate the gathered playgoers together into a community defined by its shared openness to and anticipation of such revelation.

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40 As Henry Turner points out, this location’s specification as a “heath” first occurred in 1709: Turner argues that the play seeks to “examine” rather than “resolve” the “representational problems” of “place” and “space” (“*King Lear* Without: The Heath.” *Renaissance Drama* 28 (1997): 164-65).
The one explicit discussion of whispering in the play—in a conversation between Gloucester’s servant Curan and Edmund—articulates the now-familiar connection between whispering and impending political turmoil:

Curan. You have heard of the news abroad;  
I mean the whispered ones, for they are yet but ear-kissing arguments?

Edmund. Not I pray you, what are they?

Curan. Have you heard of no likely wars toward, 'twixt the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany?

Edmund. Not a word. (2.1.6-12)

As in contemporary plays, whispering in *King Lear* accompanies and is the very means for transmitting news of ensuing political change. The setting for this conversation between Curan and Edmund is decidedly worldly: the domain of Machiavellian intrigue whose presiding spirit is Edmund, the controlled stage manager who proclaims the ineffectuality of “portents.” In contrast, the setting of the scene of Lear and Edgar’s whispering is quite different: a barren, apocalyptic landscape, where—unlike Edmund—those present seem all too little in control of themselves and their situation.

When Lear first enters the storm in 3.2, he speaks as if a revelation is impending and as if things lying in secret cannot help but be revealed. The seeds of things, he says, will be opened to sight, and he calls on the “all-shaking thunder” to “Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once” (3.2.6, 8). Lear then calls on the gods to bring to light malefactors’ hidden crimes:

Let the great gods
That keep this dreadful pudder o’er our heads
Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
Unwhipped of justice. Hide thee, thou bloody hand,
Thou perjured, and thou simular man of virtue
That art incestuous. Caitiff, to pieces shake,
That under covert and convenient seeming
Has practised on man’s life. Close pent-up guilts
Rive your concealing continents and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man
More sinned against than sinning. (3.2.49-60)

Lear here understands the storm as an instrument of the gods’ justice. Through the storm, the hidden truth about human ill-doings—“undivulged crimes,” “covert and convenient seeming,” and “close pent-up guilts”—will reveal themselves in their doers’ appeals to the gods for “grace.” Lear’s expectation, at least, is that humans cannot keep any secrets from the gods and the storm will be the occasion when these will all be revealed.

3.2 thus creates a mood of portentousness, generating playgoer expectations of revelation and unconcealment. Yet King Lear portrays the apocalypse as a non-event that never quite seems to arrive: something that is always about to happen but never quite does. When we return to Lear on the heath in 3.4, even more secrets promise to be revealed: no longer just the sins of one class of “enemies” but something more fundamental: what Lear calls “Unaccommodated man,” “the thing itself” (3.4.105, 104). Critics rightly sense the scene’s suggestions that something particularly important and literally “central” (in the
“central scene of the play’s central act,” as one critic points out) is being revealed or is about to be revealed in Lear’s encounter with Poor Tom. However, few agree on what the content of that revelation might be, proposing the nature of humanity, or of the gods, or the relation of power to representation, or the oppression of the poor and the limits of personal charity, or the centrality of the obligations of Christian caritas. None of these speculations seem to me necessarily incorrect. But verifying any of them as correct also seems impossible. In short, critics are entirely justified in speculating about what is happening when Lear is on the heath, because this scene is designed to invite speculation. The play has set up expectations of revelation, of something important coming to light, while remaining studiously vague about what that something might be. Critics’ suggestions can therefore never be anything other than shots in the dark, a dark that is (paradoxically) made apparent most vividly at the culmination of the scene, with Lear’s proposal to have “one word in private” with Poor Tom.

Lear’s encounter with Poor Tom, of course, is a classic “reason in madness” scene, in which madness can lead to a kind of wisdom. Yet Lear’s language, with its repeated use of the word “philosopher” to refer to Poor Tom, insists especially strongly on this point (3.4.150, 168, 172). Dripping with the affects associated with revelation and divine inbreaking, the scene culminates with Lear inquiring about the cause of “thunder,” a term used by a range of writers—including Cicero, Calvin, Lyly, Spenser, Marlowe, Donne, and

Camden—to refer to divine voice or power.⁴³ Refusing to seek shelter, Lear insists on remaining in the storm to converse with its denizen, his “philosopher” Poor Tom. Just before the group departs the stage, Lear and Poor Tom converse “in private,” in a scene of what I have been terming “whispering.” As I have suggested, whispering here invites playgoers’ attention and anticipation of a future revelation. Here is how the moment looks in the playtext (which is identical in Q1 and F):

King Lear. First let me talk with this philosopher:

[to Edgar] What is the cause of thunder?

Kent. Good my lord,

Take his offer, go into the house.

King Lear. I’ll talk a word with this same learned Theban:

What is your study?

Edgar. How to prevent the fiend and to kill vermin.

King Lear. Let me ask you one word in private.

Kent. [to Gloucester] Impartune him once more to go, my Lord;

His wits begin t’unsettle.

Gloucester. Canst thou blame him?

Storm still

His daughters seek his death. Ah, that good Kent,

He said it would be thus, poor banished man.

Thou sayest the King grows mad; I’ll tell thee, friend,

I am almost mad myself. I had a son,

⁴³ Elton, in King Lear and the Gods, 202-05, provides a truly exhaustive list of early modern citations in which “thunder” refers to God’s or the gods’ voice or power.
Now outlawed from my blood; he sought my life,
But lately, very late. I loved him, friend,
No father his son dearer. True to tell thee,
The grief hath crazed my wits. What a night’s this?
[to Lear] I do beseech your grace.

King Lear. O cry you mercy, sir.
[to Edgar] Noble philosopher, your company.

Edgar. Tom’s a-cold. (3.4.150-69)

The playtext implies that two different conversations are happening here: a visible but silent one between Lear and Tom, and the one printed in the playtext between Kent and Gloucester, who converse for eleven lines before Gloucester addresses Lear again with “I do beseech your grace.” Because Lear and Poor Tom’s speaking apart occurs at the same time as Gloucester and Kent’s conversation, the scene solicits a divided focus. There are, then, at least two modes of not understanding here: first, Gloucester understands neither that he is actually speaking to “good Kent” about Kent nor that his “son, / Now outlawed from my blood” is very much present; and second, playgoers do not understand what is occurring in the conversation between Lear and Poor Tom, a conversation freighted with suggestions of mystery and prophecy. Lear seems to have decided that Poor Tom is a “philosopher,” a “learned Theban” possessing an area of “study” whose counsel Lear seeks. Yet playgoers are situated outside their conversation. As I have argued above, whispering can invite audience attention, focus, and inquiry, priming playgoers for a future revelation. Yet in this case, no unveiling occurs: Lear and Edgar’s word “in private” remains so. The enigma has a solution,
but it remains unknown. Positioned as outsiders at this moment, playgoers are hailed as a collective, united not by what it possesses but by what it lacks.

It might be objected that the fact that Lear and Edgar’s conversation is unheard is not dramatically significant. According to this interpretation, the reason why they move to converse “in private” is not to generate a sense of mystery but rather merely to allow Gloucester and Kent’s conversation to be heard. While this is certainly one effect of their speaking “in private,” it seems to me that it does not exhaust the scene’s potential effects. A similar scene in a contemporary play—Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus* (1605)—helps illustrate why.

In *Sejanus*, a scene with a remarkably similar design occurs—in which one group speaks inaudibly while another converses aloud—in a manner that suggests that the inaudible conversation is purposely staged to whet the audience’s desire to know its contents. In this scene, Terentius, one of Sejanus’ followers, enters in the midst of a conversation between Laco, Pomponius, and Minutius, at which point the three are said by the F stage direction to “whisper with Terentius.” In the playtext, the other two characters present, Lepidus and Arruntius, then converse for over 30 lines. Unlike the moment in *King Lear*, in *Sejanus* the content of the whispering is revealed soon after: that Sejanus ”is still in grace” with Tiberius. Yet Terentius’ entrance is framed as the advent of desired news—news whose divulging will be delayed. Pomponius cues Terentius’ entrance by saying “Here comes Terentius...He can give us more.” That “more” is delayed in part by the technique of whispering, which here—as in *Lear*—signals and creates an atmosphere of ambient and dangerous political intrigue. Although whispering does also enable a second conversation to become audible moment of whispering, this moment in *Sejanus* suggests that the practice of

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having some characters speak apart while others speak aloud was one available technique for generating a sense of anticipation among playgoers in the theater culture of the first decade of the 1600s.

Just as Edmund ensured that his father witnessed him hastily pocketing a letter in 1.2, the play here goes out of its way to tease playgoers with the promise of a secret, of something lying just beneath the surface: “What is the cause of thunder?” The term “thunder” recurs elsewhere in the play: sometimes denoting one of Lear’s trials that he has to suffer (3.2.15; 3.2.46; 4.6.101; 4.7.33); sometimes serving as a metonym for god/the gods/God/Jove (i.e., “all-shaking thunder,” at 3.2.6); and sometimes serving as the sign of this powerful being’s agency (“the revenging gods / ‘Gainst parricides did all their thunders bend” [2.1.45-46]). For Lear to ask about the cause of “thunder” therefore fuses questions of natural philosophy with questions about the providential designs of the gods, while also gesturing vaguely towards the God of orthodox Christianity, who exists outside creation and as a potential ground of the play’s confusingly polytheistic universe. In a more mundane register, it also (quietly) queries the ground of royal authority. Lear’s question thus joins concerns that are at once ontological (what is the ground of being?), theological (what is God’s plan in making me suffer like this?), political (what is the source of political/kingly authority?), and epistemological (how might I learn the answer to these questions?).

In these senses, whispering in Lear is shaded by the hovering feeling of the possibility of prophetic activity and political turmoil. The possibilities of the prophetic—transmitting the voice of the gods and the sense of impending unveiling—are concentrated within the storm scenes, 3.2 and 3.4. Meanwhile, the moments of political upheaval are concentrated within the interspersed scenes, in which we learn (in 3.1) of the
“division…twixt; Albany and Cornwall” and (in Q) of the “secret feet” of France ready at any moment “To show their open banner” (3.1.19,21;22n), and then again (in 3.3) of the “division between the dukes” and the “part of [the French] power already footed” (3.3.8-9;13). Here, the prophetic and the political scenes complement each other, reinforcing each others’ sense that something is about to happen. The effect of whispering in Lear depends on the associations between the two domains, associations that are free-floating and unmoored precisely because whatever one hears in Lear’s question, playgoers are not privy to its answer. As a climax of an intense theatrical moment, this missing conversation is a moment of mute un revelation. Or even of evasion: theatrically, there seems to be no lack of noise, as the conversation between Kent and Gloucester substitutes for the missing one between Lear and Edgar (3.4.158sd). For Simon Palfrey, by the end of the scene Poor Tom has “morph[ed] in the king’s mind into a comical Socrates…only without the dialogue that should follow.” Yet at the risk of quibbling, it is not strictly true that no dialogue follows. There is the representation of dialogue between Lear and Tom, but playgoers cannot hear it. I am not claiming that playgoers would have imagined that Edgar actually has the answers to Lear’s questions. The bedlam beggar Tom/young courtier Edgar is an unlikely source for such material, and the moment is on some level clearly parodic, painfully pointing up just how far from the mark Lear’s questions have become as he descends into madness. Yet the moment is not merely parodic. The play has sought to raise playgoer expectations, positioning them as beholders of the divulging of the heretofore “undivulged.” Lear is both pathetically obtuse and titanically tragic here, just as Edgar/Tom is both unnervingly deranged and shrewdly cunning. The moment is tonally mixed, encouraging apocalyptic expectations while parodically deflecting them.

In its repeated encouragement and deflation of expectations, *King Lear* is a play of aversion—not in the sense of “abhorrence” but rather of “turning away.” What seems about to happen never quite seems to; various forms of conclusiveness, definition, and limitation are approached but then averted. Most obviously, the play’s ending is both horrible and a mere “image of that horror.”47 “*King Lear* ends but does not stop,” writes Stephen Booth, by which he means that for all of the signals of dramatic completion in the play’s final scene—including Edgar’s victory, Edmund’s acquiescence, Edgar’s narration of the Gloucester’s and Kent’s ends, and the news of Goneril’s and Regan’s deaths—the play seems unable to decide which ending will be the end.48 The play repeatedly gestures toward endings that are deferred. For example, in the final scene, after Albany first sums up the situation at 5.3.230-31 (“Produce their bodies, be they alive or dead…”), Kent enters and shifts attention away from the finality of Goneril’s and Regan’s deaths toward the unresolved lives of Lear and Cordelia. And when Albany again tries to sum up at 5.3.295-303 (“You lords and noble friends…”) with promises to distribute rewards and punishments, Lear interrupts by once more lamenting Cordelia’s death. Indeed, from the perspective of playgoers, Cordelia seems to die repeatedly in the final scene. After Lear first enters with what seems to be her corpse, he describes her life as remaining three separate times: “This feather stirs, she lives” (5.3.263); “Ha? / What is’t thou sayst?” (5.3.269-70); “Look on her: look, her lips, / Look

48 Stephen Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 11; on the endless endings, see 4-33. Cf. Joseph Wittreich, who points to the play’s “prophetic center and apocalyptic framework,” arguing that “*King Lear* anticipates that eschatological event [i.e., the Day of Judgment] by asserting a context for itself in the apocalyptic drama of St. John’s Revelation and in prophetic tradition generally.” At the same time, while “[t]he play contains “adumbrations of end-time,” it “does not envision the promised end,” because the final phase of the “apocalyptic paradigm”—the foundation of a new order—“is withheld…within a play that aggressively denies us what we want” (*Image of That Horror: History, Prophecy, and Apocalypse in King Lear* [San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1982], x, xi, 183, 184). Cf. Also James Kearney, who describes Shakespeare in *King Lear* as deferring and denying the coming into knowledge that generic cues promise (“This Is Above All Strangeness”: *King Lear, Ethics, And The Phenomenology Of Recognition* Criticism 54.3 [Summer 2012], 456).
there, look there!” (5.3.309-10). Yet he also proclaims her unalterable deadness an equal number of times: “She’s gone for ever” (5.3.257); “now she’s gone forever” (5.3.268); “Thou’lt come no more” (5.3.306). Even the final lines of the play—whether spoken by Albany (as in Q1) or Edgar (as in F) – suggest that those who remain inhabit a diminished world: “we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long” (5.3.324-25). This end is not what Kent calls the “promised end”: it is nothing like a new or even slightly touched-up Jerusalem (5.23.261). The play thus lurches toward a completion that is less a culmination of expectations—whether of the expectations generated by the source material that Lear will resume the throne, or even of the more basic expectation that a dead character remain dead—than an exhaustion with any expectations whatever. As Jan Kott writes, King Lear makes “tragic mockery of all eschatologies,” consigning us to “waiting for a Godot who does not come.” Frank Kermode puts it most baldly: “In King Lear everything tends toward a conclusion that does not occur.” Modern productions of the play have turned this very inconclusiveness into pointed political commentary; Herbert Blau (in 1961) and Peter Brook (in 1962) staged Lear. Were inflected by “anxieties about the hydrogen bomb, the Cold war, and the concept of mutual assured destruction”—in other words, anxieties about political catastrophes that seem to be both narrowly-averted yet still threatening.

Gunpowder is not enriched plutonium. Nevertheless, the recently-averted Gunpowder Plot of November 1605 does comprise an important context for the first productions of King Lear in late 1606. King Lear draws upon some of the fears and expectations associated with the Plot in achieving some of its theatrical power. Whether or not one accepts the claim that

49 The last example occurs only in F.
Gloucester’s lines about “Machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders” refer specifically to the Gunpowder Plot, more recent scholarship has begun to put historicist flesh on Kott’s mid-century existentialist skeleton (1.2.113-14). Nina Taunton and Valerie Hart have pointed toward “the language of apocalyptic imagery shared by the play and the official accounts” of the Gunpowder Plot. In his speech to Parliament four days after the foiled plot, King James calls the unfulfilled apocalypse a “great & feareful doomes-daye,” while Edmund Coke, the prosecutor of the plotters, revels in the destruction that never occurred, making liberal use of the subjunctive: “miserable, but yet sudden had their Ends been, who should have died in that fiery Tempest, and Storm of Gunpowder… Lord, what a Wind, what a Fire, what a Motion and Commotion of Earth and Air would there have been!” As James Shapiro has recently emphasized, King Lear’s feeling of eventful non-eventfulness—as if the play furiously builds to a climax that never occurs—resonates with the affective confusion in the wake of the recently-averted catastrophe: after all, “the Fifth of November recalls a collective experience, a day of communal deliverance, on which nothing actually happened.” In the wake of the foiled Plot, James and Coke together register feelings of both relief and lingering anxiety at the lack of closure: precisely the affective mix that Lear’s various forms of inconclusiveness collectively evoke.

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53 For an argument that Gloucester’s lines constitute a reference to the Gunpowder Plot, see A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, Vol. 5: King Lear, 2nd ed., ed. Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1880), 380. These lines appear only in F.
55 His Maiesties speach in this last session of Parliament as neere his very words as could be gathered at the instant (London: 1605), B1v; The Trial of Guy Fawkes and others (The Gunpowder Plot), ed. Donald Carswell (London: W. Hodge and Company, 1934), 83. Both are quoted in Taunton and Hart, 713.
57 I am working here from the premise that the play in its Q1 form—which was first published in 1608—was written in late 1605-1606 and that it was first performed sometime in 1606, though not necessarily before its first documented performance on 25 December 1606 at Whitehall. On the date, see Foakes, Introduction to King Lear, 89-92.
Poor Tom’s notional whispered “answer” is thus one of those forms of indefinition. It is whispered, because—whatever his answer—to say it aloud would feel like the revelation of something dangerously important. And theatrically, any answer would only diffuse the tension of the scene, which is constituted precisely by the sense of an all-encompassing and yet always-receding fullness that can be only obliquely perceived. Consequently, for all its cultivation of a sense of secrecy and reserve, King Lear is equally clear that there is no secret. The play as a whole works in this way: moments that seem to promise revelation turn out to reveal nothing. Accordingly, the next time Lear and his companions appear onstage after they have come in from the storm, Lear stages a crazed, faux-courtroom scene. While the language of “undivulged crimes” and “dreadful summoners” is taken from the courtroom, no new evidence is brought to light in Lear’s parodic courtroom, featuring Poor Tom as “most learned justicer” and “robed man of justice” and the Fool as “yoke-fellow of equity” (3.6. 21, 36, 37). No formal investigation, parodic or otherwise, could reveal anything new about what Lear’s daughters have done, not because their crimes are hidden but because they are rather all too plain. In this case, the opposite of revelation is not secrecy but a flat depthlessness, in which revelation is impossible because nothing is concealed in the first place.

Thus one of the great ironies of this play of secrets, Cordelian “nothings,” and underhanded, Machiavellian scheming is that its precipitating action—the division of the kingdoms and the banishment of Cordelia—generates effects that are entirely unsurprising. For all the fretting in the play over the causes “of thunder” “in nature,” there is no mystery about at least one of the causes of what happens: Lear’s abdication (3.4.151,3.6.74). Like some solutions to the Fool’s riddles, the truth lies there on the surface, there for the taking:
Fool. The reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason.

King Lear. Because they are not eight?

Fool. Yes, indeed: thou wouldst make a good fool. (1.5.33-36)

This riddle of the “seven stars” occurs within an unsecretive, unenigmatic, unsignifying universe. There is no deeper “reason” for anything, and to give a cause for anything entails not plumbing the minds of the gods but simply restating the effect. Seven is seven because it is not eight.

In 1936 it was suggested that King Lear’s habit of incompletion—or what I term “aversion”—signals that Shakespeare’s reach has exceeded his grasp. “King Lear,” wrote John Middleton Murry, “makes upon me the impression of the work of a Shakespeare who is out of his depth. He does not really know what he wants to say: perhaps he does not know whether he wants to say anything.”58 While I don’t think that Shakespeare “wants to say” things as much as do things in his plays, Murry’s point is apt. Whispering, I have argued, is one mode of aversion within the play, one way in which the play refuses to settle on what it is going to do. But in a stricter sense, whispering is less a refusal to do something than a refusal to say something; whispering, in other words, offers the possibility of seeming to always be about to say something without having to commit. King Lear thus affords the possibility of a peculiar form of tragic experience for playgoers, one defined less by the cathartic purging of emotion than by the halting, aversive hinting at something always just out of earshot. Whispering here is deployed not to create a sense of tragic inevitability, as I suggested above in the case of Julius Caesar. Instead, whispering helps shape the playgoers’ experience of the action not as satisfyingly, inevitably necessary, but instead as wrenchingly

58 Shakespeare (London: Jonathan Cape, 1961), 396.
unpredictable, an experience marked by repeated, communal dispossession of previously firmly held understandings.

In this chapter I have taken one theatrical technique—whispering—and examined its use in our corpus of extant early modern plays to understand its range of its theatrical effects. I also traced the use of the term in contemporary discourses to understand some of the associations—political and at times even prophetic—that it was able to bear. And finally, I turned to *King Lear* to understand how whispering works theatrically to heighten the play’s dramatic impact and to shape the playgoers’ collective experience of expectant incomprehension. I aim to have shown not that *King Lear* is actually doing something different from what we have always thought it did, but instead how *King Lear* does what it does *theatrically*, not by what it says but by what happens moment to moment in performance—and less by what is said aloud than by what remains unheard.
Coda

The four chapters of this dissertation do not cumulatively tell a single story. Tracing neither a chronological, thematic, or teleological narrative, they instead relate to one another as explorations of some—but not all—of the different ways that the institution of early modern English theater could instigate particular kinds of theatrical experience by making playgoers aware of what they do not yet know. Importantly, those experiences are varied, not only across the four techniques described in the four chapters, but also within them. For example, the withholding of information that theatrical whispering can achieve is linked to feelings of anticipation. But anticipation can take on different shadings: the apocalypticism hovering over King Lear—which I have argued finds a particular moment of intensity in the whispering between Lear and Edgar in 3.4—is quite unlike the more mundane anticipation of future visual, intellectual, and musical pleasures initiated by the whispering of Juno and Ceres to which Prospero calls the attention of Ferdinand and Miranda in 4.1 of The Tempest.

Theatrical affects can therefore be correlated to techniques of enigmatic theater in different ways. The evocation of the pleasures of audience anticipation is in fact essential to three of the four techniques: foreign languages, dumb shows, and whispering. Typically, foreign languages are explained soon after they occur; dumb shows’ meanings are unfolded by some kind of presenter; and whispering is the prolegomena to some kind of future revelation. But the techniques can be grouped according to other criteria, as well. A different trio of techniques—dumb shows, tautologies, and whispering—share a common initiation into the pleasures of unknowing. The techniques can also be grouped in terms of their solicitation of divided or unified audiences; most instances of untranslated foreign languages
and some early dumb shows encourage a sense of a divided audience, with the attendant
pleasures of feeling part of insider group that is in the know. The other two techniques—
tautologies and whispering—are by definition always resistant to the understanding of all
playgoers, encouraging a sense of commonality based on a shared deficiency. So although I
have argued for some of their shared features, the four techniques that I have taken up in this
dissertation cannot be clustered together by any consistent criteria.

This is not to say, however, that this dissertation has no conclusions. One of them, in
fact, is the simple claim that theatrical affects can be correlated to techniques of enigmatic
theater in different ways. I would also highlight three other key conclusions:

1. **There is an early modern theatrics of enigma.** Most fundamentally, this
dissertation establishes the existence of a field that has so far gone without a name:
an early modern “theatrics of enigma.” I have created this phrase by adapting the
much-better studied early modern “poetics of enigma”: a cluster of strategies,
expectations, and writing practices whereby writers and readers understood
themselves to be engaged at times in a game of wit that revolved around an often-
playful and willful refusal to make one’s writing easily understandable. The early
modern theatrics of enigma shares some of these qualities, especially its emphasis
on play. Yet however much the scene of private reading is always implicitly social
and communal, the scene of live (often outdoor) theater is fundamentally different,
even in its ways of being social and communal. Imagining other readers is not the
same as seeing other playgoers; the tactility of paper is not the tactility of the
bodies of other playgoers. By naming the theatrics of enigma as a discrete field of
study, this dissertation begins to chart both some of its distinctive features and its
points of contact with the place of the enigmatic in other domains of early modern English culture.

2. **The early modern theatrics of enigma encompasses multiple genres.** I have not restricted my focus in this dissertation to any one theatrical genre, however much I wish that I had been able to do so (it would have made this task much easier!). What I discovered during my research is the presence of this cluster of theatrical techniques across the important genres of early modern theater, as those genres were defined in both *A Warning for Fair Women* (in 1599) and Shakespeare’s First Folio (in 1623): comedy, tragedy, and history. Even within the chapters, the genres are mixed indiscriminately: for example, in chapter one I argued that the use of foreign languages in the history play *Henry V* draws on the tropes made available in comedy (in *The Weakest Goeth to the Wall*) and tragedy (in *The Tragedy of Alphonsus, King of Aragon*). Similarly, the tautologizing clowns and villains of chapter three are taken from comedies, tragedies, and histories. My point is not that enigmatic theater achieves uniform effects irrespective of genre; it is instead that early modern enigmatic theater turns out to be a decidedly multigeneric phenomenon.

3. **The playhouse was one space in early modern culture where issues of knowledge are linked to issues of belonging.** The medium of live theatrical performance, I have been arguing, can enable the recalibration of playgoers’ relationships to one another during a performance. At times, playgoers are hailed as members of different collectives, while at others they are gathered together as a single group. By taking up the language of “collectives,” I mean to articulate a
slightly different perspective in the critical conversation about theatrical publics in early modern England. Much of this work has shown how theater could shape and engage its audiences by involving them in the deliberative activities that have led some to argue for the theater’s role in the creation and participation in an early modern “public sphere.” I share with much of this recent work the premise that recognizing the presence of massed bodies of playgoers is an essential first step in understanding some of the kinds of social work performed by the early modern theater. But I differ from much of this scholarship in my emphasis that the theater can also solicit the formation of a playgoing collective by making their commonalities present, visible, known, and felt by at times excluding them from the position of those who are in the know. The withholding of information from playgoers can give rise to a different temporary form of collectively felt existence, one whose shape is defined not by participation in a common political project—not, in other words, by a sense of being an insider—but by a shared sense of cognitive failure that itself can paradoxically generate a not-unpleasurable sense of mere common feeling.

I’ll close by drawing out some of this dissertation’s resonances with our own critical moment, one gripped at times by an anxiety over the possibilities of knowing. In my estimation, clusters of ideas that have gathered under rubrics like “surface reading” or “limits of critique” (however different those rubrics in fact are) share a sense that we might at the moment know too much, or that at least we might know wrongly. This dissertation is not an intervention into these very much worthwhile conversations. But I do think it worthwhile to point out the perils of aligning a stance of cool detachment—one prescinding from the
exploration of “depth” or the supposedly-humorless rigors of “critique”—with cutting-edge scholarship. I began this dissertation by noting the prestige that attaches to the posture of above-it-all-ness, according to which attempts to ferret out secrets and to ask what lies beneath is to prove oneself a Malvolio. Some of that same prestige, I suggest, attaches to our contemporary modes of resistance to interpretation, whereby what is denigrated as “paranoid” or “symptomatic” reading has been reduced in prestige in favor of “surface” reading, “distant” reading, or “post-critical” reading.

Despite my obvious affinities for these newer approaches—I have repeatedly read for surfaces in the preceding chapters—I am made uneasy by the unearned cachet of this posture of cool disengagement, whereby one foregoes the potentially humiliating perils of exegesis in fear (perhaps) of showing oneself to be a bit too earnest, too serious, and thus a bit too credulous, like Malvolio, always crushing texts a little. I have traced some the ways in which the pleasures and effects of early modern theater are at times dependent upon cultivating an ability to resist this urge to ferret out meaning everywhere. Yet I would also insist that however much we gain by at times declining to engage in the game of interpretation, to proceed by rigorously committing oneself to the austerities of “description” or “surfaces”—in short, the austerities proper to a world of sheer immanence—is to consign us to a malingering existence in the flatlands, foregoing (to our loss) the various possibilities for transcending the given: whether political, erotic, religious, or otherwise.
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