Title
Spectatorial Risk: Performing Uncertainty in Early Modern Europe

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2n39k0bw

Author
Short, Jim

Publication Date
2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

Spectatorial Risk: Performing Uncertainty in Early Modern Europe

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Drama and Theatre

by

Jim Short

Committee in charge:

University of California San Diego

      Professor Janet Smarr, Chair
      Professor Julie Burelle
      Professor Robert Henke
      Professor Jade Power-Sotomayor
      Professor Daniel Vitkus

University of California, Irvine

      Professor Ian Munro

2021

The dissertation of Jim Short is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form

for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

University of California, Irvine

2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

2008   Bachelor of Arts Magna Cum Laude, Theatre and History, Rhodes College, Memphis, TN

2015   Master of Arts, Theatre and Performance Studies, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri

2021   Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre, University of California San Diego & University of California, Irvine

PUBLICATIONS

Short, Jim. "Layering Spectatorship: Live and Mediated Bodies in Stein|Holum Projects' *The Wholehearted*." *TheatreForum* 51 (2017): 76-82.

Short, Jim. "More Books." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 65, no. 3 Fall, 2021, pp. TBD.

Short, Jim. "So Say We All's *Incoming*: Fostering Community Over Beer." *Theatre Forum* 52 (2017): 44-45.

Short, Jim. "*Quest 3.0*: Instilling Agency Through Interactive Drama." *Theatre Forum* 52 (2017): 49.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Spectatorial Risk: Performing Uncertainty in Early Modern Europe

by

Jim Short

Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California San Diego, 2021
University of California, Irvine, 2021

Professor Janet Smarr, Chair

Spectatorial Risk explores the triangulation of performance, spectatorship, and risk. The project develops a new critical lens through which to read and analyze the spectator's relationship to risky materials presented on the stage and unpacks the diverse ways that risk is understood, internalized, and managed. This proximate and reciprocal relationship between performed risk and the audience—what I have termed *spectatorial risk*—attempts to dissect how the spectator interacts with theatre's unknowability. It not only encompasses the pleasures and dangers that *attract* audience members to performances of risk but also helps articulate the possible ways they might *respond* to that risk. After constructing a new critical lens to read the

spectator's and theatre-maker's engagement with risk, this project explores performances of and responses to risk in Early Modern Europe. The project not only argues that this period was a particularly innovative moment of theatre history in which the negotiations of risks between theatre-makers and spectators were especially salient but also draws attention to distinct patterns of significant spectatorial risk produced by disparate theatre traditions. This project, therefore, offers interventions into the fields of both audience response and Early Modern theatre historiography.

The chapters of this work are organized along parallel tracks of increasing risks to the spectator and distinct forms of Early Modern performance. It begins with the spectatorial risk to theatrical form through an interrogation of English children's companies, drawing heavily from new analyses of John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* and Ben Jonson's *Epicene* to frame the children as sites by which anything might happen. Next, it inspects the spectatorial risk to morality through exploring the salacious improvisation of Italy's *commedia dell'arte*. Here, the works of Tristano Martinelli and Flaminio Scala demonstrate how an air of unpredictability consciously fostered a risk to moral norms. Finally, this project explores the spectatorial risk to self through performances of witchcraft in which audiences became complicit with forbidden and damning practices. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and the collaboratively written *The Witch of Edmonton* are spotlighted as examples that implicated spectators in the sacrilegious world of witchcraft.

Introduction

The Intersection of Risk, Spectatorship, and Theatre-Making

In June of 2019, an exciting time in which this research project was just beginning to

materialize, New York's Times Square was spellbound with an exciting event of its own. Nik

and Lijana Wallenda, siblings of the renowned Flying Wallendas, attempted to tightrope across

the iconic streets below. Twenty-five stories up, the daredevil performers began at opposite sides

of the 1,300-foot crossing. Below, throngs of spectators craned their necks and anxiously

watched as the siblings made their way towards one another (Figure 1). Lijana reached the center

first and carefully, skillfully sat down upon the tightrope, making herself as small as possible so

that Nik might step over her. Looking up, the audience held their collective breath. Hoping.

Wondering. Praying. With precision, knowing that one wrong move—a twitch, a lean, a

misstep—would spell disaster, Nik cautiously stepped over his sister. Lijana rose, and the two

successfully completed their performance by making it to the opposite end from which they

began. The crowd below, whose steady encouragement had been punctuated with moments of

stillness in which you could have heard a pin drop, erupted into cheers and applause. In a city of

infinite entertainments, the Flying Wallendas had entranced spectators; indeed, one reporter

noted that tourists and jaded locals alike seemed "for the moment immune to the flashy

billboards and other distractions" that characterize Times Square.[1] The Flying Wallendas had

captivated their audience not only through their skilled performance but by welcoming spectators

to join them on a figurative tightrope where success would redefine what is possible in this world

and failure guaranteed certain tragedy. In other words, the performers invited their audience to

share the stakes of their risky venture.

---

[1] Corey Kilgannon, "'Flying Wallendas' Cross Times Square on High Wire in Death-Defying Stunt," *New York Times*, June 23, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/23/nyregion/flying-wallendas-times-square.html.

Figure 1. An enthralled crowd watching Nik and Lijana Wallenda as they perform a tightrope performance twenty-five stories above Times Square on June 24th, 2019.

The inherent risk of tightrope walking pervaded the news coverage in the weeks leading up to the public stunt. In particular, two major headlines dominated the news coverage. The first revolved around Lijana's near-fatal 2017 fall. During a rehearsal for an 8-person pyramid high-wire act, the company lost their footing and fell, resulting in numerous severe injuries. Rushed to the hospital, Lijana's status was perhaps most critical; she suffered from broken ribs, a shattered arm, and a punctured ear canal and liver in addition to breaking every bone in her face that required three plates and seventy-two screws to repair. The June tightrope walk over Times Square was set to be Lijana's first major ascent since her accident. Media coverage constantly reminded viewers of Lijana's previous fall and speculated on the possibility that she might fall again. Replaying previous interviews in which Lijana describes being intimidated and nervous to

climb back up on the high-wire, some media outlets even wondered *if* she would make the attempt. For instance, *Good Morning America*, just two days before the event, highlighted Lijana's trauma, describing how "her physical and mental recovery is [sic] a daily struggle" and how "her confidence is now shaken" before speculating that she might even back out of the challenge.[2] Lijana's near-death experience became a vital part of the Times Square daredevil attempt as it reinforced the fatal consequences that might occur.

If the coverage of Lijana's former accident added extra suspense to the Wallendas' upcoming stunt, another headline worked to underplay the stakes of the event. Although the Flying Wallendas famously prefer to work without nets and harnesses—which they view as a false sense of safety and an inhibitor of mental and physical acuity—the city of New York required the performers to wear tethered safety harnesses in case of a fall. News of the required safety precautions sparked a sense of cynicism and diminished enthusiasm both leading up to the event and during the stunt itself. If *Good Morning America*'s segment on Lijana hoped to drum up suspense, public reactions to the video were scattered with dismissive comments. One user noted, "She will be wearing a safety device so this isn't too thrilling" while another echoed, "They are tied off, no one cares."[3] During the event, one sulking onlooker confided that the high-wire walk would have been much more exciting if the Wallendas had not worn the harnesses but admitted that "it would also be more messy if they fell to their deaths."[4] While the news of mandated harnesses might have allayed fears of witnessing a gruesome death, it also seemed to curb some enthusiasm.

---

[2] "Lijana Wallenda prepares for high-wire walk," *Good Morning America,* June 21, 2019, video, 3:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvTazT5adaU.
[3] RFI-Crypto Lab, June 23, 2019 (5:58 p.m.); GT1Man, June 23, 2019 (6:21 p.m.), comments on *Good Morning America*, "Lijana Wallenda prepares for high-wire walk."
[4] Kilgannon, "'Flying Wallendas' Cross Times Square on High Wire in Death-Defying Stunt."

These two major headlines can be read as a negotiation of risk for not only the performers but, importantly, the spectators as well. For the Flying Wallendas, a negotiation of risk signified a balance between life and death. While the steady stream of stories and interviews that focused on Lijana highlighted the possibility of another tragic accident—*increasing* the amount of risk present at the event—, the logistical realities created through tethered harnesses meant that the duo could still risk falling, but that failure would not amount to death—*decreasing* the risk of catastrophe. This negotiation of risk applies equally to spectators. While audience members were not putting their lives on the (literal) line, media coverage negotiated the proximate risk for spectators to witness and experience a life-changing event. Through the highlighting of Lijana's previous accident and her determination to try again, audiences were able to comprehend and share in the stakes of the performance; they might witness an acute tragedy or take part in a collective reimagining of human limitations. This shared connection to the performance and its possible outcomes was especially evident in Times Square as one observer, safe on the ground, noted, "I don't even like heights, so I can feel my heart racing."[5] In this way, the risks of the high-wire act were experienced vicariously by those on the ground. The use of harnesses, however, mitigated the spectator's experience of risk. In the more controlled framing of the performance, the safety precautions limited the possibility that the audience might witness something too far beyond the limits of acceptable entertainment. This combination of acceptability and indeterminacy produced an alluring performance of risk that captivated audiences as they held their breath and prepared for whatever outcome might ensue.

As the Flying Wallendas conquered the iconic New York skyline, risking their very lives to challenge conventional limits, they reaffirmed how risk and performance are inherently

---

[5] Kilgannon, "'Flying Wallendas' Cross Times Square on High Wire in Death-Defying Stunt."

intertwined. Lijana's near-death experience reminds spectators that regardless of the performer's expertise, neither the amateur nor the professional can guarantee that everything will go as planned. This naturally extends beyond the extreme feats of daredevils to a wide variety of performances, such as kicking that winning field goal, delivering that flawless business proposal, or eloquently reciting that memorable monologue from *Hamlet*. Similarly, this indeterminacy extends past the performer's ability to succeed in *their* part as even the most flawless productions have little power over factors outside their control, such as potential disruptions from outside sources or the public's response to what is presented on-stage. Despite practice, there is always the risk that the unexpected might occur or that something might go wrong. This intrinsic coupling of risk to performance has even led scholars such as Stuart Grant to note that it is risk itself that *defines* performance. He contends that any event becomes a performance only through the "underlying temporality of risk" and the "specific structure of expectation."[6] For Grant, live performance is imbued with expectations that may or may not be satisfied in the present moment.

The audience in Times Square—looking up with craned necks and anticipating the outcome with hushed voices—reminds us that risk is not merely a factor to be navigated by performers but by spectators as well. Indeed, as the stage is tied to risk, it begs the consideration of how the spectator is drawn to and engages with the risky unknowability of performance. What, for instance, tempts the crowds to participate in the Flying Wallendas' act over another performance? After all, our contemporary moment offers spectators seemingly endless entertainment choices, so what is the appeal of a seemingly antiquated tight-rope walk? What is the role of risk in spectatorship?

---

[6] Stuart Grant, "What If? Performance is Risk," *About Performance* 12, (2014): 127.

This research project, then, is all about risk. Not the risk that is innate in all live performance—will the actors remember their lines? Will the staged combat look believable? Will the audience respond positively to the jokes? —but the risk that is experienced by *spectators* at the event. This experience of risk extends beyond the qualitative judgement of the performance. While the risk that a performance will not be perceived as "good" or "worth the money" certainly plays a role in every spectator's decision to give their time and money to see a show, this project is more concerned with the risks spectators experience in the unknowability of performance itself. As such, the word "might" has steadily pervaded my imagination as a means to conceptualize the audiences' uncertainty that stretches from what *might* happen in a performance to what *might* happen to the spectators themselves? What might be seen or heard? What dangers or failures might be encountered? What new ideas might be revealed that challenge social assumptions? What might happen to *me* while watching? Might I witness a fatal accident through a misstep on a high-wire? Might the lion in a circus act refuse to follow commands or even escape into the stands? Might the actor in a Shakespearean tragedy simply refuse to play his part or usurp the production for his own amusement? Might Doctor Faustus really conjure demons onto the stage? Might a performer be arrested for performing illicit or banned content? Might I be apprehended as well? This litany of questions, which is only a minuscule fragment of potential uncertainties, underscores the relationship between performance—its actors, scripts, properties, and stage actions—and the spectator as inherently ineffable and unknowable. Despite this, the "might" that is associated with risk is a powerful force that attracts audiences and holds them in suspense throughout the performance event.

This research project investigates how the pleasures and dangers of what *might* happen in a performance frames risk as an important discursive tool and object of study. Looking

backwards to the performative antecedents of risk that eventually lead to modern daredevil performances such as the Flying Wallendas, this project inspects Early Modern Europe as a site in which risk and spectatorship overlapped in conscious, meaningful, and economic ways. Through interrogating the interactions between performance, risk, and spectatorship, I hope to contribute a fresh perspective to both theatre historiography and the field of audience response. In particular, this project seeks to fulfill two main goals:

First, I hope to develop a new critical lens through which to read and analyze the spectator's relationship to risk. I propose a new framework that approaches the intersection of performance and spectatorship to explore the diverse ways that risk is understood, internalized, and managed. This proximate and reciprocal relationship between performed risk and the audience—what I have termed *spectatorial risk*—attempts to dissect how the spectator interacts with theatre's unknowability. It not only encompasses the pleasures and dangers that *attract* audience members to performances of risk but also helps articulate the possible ways they might *respond* to that risk. Importantly, these responses are both personal for individual spectators but also reflect normative conventions that are socially produced. In other words, I hope that a new critical lens through which to read spectatorial risk can help process the spectator's potential range of experiences on both a personal and social level. Again, I rely on the conditional phrases of "might" and "potential" not only to acknowledge the frustrating lack of archival documents from spectators but to address the heterogeneity of the audience that extends beyond class and gender and remembers that real people, like you and me, attend the theatre with distinct desires, anticipations, and anxieties. Indeed, this research project is not the first attempt to conceptualize and articulate the experience of risk from the audience's point of view. However, as we will see below, former attempts by scholars to theorize risk are narrow and limit the full range of possible

motives and responses present for spectators and theatre-makers alike. Finally, this project hopes

that a broader, more encompassing lens to analyze spectatorial risk will also account for the

diverse types of performative risk available to audiences. Just as spectators are not the same and

experience risk in different ways, the forms and strategies of performed risk are also diverse.

This project will inspect three distinct modes of spectatorial risk to demonstrate the flexibility of

our critical lens; we will examine the possible fascinations of and response to performances that

asked spectators to engage in risks to theatrical form, risks to morality, and even risks to their

physical and spiritual selves.

Second, I hope to explore the ways performance, risk, and spectatorship interacted in

meaningful ways across Early Modern Europe. I argue that this period was a particularly

innovative moment of theatre history in which the negotiations of risks between theatre-makers

and spectators were especially salient. Early Modern consumers encountered a myriad of

entertainment opportunities produced within the emerging mercantilist economy of the sixteenth

and early seventeenth centuries. Just as our present, digital moment has instigated a seemingly

endless array of entertainment options that has pushed artists to create increasingly innovative

and provocative material, the introduction of the public theatre in Europe inaugurated a new era

of theatrical competition in which spectators sought new experiences and theatre-makers

endeavored to offer novel, challenging, and unpredictable productions. Importantly, this project

does not make the claim that the relationship between risk and spectatorship originated during

this period. Its objective, instead, is to highlight Early Modern Europe as a spatial and temporal

site in which this connection was increasingly reflected upon by spectators and deliberately

constructed by theatre-makers. Similarly, this project does not make the claim that risk was an

equally prominent factor across the continent and pronounced in all forms of the period's

entertainment. Instead, I hope to draw attention to distinct patterns of significant spectatorial risk produced by disparate theatre traditions. Through investigating the unique unpredictability of English boy companies, the counter-normative improvisation of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, and the dangerous imitation of witchcraft on stage, I argue that the similarities of manufacturing and consuming risk demonstrate a broad dramaturgical pattern that has not yet been explored. In addition to examining how the period's spectators interpreted, internalized, and responded to performances of on-stage risk, this project is interested in how certain theatres, actors, playwrights, companies, and plays capitalized on this notion of spectatorial risk through intentionally constructing themselves and their work as sites where or by which something *might* happen. Far from seeing risk as uniform, this project looks to take advantage of spectatorial risk's flexibility to demonstrate the varied ways theatre-makers in Early Modern Europe marketed risk as a distinct and enticing product.

It is my hope, therefore, that this project will not only offer a new way of interpreting the intersection of performance, risk, and the spectator, but that its critical lens will allow for a fresh investigation of the dynamic theatrical culture of Early Modern Europe. Imagining spectatorial risk—the relationship between performed risk and the audience—can help us better understand the complicated balance and entwined connection between theatre-makers and consumers, actors and audience. I acknowledge the inherent unknowability of risk that pervades many performance events and traditions across spatial and temporal boundaries. While this investigation is historically and geographically situated, I invite others to use the critical lens of this project to explore spectatorial risk elsewhere. I hope the work here can lead others to new insights and interpretations of both the theatre archive and contemporary performances.

Multifaceted Risk: Unpacking a Concept

Before we are able to theorize spectatorial risk and explore the triangular relationship between performance, risk, and the audience, it is essential to unpack risk itself as a concept. Here, we will work to unravel risk from its multitude of usages across diverse fields before turning to examine how the term has been employed in relationship to performance. As we will discover, while discourse around risk appears ubiquitous, the limited scholarship on the audience's perception of risk demands a new formulation.

To talk about risk is a challenge as the term is exceptionally multifaceted, with a multitude of competing definitions and theories that span both time and academic disciplines. Psychologist Rüdiger Trimpop notes that "there are almost as many ways to study and define risk as there are researchers,"[7] while sociologist David Garland beautifully notes the variety of understandings around risk:

> Today's accounts of risk are remarkable for their multiplicity and for the variety of senses they give to the term. Risk is a calculation. Risk is a commodity. Risk is a capital. Risk is a technique of government. Risk is objective and scientifically knowable. Risk is subjective and socially constructed. Risk is a problem, a threat, a source of insecurity. Risk is a pleasure, a thrill, a source of profit and freedom. Risk is the means whereby we colonize and control the future. Risk society is our late modern world spinning out of control.[8]

Risk, then, occupies a position of intersecting and conflicting meanings. How sociologists conceptualize risk offers similarities and differences to the psychologist, economist, political theorist, philosopher, and performer. Garland's description, furthermore, highlights the amorphous character of the semantic use of "risk." Across time and academic fields, the word "risk" occasionally seems interchangeable with uncertainty, probability, danger, (mis)fortune,

---

[7] Rüdiger M. Trimpop, *The Psychology of Risk Taking Behavior* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1994), 4.
[8] David Garland, "The Rise of Risk," in *Risk and Morality*, ed. Richard V. Ericson and Aaron Doyle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 49.

threat, and chance. While at times interchangeable, these terms also claim distinct uses by different theorists. For modern risk-management, for instance, risk portrays a quantifiable uncertainty (e.g., a 20 percent chance of a disease developing), and a case of pure uncertainty is one that cannot be quantifiably estimated.

Similar to the debate over semantics is that concerning subjectivity. For whom is a risk a risk? How does one distinguish between objective risks such as walking across a busy highway and subjective risks such as declining a vaccination? In performance, this might be comparable in distinguishing between an objective risk of being singled-out and teased by a stand-up comedian and the subjective risk of witnessing salacious material. Trimpop argues that this difference of objective and subjective risk always boils down to the level of the individual risk-taker. He notes that "only if an action is known or believed to bear harmful consequences [for the individual] can it become subjectively experienced as risk."[9] This distinction and discussion of subjectivities unveils new layers for those thinking of risk on the social level as one considers the social aspect of risks as inter-subjective.

Disagreement about risk even pertains to history, and in particular, when "risk" was first conceptualized and used as an ontological construct. For some, notions of risk have always been part of the human experience. Trimpop and Jakob Arnoldi note a long history of the relationship between risk and various forms of insurance.[10] Peter L. Bernstein argues in *Against the Gods,* however, for a truly long history of risk. He investigates ancient civilizations' relationships with insurance and games to point to a long-standing concept of risk. According to Bernstein, although always part of how one views the world, risk *does* change over time due to social

---

[9] Trimpop, *The Psychology of Risk Taking Behavior,* 11.
[10] Both Arnoldi and Trimpop engage with a cursory investigation of the history of risk only in order to distinguish it from post-industrial developments of risk. See Arnoldi, *Risk: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 26-28 and Trimpop, *The Psychology of Risk Taking Behavior*, 1-3.

developments including religion and mathematics. He argues that until the Renaissance, humans actively engaged with risk but in a cavalier manner "with no real understanding of risk or the nature of decision-making."[11] Through the Reformation and Pascal's development of probability theory, both individuals and society shifted away from their perception of the future as something either left to chance or predetermined as "fate" and began endeavoring to take control of their lives. Important to our discussion here of how to conceptualize Early Modern risk, Bernstein traces the development of seventeenth-century probability theory a full century before to Girolamo Cardano's treatise on gambling *Liber de Ludo Aleae* (*Book on Games of Chance*). Bernstein points to this treatise as "the first serious effort to develop the statistical principles of probability" although Cardano refers to probability and risk only as "chances."[12] Regardless of linguistic nuances, Bernstein demonstrates that Early Modern society was actively contemplating the future (at least in games and entertainment) in terms of what *might* be.

For many others, however, "risk" is an exceptionally modern concept.[13] Scholars, especially in the social sciences, have linked risk to modernism and capitalism and have identified the nascent forms of modern risk as having emerged in Victorian England before spreading industrialized societies. Risk here was tied to emerging technologies and a government's attempts to mitigate dangers and threats for both individuals and the state. Discourse surrounding risk intensified throughout the twentieth century and, by the late 1980s and early 90s, the role that risk played at both the local and national level proliferated throughout conversations in politics, economics, public policy, and medicine. During this time, sociologists

---

[11] Peter L. Bernstein, *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996), 4.

[12] Bernstein, *Against the Gods*, 48.

[13] Envisioning risk as a post-industrial concept is especially true in the field of sociology. See Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992), Mary Douglas' *Risk and Culture* (1982), Jakob Arnoldi's *Risk: An Introduction* (2009), and Jonathan Simon's "Edgework and Insurance in Risk Societies" (2005) among others.

Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens produced influential theories attempting to explain how risk has influenced, and continues to influence, society. Beck, terming the late twentieth century both a "second modernity" and a "risk society," focuses on how the development of technologies produced new benefits as well as new risks. Arguing that the "gain in power from techno-economic 'progress' is being increasingly overshadowed by the production of risks,"[14] Beck explores how these newly developed risks have spurred new social conversations concerning power, such as how risk should be distributed and who should be allowed to subject others to such risks. Giddens, in his theory of "risk culture," argues that modernity's increasing attention to risk has impacted our self-identity. Unlike Beck, Giddens does not necessarily believe that the world is any more or less risky than it used to be, but that risk has become a central formative idea through which individuals "organize the social world."[15] In a period in which people must increasingly rely on the disparate opinions of "authorities," Giddens points to arguments regarding who and what to trust in relation to various risks as having produced a new brand of individualism in late-modernity. Beck and Giddens, then, reflect large scholarly attempts to analyze the effects that the increased attention and perception of risk has on society.

Other scholars reinforce risk as a modern and post-modern construct by drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality and investigating how capitalism has incorporated risk into consumer products. Governmentality theory looks at the role risk plays in the governance of subjects. From government-funded campaigns against smoking to insurance screenings for possible health concerns, governmentality plays a strong role in our current neoliberal society. It influences how governments shield the population against certain risks but

---

[14] Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 12.
[15] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 3.

induce them to take others framed as entrepreneurship.[16] Sociologists, moreover, argue that risk-taking as a product within our capitalist society is a particularly modern maneuver. The commodification of risk, for example, is visible via pre-packaged adventures of white-water rafting, safari hunting, or sky-diving.[17] As will be shown, packaging risk in this way became a strategy by which some Early Modern theatre-makers marketed their performances.

In sum, many scholars in sociology, psychology, business, economics, ecology, and medicine have attempted to make sense of larger trends toward fearing risks in the forms of ecological disasters and terrorisms, mitigating risks through systems of insurance, and even taking risks framed as neoliberal entrepreneurism. Spanning history, discipline, and semantics, risk proves to be a multifaceted and unwieldy concept.

Given the complex history and technical nuances of risk, it might be no surprise that the relationship between risk and performance is equally fragmented, complicated, and contested. As broad social and philosophical trends like Beck's "risk society" and Giddens' "risk culture" reveal the steady permeation of risk into modern discourse, theatre scholars and artists alike have slowly begun to question the role of risk in the theatre. Still, although Alice O'Grady notes that scholarly attention to risk has been "on trend" as of late,[18] the intersection of risk and spectatorship has thus far been a severely underexplored topic. Theatre scholars who *have* considered the presence of risk have taken note of the increasing prevalence of, and reliance on, risk in performance—perhaps a seemingly ironic characteristic given social scientists' construction of risk as something to be managed or avoided all together. From bodily risks,

---

[16] Arnoldi, *Risk: An Introduction,* 56-60.

[17] For a further discussion of the commodification of risk, see Stephen Lyng, "Edgework and the Risk-Taking Experience," in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, ed. Stephen Lyng (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3-14.

[18] Alice O'Grady, preface to *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World*, ed. Alice O'Grady (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), vii.

present in daredevils like the Flying Wallendas, to more structurally and cognitively

unpredictable risks, such as those encountered in immersive and participatory theatres, risk

seems to be an increasingly proliferating theme in twentieth and twenty-first century

performance. Most discussions of risk thus far have been centered on the performer in attempts

to answer questions regarding their motivations and experiences. Scholars have only begun to

extend these considerations to the relationship between risk and the spectator. Efforts to address

the questions of why spectators are drawn to risky acts, what is their experience while watching

risk, and how is the unknowability of risk promoted have begun and are certainly promising but

are often limited to how the spectator engages with risk within a specific production and lose

their ability to be applied more broadly. Working to situate my own research project, I find it

helpful to distinguish between the two main arenas of scholarship involving risk and the

spectator: the audience as witness to risk and the audience as risking.[19] These lanes of

interrogation are not mutually exclusive but, instead, overlap as frequently as elements of

performance do.

      If risk is continually avoided or tamed in one's quotidian life, what is the allure of seeing

it enacted in performance? As Alice O'Grady observes within her edited collection, *Risk,*

Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World, risk

thrives because modern audiences actively seek out new performative experiences. Noting a

"thirst for performances that promote, encourage, and embrace risky encounters,"[20] O'Grady

---

[19] A third area of closely related scholarship might be categorized as research investigating risk as a marketable strategy. While insightful and occasionally fruitful, this work is often tangential to the actual theatre—the main focus of this research project—and prioritizes the works of individual companies and productions as producing meaning rather than the spectators' experience. For interesting and diverse examples of this literature, see Catherine Clepper, "'Death by Fright': Risk, Consent, and Evidentiary Objects in William Castle's Rigged Houses," *Film History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 54-84, and Adam Alston, "'Tell No One': Secret Cinema and the Paradox of Secrecy," in *Performance and Participation: Practices, Audiences, Politics*, eds. Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson (New York: Palgrave: 2017), 145-163.

[20] O'Grady, preface to *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice*, viii.

broadly defines risk in performance as anything that challenges normative assumptions or paradigms. Risky performance in her volume, therefore, is widely considered through the lenses of aesthetics, psychology, emotion, structure, society, and politics. Regardless of the boundary being pushed, risk in performance attempts to cater to "a yearning for feeling, for rawness, edginess, livid and vivid experience that is missing from other spheres of daily life."[21] Exploring what she labels as "risky aesthetics," O'Grady continues that an array of performances practices have developed in response to this new impulse by audiences towards experiences that are novel or provocative in some way. While risky aesthetics cover a large field and include strategies meant to provide spectators with the thrill, challenge, or intimacy they crave, these practices collectively operate "in the openness, in the gaps, in the margins of uncertainty" in which "spaces and moments of potentiality are made possible."[22] For O'Grady, spectators engage with risk in an attempt to seek out new experiences not offered or even possible in their everyday lives; witnessing risk permits the expansion of ideas. Through disparate aesthetics, furthermore, theatre-makers actively cater to this increased demand for risky content.

Whereas O'Grady combines individual and cultural motives for spectators to seek out new experiences, Dror Harari connects different periods of witnessing risk to larger philosophical movements. Citing a distinction between the risks enacted on stage in the modern and post-modern periods, Harari argues that the risk encountered by spectators corresponds to larger trends in social thought. For Harari, risk in the modern theatre served an antiestablishment agenda. Viewing risk-taking during this period as an "indispensable strategy of ethical and aesthetic change," he argues that this risk was employed in order to "undermine certain pervasive regimes of performance that serve[d] realist representation and reflect[ed] the modern idea of the

---

[21] O'Grady, preface to *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice*, x.
[22] O'Grady, preface to *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice*, x.

calculability of uncertainties."[23] Post-modern risk-taking, he continues, abandons the modernist optimism in efficacious performance and, instead, positions risk as an expected and banal performative that has integrated itself into individuals' daily lives. Harari positions both modes of risk-taking on stage as reflective strategies to be witnessed by spectators. Audiences have the opportunity to witness and cognitively interact with risk to reveal new insights unto themselves of their relationship with these broader social themes. Unlike O'Grady, who posits risky aesthetics as something dictated by spectators and fulfilled by practitioners, Harari conceptualizes risk as falling into larger categories that represent discursive functions of social thought.

Bruce Barton draws from very recent examples to expand upon what is considered "risky" on stage and how audiences desire risk. Artistic Director of Vertical City, an interdisciplinary performance hub in Calgary, Canada, Barton, in his artistic and scholarly work, explores the current need for sincerity and intimacy in a world characterized by automation, speed, and efficiency. Combining sets made of a large jungle of scaffolding and semi-autonomous interactive technologies with moments of quiet intimacy, Barton interprets his audience's need for risk as really one for "a generous, vulnerable concession of the fragility of theatrical intimacy amidst the aggressive, performative excess that reflects contemporary social experience."[24] His theatre draws parallels between individuals hiding behind their phones and busy schedules with theatres that reproduce elaborate spectacles for spectacle's sake in order for him to underscore the real risks of theatrical and social behavior that come with self-revealing behavior. Audiences, then, are encouraged to witness moments of intimacy, challenging them to conceive of new ways to be present with others in the twenty-first century.

---

[23] Dror Harari, "Risk in Performance: Facing the Future," *Theatre Research International* 34, no. 2 (2009): 175.
[24] Bruce Barton, "Subtle Spectacle: Risking Theatricality with Vertical City," *About Performance* 12 (2014): 103.

In the scholarly exploration of how spectators witness risk, it is important to note that all three of the scholars discussed endeavor to contextualize risk in a given historical moment. All three implicitly follow larger sociological trends and acknowledge how modernity has produced both new risks and new attention to risks that dictate how we navigate the world and come to understand our very identity. For these scholars, the act of a spectator witnessing risk on stage cues larger reflections onto the current state of the world as well as onto which fundamental aspects of existence are, and are not, currently being provided by everyday life.

If a few recent scholars have begun looking at how contemporary spectators *watch* risk, the surge of immersive and participatory theatres in recent years has caused a larger influx of consideration on how spectators *directly engage* with risk. As expected, however, there are a variety of claims that attempt to parse the phenomenological experience of spectating into embodied and cognitive forms. For some, such as Matthew Reason, the risky experience by audience members is contingent on their willingness to participate, directly or indirectly, with their interlocutors. Describing his theory as a "committed return," Reason argues that simple physical presence at a performance does not guarantee experiencing anything, let alone risk; instead, engagement requires a conscious willingness to commit oneself to the live event. Transforming the notion of participatory theatre into a term that highlights the verb-tense of engagement, Reason posits that "participatory audiencing," through an act of invested spectatorship, allows audiences to "make a committed return to both the performance and their experience of the performance."[25] Reason's argument highlights the agency of the spectator; they are ultimately in control as to whether or not to be open to experiencing risk in the theatre.

---

[25] Matthew Reason, "Participatory Audiencing and The Committed Return," in *Staging Spectators in Immersive Performances: Commit Yourself!* Eds. Doris Kolesch, Theresa Schütz, and Sophie Nikoleit (New York: Routledge, 2019), 89.

Opposite of Reason, N. R. Helms removes the spectator's agency and postulates performance as an inherently risky medium as audiences are *always* implicated. Constructing a theory of "spectator risk," Helms combines Bruce McConachie's conceptual blending, Alvin Goldman's mindreading, and Robert M. Gordon's simulation theory to explore how spectators are inherently implicated in performance and become active participants, "risking themselves by using their identities as material for an understanding of performance."[26] Just as performers sacrifice elements of their selfhood in the adoption and performance of a character, spectators too abandon social and psychological barriers to simulate themselves within the performance. As a form of empathic construction, this simulation leads audience members to experience new states of arousal and to imagine integrating new ontologies and epistemologies. Helms continues that unlike the actor, however, who risks their own identity for the purpose of their craft or product, audience members risk efficacious and even permanent change to *themselves*. He notes that "the parts of the self that the spectator risks in the theatrical event—these sacrifices of imagination, experience, emotion, and critical awareness—are not simply on loan," but may constitute permanent change.[27] The experience of the spectator is perceived as venturing onto the stage and into the staged action only to eventually return, prompting a blending of the self and another that must now live within the audience member. For Helms, then, spectator risk becomes an ethical discussion that performance-makers must have before they engage with their audiences. He reminds practitioners that performances become risky exchanges in which spectators might, consciously or not, painstakingly or with ease, have themselves dramatically altered.

---

[26] N. R. Helms, "'Upon Such Sacrifices': An Ethic of Spectator Risk," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 27, no. 1 (2012): 91.
[27] Helms, "'Upon Such Sacrifices': An Ethic of Spectator Risk," 96.

If Reason and Helms can be read a representing dialectical opposites in the debate on a performance's inherent risk to the spectator, others explore specific ways in which audiences actively engage with risk. Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson, for instance, explore the ways in which spectators engage with political risks. Looking specifically at participatory theory, Harpin and Nicholson connect direct participation with democracy; the ways in which spectators collaborate, add ideas, voice disagreements, or simply provide their eyes and ears as responsive embodiments within performance echo similar enactments within the public sphere and political arena. They acknowledge, furthermore, that similar to the theatre more generally, spectators can experience these political risks differently based on how they choose to (or refuse to) participate. While performances and spectators vary, causing the experience of political risks on audience members to range, they argue that all participatory theatre inherently speaks to the individual's agency, which, as a political act, is "experienced, denied, or exercised."[28] For instance, they recognize that some cautious spectators might simply witness and learn how action can lead to rewards and punishments in the public sphere while others might be inspired by their own political power and driven "towards a tyrannical mode of hegemonic practice."[29] Similar to Helms' risk to the spectator's identity, Harpin and Nicholson's interrogation of political risk posits the spectator's self as receptive to discovering new ways of engaging. Whether the content of the performance speaks to politics or is centered on an entirely different topic, the act of participation enables interlocutors to imagine themselves in similar social situations or to simply practice discursive engagement in a communal setting.

---

[28] Harpin and Nicholson, "Performance and Participation," 8.

[29] Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson, "Performance and Participation," in *Performance and Participation: Practices, Audiences, Politics*, eds. Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson (New York: Palgrave: 2017), 3.

In "Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value," Adam Alston also links participatory theatre to the spectator's agency. Alston specifically inspects the recent trend towards immersive theatre in which individual audience members are forced into taking an active role in producing their own experience; where one goes, what doors one opens, what one says, does, or responds reveals or limits their potential for experiencing some aspects of a performance. Calling this practice "entrepreneurial participation," Alston argues that immersive theatres share particular values with neoliberalism such as entrepreneurialism, valorization of risk, and individual agency and responsibility. Paralleling a neoliberal mindset, immersive theatres offer a bevy of rewards for savvy, smart, and brave spectators, but one must be willing to risk in order to achieve these prizes. This risk, furthermore, can be read both as a risk of *not* seeing something but also as a risk of one's feeling of safety or even personal space in the performance event. Importantly, Alston argues that, like the larger neoliberal mindset that permeates society, immersive theatre and entrepreneurial participation exacerbate inequalities between audience members and that opportunities are unevenly distributed.[30] Like Matthew Reason, Alston places agency at the center between spectatorship and risk. Individuals have the capacity to determine their level of interaction, and thus their experience of risk, within the performance.

Finally, as we consider how the audience engages with risk within participatory theatre, we return to Alice O'Grady for the exploration of risk and spectatorship perhaps most closely aligned to our research here. In addition to her focus on "risky aesthetics" by which theatre-makers portray a sense of risk to be witnessed by audiences, she theorizes what she calls "critical vulnerability," as a strategy for engaging with spectators and as a tool for shared meaning-making. Looking at diverse kinds of applied, participatory theatre, O'Grady positions critical

---

[30] Adam Alston, "Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency, and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre," *Performance Research* 18, no. 2 (2013): 133.

vulnerability as the moment when spectators themselves risk exposure within the performance. Looking deeply at the trust needed in participatory performance, she argues that critical vulnerability occurs "by crossing the threshold and moving from our position as spectator to that of participant" in which a "leap of faith" occurs and spectators are made to put their trust in someone else—the artist, the facilitator, or fellow participants."[31] This "leap of faith," furthermore, takes spectators outside of the safety provided by traditional spectatorship and makes them collaborators in the performance. In this way, O'Grady seems closely in line with Matthew Reason's view that spectatorship requires conscious, agential participation from the spectator. Building from work in sociology, O'Grady terms the interaction between participation and performance "edgeplay," as she attempts to mobilize "the theoretical concept of edgework and reframe it in relation to participatory practice where playing on the edge is carried out as a tactic."[32] Through combining edgework and critical vulnerabilities, O'Grady notes the multiple loci of risk in the performance. There is risk to the participants who "enter an unfamiliar dramatic frame based largely on trust," risk to the performer who must relinquish control of their artwork, and risk to the artwork itself in both content and structure.[33] Combined with her observation that audiences are actively seeking out new experiences, O'Grady's theory of edgeplay is perhaps one of the most developed models for exploring the risks with which spectators engage.

Compared to recent investigations into risk and spectatorship that analyze twentieth and twenty-first century performance, still fewer works have utilized risk as a framing concept in

---

[31] O'Grady, preface to *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice*, x.
[32] Alice O'Grady, "Introduction: Risky Aesthetics, Critical Vulnerabilities, and Edgeplay: Tactical Performances of the Unknown," in *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World*, ed. Alice O'Grady (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3.
[33] O'Grady, "Introduction," 2.

Early Modern Europe.[34] However, while lacking in quantity, three fruitful investigations into

Early Modern risk are worth quickly exploring here, which have informed this project and will

be explored in greater detail later. First, Richard Preiss highlights the anxieties produced by new

theatrical economies in Elizabethan London where one paid *before* watching the show. Just as he

links the development of new theatrical architecture in Early Modern England to the birth of

interiority, he also notes how these playhouses produced a new economic system in which

spectators were required to invest money "to enjoy something not yet produced."[35] Similar to

gambling halls, Preiss emphasizes the audience's inability to know whether or not their payment

for admission would accurately reflect the quality of performance shown and their enjoyment of

it. As he argues, the playhouse "offered the same uncertainty and risk [as gambling], only

without the chance to recoup one's admission."[36] Unlike the gambling house, where one might

play again (assuming they can afford the ante) to earn back one's losses, payments to enter the

playhouse were final. Going to the theatre, then, became a type of risk-taking in which the

content and quality could be unpredictable.

This element of unpredictability is reenforced by Claire M. Busse and Andrew Sofer,

each of whom inspect the allure of the unknown for potential theatre-goers. Busse inspects

---

[34] The absence of scholarly work on historical risk is not surprising nor unique to Early Modern Europe if we remember how risk has become a more conscious factor in (late) modernity. While outside the spatial and temporal purview of this research project, notable contributions to examining historical risk exist. For instance, Jonathan Simon extends Beck's "risk society" into Victorian London to investigate the ways urban professionals used the risks of mountain climbing to prove their own virtuosity and calmness under intense pressures; their bragging rights, furthermore, translated into gains of reputation. Also, Joseph Fichtelberg inspects how the anxieties of unfamiliar risks in colonial America were acknowledged and mitigated through writing and performance. He argues that risks were made discursive for audiences to re-fashion the settlers' understanding of their own agency and power. See Jonathan Simon, "Edgework and Insurance in Risk Societies: Some Notes on Victorian Lawyers and Mountaineers," in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, ed. Stephen Lyng (New York: Routledge, 2005), 203-226, and Joseph Fichtelberg, *Risk Culture: Performance and Danger in Early America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010).

[35] Richard Preiss, "Interiority," in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 51.

[36] Preiss, "Interiority," 51.

English boy companies and the ways their child actors are positioned as potential threats against authority. Interrogating the in-between nature of the dramatic induction as analogous to the liminal body of the child, Busse argues that these boy actors "threaten to take over and potentially undermine the productions."[37] As children, not yet adults, lack social obligations for "correct" performance, Busse explores how playwrights used this potential of dangerous children to both dramatic and commercial success. Authors reinforced this disruptive possibility to audiences; they used the disposition of children "to their advantage by enticing their audiences with a theatre of uncertainty rather than predictability."[38] Sofer, too, reinforces the appeal of possibility in his exploration of conjuring demons on the Early Modern stage. Using Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as his main point of inquiry, Sofer sifts through anecdotes of performances that featured "one devil too many" to inspect the fascination of an "unnerving performative potential."[39] Challenging speech act theory's differentiation between efficacious performatives and hollow theatrical representations, Sofer interrogates how conjuring on the stage produced anxieties in spectators due to the risks of actually doing what one "pretends" to do. He argues that it was the potential for "inadvertent magic on the part of the plays—the belief that Faustus's spells might operate independent of the actor and character—that thrilled and alarmed Elizabethan audiences."[40] Like Busse, Sofer's argument is not dependent on real occurrences of disruptive behavior on stage, but on the risks that something *might* occur. However, it is worth noting that while Busse and Sofer introduce the spectator's engagement with risk into Early Modern conversations, it is not the main purpose of their investigations. Busse's real

---

[37] Claire M. Busse, "'Pretty Fictions' and 'Little Stories': Child Actors on the Early Modern Stage," in *Childhood and Children's Books in Early Modern Europe, 1550-1800*, eds Andrea Immel and Michael Witmore (New York: Routledge, 2006), 80.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Andrew Sofer, "How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in *Doctor Faustus*," *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 1 (2009): 2.
[40] Ibid., 2-3.

interrogation looks at the blurred lines between children's bodies as agent and property, celebrity and product, and Sofer's work attempts a new interpretation of speech act theory in which interlocutors muddle the lines between constative and performative language on stage. Risk, then, while important to these scholar's arguments, is used as support rather than the lens through which performance is inspected.

While very few theatre historians have interrogated the specific relationship(s) between risk and the spectator in Early Modern Europe, scholarship abounds that investigates the audience of this period more broadly. Indeed, as Nova Myhill and Jennifer A. Low note in their edited volume, *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558-1642,* there is no shortage of inquiries looking at the audience as a demographic entity and even "a positive superabundance" of analyses on individual plays and their relationship to society and, thus, the audience.[41] It would impossible here to parse out all of the different ways that scholars have approached how audiences respond to performance, but we should briefly note a couple dominant threads in which we can position this research amongst existing scholarship.

Two main branches seem to divide how scholars have theorized the spectators' relationship to staged performance. On one side, new historicism has diminished the role of the audience in its prioritization of cultural products. For new historicists, theatrical performance not only reflects society but actively shapes the social sphere through dictating how audiences should interpret its work. Power clearly lies with playwrights and acting companies that are viewed as having the capacity to influence a relatively passive audience. This viewpoint on the spectator is backed by historical evidence; new historicists, anti-theatrical critics, and defenders of the stage alike share similar interpretations of theatre's power to inform and shape malleable

---

[41] Nova Myhill and Jennifer A. Low, "Introduction: Audience and Audiences," in *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558-1642*, eds Jennifer A. Low and Nova Myhill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

audiences. Jeremy Lopez, for instance, notes this connection in order to ground his exploration

of the beliefs, attitudes, and fears with which spectators arrived at the theatre. He contends that if

both proponents and detractors "were willing to argue publicly that a play could affect reality

and the lives of its audience, it seems more than safe to assume that this is the kind of assumption

playgoers would have brought with them to the playhouse."[42] Similarly, Tatiana Korneeva's

recent book on Italian dramaturgy also investigates the power of the Early Modern stage to shape

spectators. Linking specific theatre-makers to socially specific audiences, Korneeva argues that

playwrights compelled spectators "to take on specific roles as viewers" and, thereby, transformed

audience members into "free-thinking critical agents who would become explicitly central to

theatrical—and eventually political—theory and practice."[43] For some scholars, then, spectators

were objects waiting to be imprinted upon by powerful theatre-makers.

On the other side of this debate, scholars have worked to respect the agency and

individualism of the audience. Rather than viewing the audience as a monolithic group that may

vary culture by culture and theatre by theatre, some scholars have relied on semiotics and

phenomenology to remind readers of the heterogeneity within every audience. This move to

consider individual audience members attempts to restore power to the spectator; the spectator is

viewed as the subject through which meaning is created. Keir Elam's work at the intersection of

semiotics and the theatre is a helpful reminder of the varied ways individual audience members

may interpret, internalize, and respond to the theatre. Elam pushes back against the "apparent

passivity" of the audience and reminds readers that the spectator constructs their own meaning:

"However judicious or aberrant the spectator's decodification, the final responsibility for the

---

[42] Jeremy Lopez, *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 31-32.

[43] Tatiana Korneeva, *The Dramaturgy of the Spectator: Italian Theatre and the Public Sphere, 1600-1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 4.

meaning and coherence of what he constructs is his."[44] Paul Yachnin, in a fascinating debate on the nature of playgoing, also prioritizes individual responses in the theatre. He argues that it was actually the "volatile possibilities of radical individuation" that held the pleasures of playgoing as one could have an experience drastically different than one's fellow interlocutors.[45] In a similar vein, John J. McGavin and Greg Walker argue for highly individualized engagement by spectators based on their location in space. Looking at the triangulation of space, performance, and spectatorship, they contend that audience members "are active, choosing (as far as their means and location allow) when and how to contribute to their own theatrical experience."[46] In other words, spectators are actively engaged in producing meaning but also limited based on the optics of space.

While these two branches seem at ideological odds, theatre scholarship in the last decade has attempted to bridge the divide. As evident in Nova Myhill and Jennifer A. Low's edited collection, research is beginning "to negotiate between the fantasy of the all-powerful spectacle and the all-powerful spectator."[47] It is within this new space that acknowledges the cultural work of theatrical production *and* the individualistic engagement by spectators that I hope to place my work. As we will see in the next section, it is my hope that a critical lens inspecting spectatorial risk will be wide enough to encompass the productive attributes of both scholarly currents.

Risk, Performance, and the Audience: Constructing a New Critical Lens

---

[44] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, 2nd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2002), 85.
[45] Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakspeare's England: A Collaborative Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 80.
[46] John J. McGavin and Greg Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship: From the Mysteries to the Shakespearean Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.
[47] Myhill and Low, "Introduction: Audience and Audiences," 5.

As our conversation has highlighted, both the concept of risk and the scholarship on how risk intersects with performance and the spectator is disparate and multifaceted. My research project attempts to build from where many of these scholarly investigations leave off to fill in the gaps and construct a broader lens through which to read the spectator's engagement with risk. While Alice O'Grady's concept of risky aesthetics begins to demonstrate how spectators engage with risk, her interlaced theories of edgeplay and critical vulnerabilities limit conversations to participatory theatres and spectators' labor in the process of risk. Conversely, N. R. Helms' "spectator risk" dismisses the spectator's agency and limits discussions of audience engagement to only how audience members themselves risk permanent changes to themselves. Theatre historiographers, like Claire M. Busse and Andrew Sofer, have worked to identify unpredictability as a way of discussing how spectators perceived on-stage risks during the Early Modern period; however, their investigations fail to address *why* audiences were drawn to unpredictability and what their responses, both outward and internal, might have been. These scholars, along with the many mentioned above, offer valuable perspectives to understanding the spectator's relationship with risk but each omits or limits important aspects of that engagement. What is needed is a new critical lens to encompass a greater array of the ways spectators desire, comprehend, and respond to risk. Although addressing spatial and temporal boundaries is crucial, what is needed is a flexible framework that can be applied to disparate performances to widen the scope of risk as an essential force between the stage and the spectator beyond the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Here, while focusing our analyses on Early Modern examples, we will theorize how spectatorial risk can act as a broad lens through which to read and analyze how spectators interpret, internalize, and respond to performative risk.

To discuss the relationship between risky business and spectatorship, I propose the term *spectatorial risk.* Here, I am intentionally differentiating my term from N. R. Helms' use of "spectator risk." Whereas Helms places risk on the noun—the self—, I look to broaden this relationship between risk and spectatorship to describe the larger range of experiences relating to witnessing on-stage risks. Rather than focused solely on the ontological threat of risking changes to the self, I hope to explore the larger arena of magnetisms and anxieties that are inspired by performances that are deemed unpredictable in some way. Again, I return to this project's emphasis on the word "might" to position spectatorial risk as not only what might happen *to* the spectator but also to encompass the allure of risk *for* the spectator, the experience of risk *of* the spectator, and the response to that risk *from* the spectator. Just as Helms suggests, one has the potential to be changed permanently through watching a performance, but just as meaningfully, one has the possibility to experience more temporarily a sense of thrill, surprise, or fear from that which is unexpected, scandalous, or dangerous.

In developing a new critical lens of spectatorial risk, I combine the productive elements of Helms' "spectator risk" and O'Grady's "risky aesthetics," "critical vulnerabilities," and "edgeplay" with work in both sociology and psychology. Sociology alone—much like new historicism above—tends toward a social constructionist approach to risk that deemphasizes the individual and attempts to explain human rational and action through culture.[48] This approach removes the individual in favor of larger societal trends and structural analyses. Psychology by itself, conversely, tends to deemphasize culture and either to locate risk as an innate, biological and/or neurological evolutionary trait[49] or to identify innate motives to risk-taking such as the

---

[48] Arnoldi, *Risk: An Introduction*, 14-16.
[49] Trimpop, *The Psychology of Risk Taking Behavior,* 28-76.

anticipation of reward.[50] Sociologists often see these approaches as reductionist as they rest on

"the assumption that risk-taking is impelled by factors that are constant across time and space."[51]

While each approach is limiting in itself, I aim to combine disciplines in order to create a

framework that can theorize risk within specific spatial and temporal moments *and*

phenomenologically engage with individualized spectators. Specifically, my approach to

theorizing spectatorial risk combines Stephen Lyng's sociological concept of *edgework* and

Marvin Zuckerman's psychological *Sensation Seeking Scale*. Both models push their respective

disciplines by incorporating ways of considering risk from *both* the individual and cultural

perspective.

      While most attempts to theorize risk revolve around how one attempts to diminish the

threat of risk, Lyng's theory of edgework investigates voluntary risk-taking. Originally

examining the culture of recreational sky-diving, Lyng broadens edgework activities to any that

"involve a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an

ordered existence."[52] These voluntary risks, furthermore, push conceptualizing risk past that of

results of risk (e.g. reward or punishment); instead risk-taking is framed as a value of

experience.[53] While people who sky-dive, for instance, might value the reward of a picture or

proof that they successfully navigated such a risk, it is the ephemeral, intangible experience of

having done the activity that matters most. Lyng's study claims that these experiences produce a

sense of "self-realization," "self-articulation," or "self-determination" in edgeworkers, "which

leaves them with a purified and magnified sense of self."[54] Those who engage in voluntary risk-

---

[50] Trimpop, *The Psychology of Risk Taking Behavior*, 129-130.
[51] Stephen Lyng, "Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking," *American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 4 (1990): 854.
[52] Lyng, "Edgework," 857.
[53] Lyng, "Edgework," 852.
[54] Lyng, "Edgework," 860.

taking, therefore, do so for the momentary experience through which they perceive themselves and their world in a new light.

While Lyng places edgeworkers as a post-modern phenomenon, especially prevalent in the rise of "weekend-warriors" or weekend risk-takers in the 1980s, he offers a theoretical framework through which edgework, in general, can be investigated. Drawing on Karl Marx and George Mead, Lyng looks at the polarity between constraint and spontaneity. Both theorists pose an ongoing dialectic between a constrained social self and a spontaneous individual self. Marx sees this as a "total self" that is negotiated by social factors while Mead creates a dichotomy between a "me" and "I" in which the "me" is the organized self, dictated by the attitudes of others, while the "I" is "the continually emerging, spontaneous, impulsive, and unpredictable part of the self."[55] It is at the edges or borderland of these oppositional forces of constraint and spontaneity that Lyng places edgework, as individuals who exist within a society characterized by "alienation" (Marx) and "oversocialization" (Mead) exert their own spontaneous, anarchic selves.[56] Lyng conceives of high-risk activities as those, then, that push toward impulse and away from normative conventions. Edgework, thus, "seems to be the direct antithesis of role behavior in the institutional domain."[57] Lyng's theory of edgework is perhaps best understood visually (Figure 2). Normative society, illustrated as the central circle and charactered by rules and regulations, establishes boundaries by which to separate itself from the pure chaos of anarchy. Lyng places edgework right on this boundary—barely adhering to social restraint while reaching out to experience a glimpse of spontaneity. The thrill occurs as one attempts to get as close as possible to this edge. Importantly, Dragan Milovanovic reminds us that this boundary

---

[55] Lyng, "Edgework," 866-7.
[56] Stephen Lyng, "Edgework and the Risk-Taking Experience," in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, ed. Stephen Lyng (New York: Routledge, 2005), 5.
[57] Lyng, "Edgework," 864.

line is not fixed but moves to reflect new social beliefs and attitudes. He argues that what

constitutes a risky experience is determined through the "ongoing dislocations" between the

dimensions of legal and illegal, greater and lesser emotional intensity, and being in- and out-of-

control.[58] Edgework, thus, is a conscious attempt to explore past the normative perimeters of

society in order to *experience* something new and self-fulfilling.
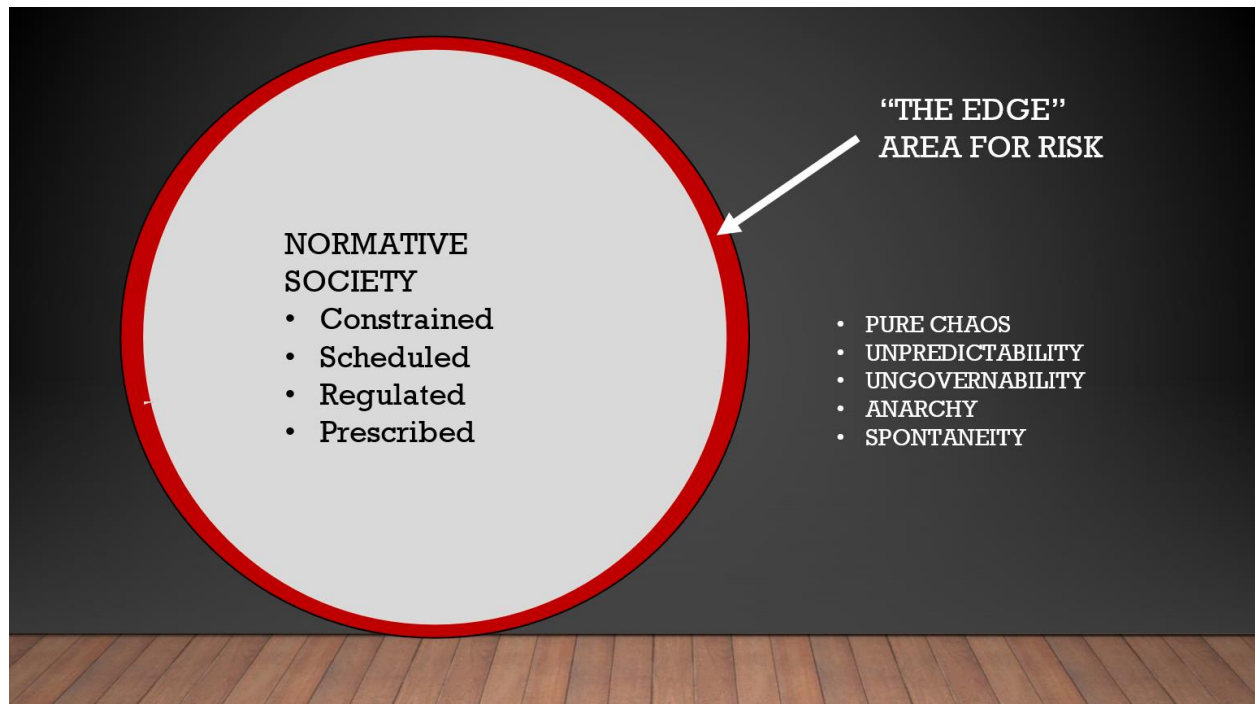
Figure 2. Diagram to show ideal area for risky performance. The interior of the circle (white) reflects normative society and is characterized by notions of constraint. Outside of the circle (black) represents dangerous unknowability and chaos. The thin ring (red) highlights the edge between normative and non-normative society; a space with some danger and but still within the safe confines of constraint. Image by Jim Short, 2020.

Lyng's theory of edgework is a helpful frame through which to understand the appeal of

spectating risk-taking activities. While Lyng discusses the risk-taker him/herself and Alice

O'Grady focuses only on audiences of participatory theatre, I argue that the same theoretical

groundwork of edgework can apply to those who witness these performances—that is, individual

---

[58] Dragan Milovanovic, "Edgework: A Subjective and Structural Model of Negotiating Boundaries," in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, ed. Stephen Lyng (New York: Routledge, 2005), 60.

spectators. Thinking back to our initial example of the Flying Wallendas high-wire walk, while the audience does not engage with the *same* risk-taking experience as the daredevils themselves, theirs becomes a proximate risk, not of death itself but of witnessing death. By acting as spectators, they share in the risk-taking experience as the Wallendas attempt to redefine the limits that both society and the natural order have established. Their presence, even as bystanders, creates a shared experience in which the spirit of anarchy pushes all those involved, not just the lone risk-takers, to the edge of control. Outside of life-threatening performances of risk, this shared experience of edgework can apply to all instances of risk-taking performance. Witnessing banned or politically dangerous content makes the spectator liable. Witnessing salacious material pushes against the acceptable social norms not only for the performer but their interlocutor as well. Witnessing amateurs, children, animals, or robots on stage increases the thrill of unpredictability within the live event for audiences; they ask, "Will these performers do as they should do?" While, naturally, applying edgework to a theory of spectatorial risk is not a one for one substitution, it is useful in conceptualizing how the performance elicits a feeling of risk within the audience.

Some might argue that a theory of edgework cannot apply to the spectators as they are removed from the experience of doing and, therefore, are absent from the "strong element of individualization inherent in the confrontation with risk and an open future."[59] Here, I briefly point to kinesthetic empathy. While the "cognitive turn" has incorporated concepts from neuroscience to demonstrate how embodiment can be used to communicate ideas and as a form

---

[59] Arnoldi, *Risk: An Introduction*, 153.

of world-building,[60] I propose that the interdisciplinary concept of kinesthetic empathy is useful

in explaining the link between performers engaged in risk-taking behaviors and their audiences.

If one regards corporeality as the "intertwining of sensation and perception where the

body remains anchored as the central scope of awareness,"[61] then one can understand the

performance event as the intersubjective context in which bodies on stage and those in the

audience become connected. Kinesthetic empathy pushes past mere mimicry between actor and

spectator to theorize how other "sensorial, emotional, and imaginative responses" are

conceptualized and internalized.[62] Through certain performances in which corporeality is central,

performative interlocutors become linked and share certain emotional qualities. This linkage can,

according to Tal-Chen Rabinowitch, become strong and congruent. Through an investigation of

musical performance, Rabinowitch argues that the distinct identification of individual spectators

may be compromised into a "merged subjectivity" where one subject "may regard another

participating subject almost as himself, to the point that one may experience another's sensations

as one's own."[63] However, these emotional qualities are not always identical; Ann Cooper

Albright argues that through kinesthesia "audience members and performers can share the

process of feeling together without necessarily imbuing that experience with the same

meaning."[64] I contend that this distinctive "meaning" is especially true in spectatorial risk where

---

[60] See Bruce McConachie's *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) for a discussion of how spectators are always cognitively engaged through mirror neurons and conceptual blending, and chapters by Pier Francesco Farrari, Vittorio Gallese, and Riitta Hari in *On Being Moved: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy*, ed. Stein Braten for explorations of embodied simulation, imagined intention, and imitation and motor systems.

[61] Ann Cooper Albright, "Split Intimacies: Corporeality in Contemporary Theater and Dance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theatre*, ed. Nadine George-Graves (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20.

[62] Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, "Introduction," in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, eds. Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012), 20.

[63] Tal-Chen Rabinowitch, Ian Cross, and Pamela Burnard, "Musical Group Interaction, Intersubjectivity and Merged Subjectivity," in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, eds. Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012) 111.

[64] Albright, "Split Intimacies," 20.

performers might be risking their physical safety while spectators might be risking their emotional or mental safety by watching what could be a fatal failure. In either case, congruous or divergent, kinesthetic empathy links actor and audience in an emotional or affective state.

To analyze the individual allure, interpretation, and response of audience members and help fill in the gaps of theorizing spectatorial risk where Lyng's edgework leaves off, the psychological approach of the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS) offers a phenomenological foundation through which one can read potential audience engagement. The SSS, first developed in 1964 by Marvin Zuckerman and now in its fifth iteration (SSS-V) alongside multiple spinoffs and derivatives, attempts to quantify different categories and levels of arousal within individuals. Looking to understand why individuals take certain actions including physical and social risks, Zuckerman eventually concluded they are linked to an individually specific "need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences."[65] Echoing Lyng's theory of edgework, Zuckerman argues that specific actions are not taken for reward or as an avoidance of punishment, as other psychologists repeatedly theorized, but instead in search of specific experiences or states of arousal. Importantly, this method of charting the level of perceived sensation incorporates both psychological and social variables, enabling integration with edgework while allowing a phenomenological reading of those witnessing risky performances.

The categories and terminology that developed from the SSS can be helpful criteria in analyzing the spectator's relationship with risk even in the absence of archival material. Zuckerman separates his SSS into four categories, distinct in their own right but often overlapping in their attempt to map an individual's psychological profile. While his later categories of "Disinhibition" and "Boredom Susceptibility" might be useful to scholars

---

[65] Trimpop, *The Psychology of Risk Taking Behavior*, 89.

inspecting participatory performances due to their intersubjective nature of arousal,[66]

Zuckerman's categories of "Thrill and Adventure Seeking" and "Experience Seeking" are

especially fruitful for analyzing spectatorial risk in performance more broadly. Thrill and

Adventure Seeking describes an attempt to engage in physical or social activities that offer

sensations that are unusual or difficult to come by in everyday life. To Zuckerman, these

activities include mountain climbing and scuba diving, where the reward is the sensation itself

more than the risk or accomplishment. Edgeworkers who engage in extreme physical risks, like

the Flying Wallendas, would surely show high scores in this category; in this vein, Zuckerman

even notes that it is likely for these thrills to become more and more extreme as "the more risky

the activity the more likely [thrill-seeking] individuals [are] attracted to it."[67] Corresponding to

the criteria of Thrill and Adventure Seeking, Experience Seeking describes "seeking sensation

and new experiences through the mind and the senses (music, art, travel) and through a

nonconforming general lifestyle with like-minded friends."[68] Perhaps most directly related to the

spectator, Experience Seeking fits within the theoretical scope of edgework as the desire to

receive sensations and arousals not available in the mundane everyday world. Special programs,

entertainment, and ways of engaging with non-normative experiences lead to distinct states of

pleasure or arousal that offer something special still within a highly structured society. Rather

than engaging with arousal-producing risk through the body as is the case with the Thrill and

Adventure Seeking model, the Experience Seeking model engages the mind and senses to

---

[66] Disinhibition refers to sensation seeking through engagement with other people or produced through social stimuli—very often through a hedonistic lifestyle. Boredom Susceptibility shows sensation seeking through an opposite point of view where arousal is created through conditions of when certain (non) stimuli are *not* present.
[67] Marvin Zuckerman, *Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association: 2007), 58.
[68] Zuckerman, *Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior*, 13.

produce arousal in individuals. This ephemeral stimulation produces excitement in subjects by offering them the chance to come into contact with new sensory, mental, and spiritual stimuli.

Taken in whole, Zuckerman's approach offers helpful terminology and a foundation for thinking about how individuals seek and experience arousal through external stimuli. Building from the individual spectator, the SSS enables a qualitative approach in analyzing why spectators would seek certain forms of entertainment over others. Finally, although Zuckerman's model fails to account for individual preferences dictated by specific context (e.g., culture, religion, etc.), his approach grounds a theoretical investigation of what drives individuals to seek certain types of experiences in a world congested with entertainment opportunities.

Lyng's edgework and Zuckerman's SSS work together in developing a new critical lens to read and analyze spectatorial risk from both the *why* and the *how*. In thinking about spectatorship, the edgework model reveals why people would attend performances in which there is a risk of injury, indecency, unlawfulness, or failure. If these performances exist on the borderline between societal constraint or quotidian parameters and anarchic unknowability, this sense of a risk to self or reformation of self-identity trickles to the spectator as intimate interlocutor and proxy to those engaged in the performance. This approach encompasses O'Grady's discussion of participatory theatres and the audience's experience of critical vulnerabilities but also works to understand broadly the allure of certain risks and how spectators can still experience risks vicariously even when simply seated and watching. If this risk draws audiences to a performance, the affective impact can be analyzed by deciphering the means through which they experience sensation and arousal. If attendance at an event involving risk is viewed as seeking to elicit a specific type of stimulation, then the spectator's experience can be phenomenologically recreated to help explain how meaning is derived from such attendance.

This approach not only encompasses the risks to spectators themselves as described by Helms but the variety of disparate ways of internalizing and responding to staged material. Thus, this model that incorporates theories of edgework and sensation seeking to interrogate spectatorial risk can support hypotheses as to *why* spectators chose certain entertainments over others and *how* they processed and responded to the pleasures and dangers of those experiences.

Growing Stakes: Three Modes of Spectatorial Risk

This research projects sets out not only to develop a lens of spectatorial risk but also to apply it with the hopes of demonstrating the flexible ways it may interrogate the audience members' diverse engagements with risk. To do this, the following chapters explore the different ways spectators of theatre interacted with risk in Early Modern Europe. As previously mentioned, this is not to suggest that risk as a theatrical commodity was invented during this period. Instead, we will see how increased economic competition and new developments of theatricality position the theatre of Early Modern Europe as a spatial and temporal landscape where risks were both sought out by consumers and exploited by theatre-makers. By analyzing the period's diverse theatrical styles through a lens of spectatorial risk, I hope to offer new insights that will link disparate audiences and companies with similar desires and strategies.

The following chapters are organized along two parallel investigations. First, chapters are separated by different modes of spectatorial risk. Three forms are traced here that are in order of increasing stakes for the audience. We begin by examining the mild dangers present in the spectatorial risk to form before moving on to consider increasing risks to the spectator's views on morality and to the spectator's very body and soul. Three distinct forms of Early Modern theatre accompany these modes of spectatorial risk. We will inspect the playhouses of English

children's companies, the Italian *commedia dell'arte,* and the widespread topic of witchcraft in English plays as sites in which our distinct modes of spectatorial risk were manifested. Each chapter will attempt to highlight the distinct pleasures and dangers with which spectators engaged before offering case studies of specific actors, playwrights, companies, and plays that consciously employed these strategies related to spectatorial risk.

Chapter 1 explores the English children's companies. A contemporaneous entertainment to Shakespeare, the boy companies have received far less critical attention than the Bard or the use of prepubescent boys to play women's roles for the adult theatres. Outside of Claire M. Busse's article inspecting the unpredictability of the boy players as they occupied the tenuous position between property and agents, little work has been done to investigate the relationship between the spectators of boy companies and risk. Impressive scholarship has worked to address the lack of critical attention on this topic by reconstructing the children's companies for modern readers.[69] Scholars have attempted to identify the audience as a demographic entity[70] and to interrogate specific plays performed by these children's ensembles, which were both shorter in duration and less prolific in its oeuvre than the competing adult companies. While not pertaining to our discussion of risk, Mary Bly's *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage* offers a fascinating combination of textual close reading with keen attention to the audience. Investigating the Whitefriars, a short-lived boy's company, she argues that the theatre's use of puns as a "sustained commitment to vulgarity" was enacted to "exploit an identifiable group of men, and that when those men gathered together in the theatre, the nature of

---

[69] In particular, see Michael Shapiro, *Children of the Revels: The Boy Companies of Shakespeare's Time and Their Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), Lucy Munro, *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and Edel Lamb, *Performing Childhood in the Early Modern Theatre: The Children's Playing Companies (1599-1613)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
[70] For instance, see *Inside Shakespeare: Essays on the Blackfriars Stage*, ed. Paul Menzer (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2006).

punning suggests that a sense of community formed around their shared laughter."[71] In other words, the shared desire and enjoyment of sexually transgressive humor intentionally drew a specific audience and created connections and a community of shared interests between the spectators. Bly's research stands out and is worth mentioning here as a conscious attempt to interrogate the allure, enjoyment, and response by a specific audience.

In Chapter 1, I position the English boy companies as a site in which audiences experienced a spectatorial risk to form. I explore the Early Modern child's status as ontologically unfixed and in a perpetual state of becoming in order to highlight their unpredictable nature on the stage. A risk to form occurs in the theatre as audiences perceive the child actors to be unreliable professionals; the children may fail to perform their parts correctly and convincingly or may even rebel and refuse to participate all together. Building on Busse's argument, which locates the allure of child actors on their capacity to engage in unruliness or derail the narrative, I argue for a broadening of their unpredictable nature as children that positioned them as unknown variables within the playhouse that threatened the very form and function of theatre itself. Capable of anyone once alone on stage, the child actors *might* uphold the decency of the stage and act as staunch defenders engaged in dutiful servitude, they *might* rebel against their mangers and ruin the performance, or they *might* simply fail at their responsibilities and prove too unexperienced to carry out their work. It is this range of possibilities that contribute to a spectatorial risk to form. This chapter first seeks to demonstrate the intentional usage of exteriority as a thematic element in the boys' performances before arguing that exteriority was used as a conscious and persistent reminder of the actors' nature as children. A comparative study of Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* will help demonstrate the boy

---

[71] Mary Bly, *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2, 5.

company's intentional differentiation of exteriority from the adult theatre's heavy use of interiority. Framing the spectatorial risk to form as a conscious element of the theatre, I end this chapter by investigating Ben Jonson's *Epicene*, arguing that attention is purposefully drawn to the physical bodies of the boy actors to highlight their unpredictable natures. Audiences risk an uncertainty that boy players will perform as they should through the very last moments of the play.

Chapter 2 explores the Italian commedia dell'arte. Similar to the work on English children's companies, scholarship on commedia has been occupied with trying to revitalize the theatrical style for modern readers and audiences. Attempts by scholar-artists such as Antonio Fava, John Rudlin, and Dario Fo have worked to bring the dynamic masked improvisation of commedia to life for their audiences. Balancing historical interpretations of individual masks and characters with lively samples of dialogue or, in the case of Fo, the quasi-intelligible *grammelot*, these writers have worked to bring the notoriously ephemeral and ineffable qualities of commedia to modern stages and classrooms.[72] Less "on-your-feet" than these scholar-artists, a major vein of commedia scholarship has worked to compile, introduce, and analyze primary documents as a means of understanding theatre history. Of particular note here is Anna Maria Testaverde's impressive, edited collection of scenarios, *I cannovacci della commedia dell'arte,* that span the long history of commedia's rise and fall, as well as Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards' documentary history of commedia.[73] Still others have worked to offer new insights and

---

[72] See Antonio Fava, *The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), John Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994), and Dario Fo, *The Tricks of the Trade*, trans. Joe Farrell, edited and with notes Stuart Hood (New York: Routledge, 1991.

[73] *I canovacci della Commedia dell'arte,* ed. Anna Maria Testaverde, transcription of tests and notes Anna Evangelista, preface Roberto De Simone (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 2007); Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'arte: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). See also: M A. Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560-1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records* (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2006), Mel Gordon, *Lazzi: The Comic* Routines *of the Commedia dell'Arte* (New York:

better understand commedia as a theatrical practice through positioning it within Early Modern

culture. For instance, Siro Ferrone's *Attori mercanti corsari* inspects the ways actors constructed

their own identities through taking advantage of new modes of self-promotion while Anne

MacNeil inspects the intersection of commedia's *prime donne* with the period's dominant

ideologies concerning gender, politics, and education.[74] Unlike the actor's handbooks and

collections of primary documents, this secondary literature naturally builds upon itself over time

to produce fresh perspective and unveil nuanced insights. For instance, MacNeil's work builds

on Ferdinando Taviani and Mirella Schino's exploration of the individuals involved in commedia

troupes and especially on the development of the actress, whom they identify as arriving from

the group of "honest courtesans"—already educated, classically trained, and adept performers—

that were looking for new opportunities after increased regulation.[75]

Outside of studies pertaining to court patronage and rampant antitheatricality, little has

been said about historicizing the audience response to commedia dell'arte. In Chapter 2, I seek to

address this gap by analyzing commedia as a site of spectatorial risk to morality. Critics, perhaps

in some cases justifiably, attacked commedia as a bastion of illicit and depraved material; they

warned their interlocutors that the stage would lead to immoral behavior and undermine the very

foundations on which society was constructed. Analyzing the improvisatory indeterminacy of

commedia alongside its provocative portrayals of sex and class revolt, I argue that audiences

experienced a spectatorial risk to morality. The improvised theatre offered the simultaneous

---

Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), and *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: A Translation and Analysis of 30 Scenarios*, edited and translated Richard Andrews (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

[74] Siro Ferrone, *Attori mercanti corsari: La Commedia dell'arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993); Anne MacNeil, *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Also in this vein is Robert Henke's influential study of commedia performance at the intersection of oral and literate cultures: see Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[75] Ferdinando Taviani and Mirella Schino, *Il segreto della commedia dell'arte. La memoria delle compagnie italiane del XVI, XVII e XVIII secolo* (Florence: La casa Usher, 1982; 2007).

pleasures and dangers of challenging social norms. This new way of perceiving society was not

only a draw for spectators but threatened to challenge previously held beliefs and assumptions.

After inspecting the thrills associated with improvisation, I interrogate the ways in which

commedia actors and company managers attempted to harness the alluring appeal of spontaneity

and chaos in order to offer audiences the illusion—and sometimes the reality—that indecency or

unlawfulness might happen. Here, I will not only examine the actions contained within

commedia scenarios that suggest a chaotic playfulness in performance but will also attempt to

read texts traditionally positioned as "defenses" of the theatre as tongue-in-cheek suggestions of

what one *might* find. This chapter ends with a close reading of Tristano Martinelli's

Compositions de Rhetorique and Flaminio Scala's *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative* to

demonstrate how an air of unpredictable risk consciously fostered spectatorial risk to morality as

an intentional marketing strategy.

  Chapter 3 explores performances of witchcraft as a narrative topic and theatrical trope.

As mentioned above, Andrew Sofer inspects the audience's response to witchcraft in his

historical interpretation of speech-act theory; he argues that performances of conjuring supersede

the stage's presumption towards "hollow" speech-acts and locates the slippery possibility of

accidental conjurings as the theatre's primary thrill. Besides Sofer, scholarship has been quiet in

offering hypotheses of the spectator's experience watching witchcraft on stage. While studies of

Early Modern witchcraft are legion,[76] less attention has been paid to patterns of witchcraft on

stage despite the widespread prevalence of the figure of the witch and the casting of spells in the

period's theatre. Deborah Willis traces this common appearance of witches and sorcerers across

---

[76] For some foundational texts on witchcraft, see Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1987), and Matteo Duni, *Under the Devil's Spell: Witches, Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in Renaissance Italy* (Florence, Syracuse University in Florence: 2007).

Renaissance drama and notes how they are incorporated onto the stage in a variety of manners and for a variety of purposes.[77] Indeed, this variety is substantiated by the plentiful research on individual plays that feature witchcraft, such as *Macbeth*, *The Witch of Edmonton*, and "Il Gran Mago." While scholars have analyzed individual plays and performances to offer new insights into Early Modern culture—such as Richard Levin's interesting observations that the rise of "skilled magic" corresponds with ideals of rugged individualism that characterized the new mercantile economy—, an exploration of how spectators engaged with the thrills and dangers of performative witchcraft is still needed.[78]

If witchcraft was perceived as dangerously anarchic and chaotic, antithetical to the constrained, normative society prescribed by institutional powers, its staged representations offered interlocutors the chance to stand at the edges between order and disorder and experience for themselves the world in a new way. In Chapter 3, I investigate staged performances of witchcraft to unpack the varied ways spectators engaged with material that was both spiritually damning and socially punishable by death. I argue that the pleasures and dangers of witnessing witchcraft, however, were different from our previously discussed modes of risk produced by English boy actors and the commedia dell'arte. Unlike risk to form or morality, I contend that witchcraft produced a spectatorial risk to self in which interlocutors placed *themselves* on the edge of normative society and the unknown; they are not simply asked to witness something in front of them but to actually take part in the live event. After outlining the threats to social order that characterized witchcraft, I argue that the stage implicates spectators into the damnable acts of witchcraft by incorporating them into the witches' collective, blurring the lines between

---

[77] Deborah Willis, "Magic and Witchcraft," in *A New Companion to Renaissance Drama*, First Edition, eds. Arthur F. Kinney and Thomas Warren Hopper (Hoboken, NJ : Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 170-181.
[78] Richard Levin, "My Magic Can Beat Your Magic," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 22 (2009).

entertainment and efficacious performance, and teaching specific practices that might slip from the spectator's lips at a later time. This chapter ends with a close reading of Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's collaborative *The Witch of Edmonton.* I explore how the playwrights consciously employed a spectatorial risk to self by asking audiences to empathize with the witch protagonist. Here, I apply Nathan Johnstone's argument that the Devil was increasingly perceived as the ubiquitous presence of temptation in order to highlight the additional risks spectators encountered as they recognized within themselves reactions similar to those that eventually led to Mother Sawyer's death.

In total, the chapters of this research project are meant to walk readers through different modes of spectatorial risk. It is my hope that these different types of risks will not only reflect increasingly dangerous engagements between the stage and audience members but will also demonstrate the adaptability of spectatorial risk as a lens through which to read encounters at the intersection of risk, performance, and spectatorship.

Chapter 1

Spectatorial Risk to Form:

Exteriority, Unpredictability, and English Children's Companies

Elizabethan audiences had two very different styles of theatre from which to choose—

theatre that explored interiority and another that endorsed exteriority. On one side of the Thames,

audiences witnessed Hamlet encourage the presence of an innate inwardness through his

advising of the touring players. Acknowledging the power of which performers are capable

through the "very torrent, tempest, and…whirlwind of [their] passion"[1] (3.2.6-7), Hamlet advises

that this explosion of passion should be tempered to match the character—not only their situation

but also their interior subjectivity. Warning the players to neither yell out every line like a town-

crier and "saw the air too much with your hand" nor, oppositely, "be not too tame," (3.2.4-5,17)

Hamlet instructs his actors to follow a naturalistic approach in which action is dictated by the

character's specific intention in time and place. He argues that one should "suit the action to the

word, the word to the action" in order to "o'erstep not the modesty of nature" (3.2.18-21). Doing

so, he continues, will cause one to hold a "mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature."

(3.2.23-24). In his instruction, it becomes clear that Shakespeare is criticizing the acting done

through exaggerated or mechanical physical expression. While physicality is important—after all

the action should suit the word—his emphasis here lies in how action must be a product of

something deeper within, and reflective of, the character. Claiming that one's performance, the

outward show of character to an audience, should match the nature within, Shakespeare draws

our attention to the source of action, the character's interiority.

---

[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks: 1992).

Hamlet's instruction to actors would not have been strange to his audiences; instead, the advice encapsulates the central theme of Early Modern acting theory. Still dominated by classical ideas concerning the existence of internal passions that produce outward action, theatre workers like Shakespeare endorsed an acting theory in which these interior passions drove exterior action. Contemporary writers, such as Thomas Wright in his *Passions of the Minde in Generall* (1604), attempted to explain this process towards action. Contemplating staged performances, Wright argued that action was an "external image of an internal minde."[2] This internal process, furthermore, involved the whole body as "by mouth hee telleth his minde; in countenance he speaketh with a silent voice to the eies; with all the universal life and body he seemeth to say, Thus we move, because by the passion thus wee are moved."[3] Passions, then, happening within the body, hidden from spectators, were the building blocks by which stage action was conceived. This process is nicely summarized by Joseph Roach, who recognizes a two-step process by which actors must first "discover the passions of the mind" and then transform "invisible impulse into spectacle and unspoken feeling into eloquence."[4] This interiority, then, becomes the impetus through which outward action becomes manifest on stage and then interpreted by spectators.[5]

While Shakespeare's theatre highlighted characters' interiorities, on the other side of the Thames, the boy companies took the opposite approach. Proving to be one of Shakespeare's most direct commercial rivals—Rosencrantz criticizes the "aerie of children, little eyases, that

---

[2] Thomas Wright. *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*, with an Introduction by Thomas O. Sloan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 176.

[3] Wright. *The Passions of the Minde in Generall,* 176.

[4] Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 32-3.

[5] Ironically, it was one of the most famed performances of Hamlet that systematically ignored Hamlet's own advice over a century later. David Garrick's eighteenth-century portrayal of Hamlet adopted a mechanized approach by which deliberate attention to exteriority produced great effect in spectators. He became famous particularly for his physical reaction to encountering his father's ghost. Equipped with a wig that made it appear as if his hair was standing on end, he struck a pose that physiologically signaled his fear and astonishment. Emphasizing exteriority, "Garrick held this tableau for so long that some spectators wondered if he needed prompting" (see Roach, *The Player's Passion*, 85-92).

cry out on the top of question and are most tyrannically clapped for 't" (2.2.362-364)—these companies of child actors emphasized their physical bodies more than any inward, hidden "self." At the inaugural performance for the newly reestablished Children of St. Paul's Cathedral in 1599, John Marston's induction for *Antonio and Mellida* dismissed notions of interiority in favor of a practical and purposeful emphasis of exteriority by which characters were portrayed. In addition to the induction's dual capacity to introduce new audience members to the company's players and that evening's characters, Marston has his actors work together to embody their various characters from the outside in. Entering onto the stage with scripts in hand and costumes hidden under cloaks as if still backstage, the boy who will play Piero, the Duke of Venice and the play's antagonist, notes that "we can say our parts, but we are ignorant in what mould we must cast our actors"[6] (3-4). He laments to the audience that while they have the playwright's words at their disposal, they lack the professional and life experience needed to embody this characterization. This process, common on adult stages and familiar to spectators, is immediately struck down by the young man playing Alberto (and, seemingly in this moment, the company manager). He advises Piero that in order to "personate" the Duke, simply "frame your exterior shape to haughty form of elate majesty" and "grow big in thought as swoll'n with glory of successful arms" (7-8, 11-12). This advice to physically mimic what these children perceived as old, dignified, and strong quickly brings relief to Piero: "If that be all, fear not, I'll suit it right. Who cannot be proud, stroke up the hair and strut?" (13-14). This same emphasis on exteriority is explored again soon after as the boy playing Antonio doubts his ability to successfully play both the protagonist and his cross-dressed disguise, the Amazonian Florizel. Antonio fears not only having to internalize both parts but also to convincingly portray a woman since, he hints, his

---

[6] John Marston, *Antonio and Mellida*, ed. W. Reavley Gair (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

voice has already changed due to puberty.[7] Alberto again relieves his colleague's fears by noting

that an Amazon's voice should naturally be "viragolike" and that it is "common fashion" to play

two parts in an evening (76, 77-78). Alberto's alleviation of Antonio's worries indicates a focus

on the external body, rather than any inward essence, as the essential theatrical marker of

character; his voice is appropriate for his character and his body is capable of differentiating

between two characters by simply changing his physicality.

Interiority and exteriority, then, became different tools by which these English theatres

marked themselves, and in turn, generated different products that were offered to spectators. The

adult theatre's inwardness pointed to characters that were inherently unknowable in their

subjectivities. As in real humans, imbedded thoughts, desires, and strategies could never be truly

disclosed and became, instead, a subject for interpretation. Exteriority, as its opposite, focused on

the body as the locus of meaning-making. The physical body, that which exists in time and

space, constructed its own meaning.

This dichotomous distinction between interiority and exteriority, as Katharine Eisaman

Maus notes, is traditionally constructed "to privilege whatever is classified as interior."[8] Maus'

observation possibly explains why scholarship has continued to be fascinated by the adult

company's enigmatic interiority. This chapter, on the other hand, looks to explore the exteriority

used by the boy's companies and its relationship to the triangulation of risk, performance, and

spectatorship. Here, I hope to push past readings of child actors and staged exteriority that limit

themselves to discussions of the boys' presumed inability to perform more convincing emotional

drama. After all, Michael Shapiro reminds us that companies would have employed a range of

---

[7] Antonio laments, "I a voice to play a lady! I shall ne'er do it" (Ind.74-75)

[8] Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.

acting styles depending on the specific needs of a given production while Ben Jonson applauded the naturalistic acting of child actors, such as Salomon Pavy, whose truthful imitation of characters Jonson praised for having been "play'd so truly."[9] Instead, I hope to interrogate the ways in which exteriority was both reinforced and utilized as a conscious mode of theatricality. I am interested in exploring how exteriority instilled an air of unpredictability that was associated with the actors' status as children. Furthermore, I hope to unpack the ways in which the child actor's unpredictability fostered an experience of risk in the theatre.

This chapter, then, has two intertwined objectives. First, I argue that exteriority was intentionally employed by the children's companies of Early Modern England. Drawing on Katharine Eisaman Maus' historical investigation into inwardness, I position exteriority as a form of theatricality that spectators would have both recognized and understood. Then, positing this emphasis on the body as a conscious maneuver, I investigate the poles of interiority and exteriority through two concurrent tellings of the same story: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*. Although seeming to draw much from the same source material and performing across town almost simultaneously in 1601, the two plays share certain plot points but differ drastically in terms of how each telling reinforces their respective usages of interiority or exteriority. Through a comparison with *Hamlet*'s famed use of inwardness, the focus on the body in *Antonio's Revenge* highlights the children's companies as an intentional site in which exteriority—the physical body of the child—is emphasized.

Importantly, this exteriority was not simply employed by children's companies to differentiate themselves from the adult companies. After demonstrating *how* the boy companies

---

[9] Michael Shapiro, *Children of the Revels: The Boy Companies of Shakespeare's Time and Their Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 103-127; Ben Jonson, *Epigrams*; and *The Forest*, ed. Richard Dutton (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1984), 77.

accentuated exteriority, I explore *why* this mode of theatricality was used and its impact on

spectators. I argue that the use of exteriority led to a spectatorial risk to form that was

experienced by the audience. Here, exteriority is analyzed as providing a constant and ever-

present reminder of the phenomenological status of the child actor. Through doing so, these boy

companies highlighted the very nature of the children on stage as unpredictable and potentially

dangerous agents of performance capable both of sincere servitude and unruly rebellion.

Through this focus on the exterior of the actor instead of the character's interior, a constructed

atmosphere is offered to consumers where something could go wrong. Rather than enabling a

safe assumption that the performance will carry on as normal, the unpredictability of the child

actor threatened theatrical convention itself; while the children might behave as devout defenders

of the theatres, they might also shatter conventions, fail at playing their parts, or even rebel and

purposefully ruin the performance. A focus on exteriority and its implied unpredictability

reminded spectators that the risk was always present that the performance might not go as

planned; indeed, a simultaneous pleasure and danger existed as spectators questioned whether

the day's performance would take place as normal or be routed by the inconsistencies and

unreliability of children. After exploring the possible ways that audience members might have

been enticed by and responded to this spectatorial risk to theatrical form, this chapter ends with

an investigation of Jonson's *Epicene*. As we will see, Jonson's play presents a robust case study

to the ways in which the children's companies offered audiences the opportunity to engage with

a spectatorial risk to form.

Early Modern Interiority/Exteriority

51

Notions of interiority and exteriority were not erudite ideas disconnected from the

common spectator. Instead, as we will explore here, the stark contrast between the unknowability

of what was within and the outward portrayal of one's subjectivity to interlocutors produced

salient anxieties in Early Modern England. To understand the boy companies' strategic push

towards exteriority—and exteriority itself as a dialectical opposite—it is vital to understand how

interiority was perceived during this period. This is no simple task, however, as scholars have

vigorously debated this issue, the stakes of which are of great importance in how one analyzes

the period's material production. Although there are diverse theories to interpreting "interiority"

or "inwardness" as it applies to this spatial and temporal moment, most recent scholars are

consistent in their attempt to avoid placing modern theories onto historic bodies. This was

especially true in the 1980s through a push by scholars against the application of modern and

post-modern theories of interiority and subjectivity onto subjects and materials for which those

ideas differed or were nonexistent. Both Francis Barker and Margareta de Grazia pushed back

against previous notions that interiority was an innate cultural given. Barker argued that an

interiorized self-recognition was not possible during a period in which subjectivity was

inherently tied up in a monarch's sovereignty; one's identity was defined through the

"incorporation of the body politic."[10] Similarly, de Grazia pushes against the anachronistic nature

of Shakespearian criticism. She notes that in neither *Hamlet* nor the *Sonnets*, the two most

frequently cited materials for Shakespearian interiority, is there any evidence to suggest these

works sparked ideas of subjectivity when they were written. Even later than Barker, de Grazia

pushes the move toward interiority to the eighteenth century due to "new pressures to unify and

---

[10] Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984), 31.

legitimate the subject: the first person of the *Sonnets* and the main character [of *Hamlet*].”[11] Although their explanations differ, both Barker and de Grazia challenge what they interpret as the inappropriate historicizing of interiority.

If Barker and de Grazia roughly locate the development of interiority in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Richard Preiss works to provide an exact moment where English interiority was born. A cultural materialist, Preiss understands inwardness as an inherently *dramatic* phenomenon and ties the birth of dramatic interiority to the first permanent, dedicated playhouse in 1576. Calling interiority a “site-specific technology,”[12] Preiss discusses how the walled off architecture of permanent theatre structures created an interior domain within; furthermore, the rapid production of new scripted material combined with the new buildings to create an unknowability of the product one was going to see that day. A contradiction exists, he asserts, between outside and in, where “more than ever before, theatre was present, a visible, material, physical feature of the skyline and an institutional force to be reckoned with [and] more than ever before, theatre was also an absence, a void, an unknown, its principal commodities invisible at the instant one reckoned for them.”[13] Arguing that practitioners and patrons would have surely noted this new relationship between space and knowability, Preiss argues that the *content* presented on stage began to explore this same duality between outward appearance and inward subjectivity. Just as the playhouse presented an “opacity and self-enclosure that conceals an essential unknowability,” characters began to reveal themselves by what they kept hidden from spectators through “secrets, unfathomable motives, and unrepresentable desires.”[14] For

---

[11] Margareta de Grazia, “The Motive for Interiority: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Hamlet,” *Style* 23, no. 3 (1989): 431.

[12] Richard Preiss, “Interiority,” in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 48.

[13] Preiss, “Interiority,” 51.

[14] Preiss, “Interiority,” 53, 61.

Preiss, then, it was not that interiority slowly developed but that it was suddenly produced to match new economic and architectural changes.

Similar to Preiss, Michael C. Schoenfeldt attempts to historicize a Renaissance English interiority. In *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, Schoenfeldt draws from the period's rich, continued investment in Galenic humoral theory to argue for the development of an individual interiority. As humoral theory stressed the convergence of physiological and psychological states—e.g. choler in the blood corresponds to anger in the psyche—Schoenfeldt investigates the self-regulating practices that individuals take to monitor their exteriority in order to control their own interiority. Departing from the New Historicist emphasis that the individual is a victim of authoritarian state controls, Schoenfeldt invests power into the individual arguing that it is the self-control of bodily practices that "authorizes individuality."[15] Early Modern interiority is conceived through "the individual subject's willing and unembarrassed adoption of therapies of self-regulation" such as mundane, everyday activities like eating and defecating.[16] For Schoenfeldt, then, the interiority of psychological humoral theory not only is intrinsically tied to exterior self-control but eventually enabled the parameters for individual subjectivity as well as a wider assimilation of acceptable corporeal and psychological actions.

If pinpointing a historically developed interiority is vital for some, others, such as David Schalkwyk view it as a moot point. For him, human subjectivity does not belong to any one culture or period but "is born with language itself."[17] Analyzing Shakespeare's writing as a series of intersubjective speech acts and language games, Schalkwyk rejects the enaction of interiority

---

[15] Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

[16] Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, 15.

[17] David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 107.

by which interlocutors only receive snippets or moments of inwardness interpreted through outward signs. Instead, he argues that meaning is constructed exclusively from the language presented. Borrowing from Ludwig Wittgenstein, Schalkwyk views what he calls "concepts of inwardness" as a redundant point; it does not matter what interior sparked the words spoken on stage as that interior is *always* unknowable. That interior could be genuine, mischievous, duplicitous, or hollow, but regardless "words work without interior states to back them up."[18] Interiority, he claims instead, is an intersubjective construct that derives meaning from the spectator's individual and communal engagement with what is actually said. In a purely linguistic move, Schalkwyk would seem to care far less about the interpretive question as to whether Hamlet is faking madness and is more concerned with determining which speech acts lead us to ask this question to begin with.

Investigating Early Modern English interiority, then, presents a multitude of competing theoretical models and assumptions for better understanding the theatrical productions in this period. While acknowledging the work that these scholars are doing, the analysis of this chapter grounds itself on the historic conceptualization of interiority by Katharine Eisaman Maus as its theoretical underpinning. Specifically working to counter scholars such as Barker and de Grazia who view interiority as a late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century development, respectively, Maus demonstrates that not only is there sufficient historical evidence to link concepts of an outer and inner self already in the sixteenth century but that this cultural conversation concerning an individual's two selves was pervasive and vexed. In *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, Maus uses the stage to illustrate a social awareness of the distinction between an unexpressed, or inexpressible, interior and a theatricalized exterior. Drawing from a broad

---

[18] Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays*, 108.

archive of contemporary philosophical, religious, and literary sources, Maus refutes

anachronistic claims by indicating the prevalent, almost commonplace, discussions regarding an

individual's interiority. Noting that "the difference between knowing oneself 'from the inside'

and knowing other people 'from the outside' may seem so fundamental to social life that it

cannot be the property of a particular historical moment,"[19] she identifies Renaissance England

as a point of crescendo and anxiety concerning the gap between an individual's dialectical poles.

She points to this discrepancy between "inward disposition" and "outward appearance" as a

debate that was historically urgent and consequential.[20] In all aspects of society (the quotidian,

the religious, and the theatrical), anxiety existed in the perceptions between what people and

things inwardly *are* and what they outwardly only *seem*. The booming theatre scene, with its

distinguishing relationship between actor and character, instigated the reflection on disparities

between interiority and exteriority with regard not only to religious claims and competitions but

also to self-presentation in the social arena. For instance, Protestants endorsed the cultivation of

inner truths and Catholics were accused of focusing solely on exteriority and "attending only to

outward 'shows.'"[21] Similarly, plays and literature repeatedly interrogated the necessary

deceitfulness of courtly interactions, as our final case study in this chapter will show. Finally,

Maus argues that these two selves—the hidden, ineffable inner self and its outward, material

manifestation—were not contradictory notions but were often "voiced together, so that they

seem less self-canceling than symbiotically related or mutually constitutive."[22] In other words,

the public domain of exteriority derived its significance from the inner, private workings of self

while, simultaneously, interiority could be effected through outward action. As two sides of the

---

[19] Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance,* 12.
[20] Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, 13.
[21] Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance,* 8-15.
[22] Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, 29.

same coin, Maus posits Early Modern English self-identity as an oscillating conversation between inner and outer forces.

Maus' work, thus, helps to position the competing theatres of Elizabethan England within the larger rhetorical context of public discussions concerning interiority and exteriority. While, as noted, Hamlet's advice to players would not have estranged his spectators, neither would the references to and frictions of inner turmoil and outward performatives. Audience members were already thinking about this relationship and looking to see its portrayal (or not) through actors' bodies on stage. Theatre companies, too, would have been actively thinking about the duality of interiority/exteriority and looking to find ways to showcase this social anxiety on their stages. With the myriad of writings presented to her readers regarding the ubiquitous presence of this theme, it can safely be reasoned that both Shakespeare and the boy companies were not only aware of this cultural conversation but active participants in it. The adult theatre's prevalent interiority and boy companies' excessive exteriority can be read, thus, as conscious strategies by which they offered their interlocutors specific experiences that corresponded to discussions already happening outside the theatre. Shakespeare responded to contemporary discourse through exploring the enigmatic duality between inner prerogatives and outer representation. Meanwhile, the children's companies prioritized exteriority, helping the audience momentarily disregard an ineffable interiority and focus on the phenomenological presence of the child's body.

Interiority or Exteriority? That is the Question

Hamlet and *Antonio's Revenge* have many points in common. Revenge tragedies, both plays feature the secret murder of a monarch, the seduction of his widow, and the vengeance by

his son. Both plays share important dramatic elements: the ghost of each murdered king visits his son and calls for revenge, vengeance is premeditated in order to inflict maximum punishment, and each protagonist loses his love interest before the revenge is complete. However, other than some common narrative and dramatic threads, the two plays present very different interpretations of the same story. Commonalities of ghosts, disguises, poisons, and stabbings provide only a thin veneer over two very different theatricalities at work. While *Hamlet* presents the *locus classicus* of Early Modern interiority,[23] *Antonio's Revenge* represents the extreme limits by which exteriority is emphasized on the stage. In this section, a comparative investigation between similar aspects of the two plays highlights their thematic insistence on either interiority or exteriority. We will inspect these differences to demonstrate how the children's company placed emphasis on the body as a conscious maneuver. Far from any fluke or random pattern, Marston intentionally and repeatedly directs the spectator's gaze onto the physical bodies of these young actors to reinforce exteriority as the site of meaning-making.

In discussing the exploration of interiority in *Hamlet*, perhaps no passage is more often quoted than Hamlet's response to his mother early in the play in which he links outward performatives to inward motivations. When Gertrude asks her son why he still seems so strange two months after his father's passing, Hamlet responds:

> "Seems," madam? Nay, it is. I know not "seems."
> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,
> Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
> Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
> Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
> That can denote me truly. These indeed "seem,"
> For they are actions that a man might play;
> But I have that within which passes show,

---

[23] Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays*, 115.

These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.2.78-89)

Within the second scene of his play, Shakespeare already attempts to engage with popular conversations that polarize, as Maus notes, what *is* and what merely *seems*. Discussing exterior "trappings" and "suits" but connecting them with an inner truth, Hamlet demonstrates the link between these two extremes. For him, his outward appearances of sadness—his black clothes, sighs, tears, and downcast vision—all embody that which is truly beneath the surface. As Jacalyn Royce notes, Hamlet "asserts the authenticity of his body language and behavior" as emanating "from his true personal feelings."[24] It is not just a matter of putting on a performance but of expressing something hidden and unknowable inside. Hamlet lashes out at his mother at the thought that these two poles are not truly tied but that his exterior would only "seem" to express how he is feeling. The realistic linking between Hamlet's outward performatives and his interiority must have surely resonated with spectators as being believable. Sir Thomas Overbury noted that Richard Burbage's performance of Hamlet was exceptionally realistic. Describing "An Excellent Actor," Overbury explains that "what we see him personate, we thinke truly done before us."[25] Royce again, in her analysis of Early Modern English acting, points to Hamlet as an attempt "to achieve the appearance of not 'acting,' [but] the illusion of *being* their characters rather than performing them or, even, *seeming* like them."[26] Interiority and outward manifestations, then, are closely tied; gesture and action become mirrors to the character's inner motivations.

---

[24] Jacalyn Royce, "Early Modern Naturalistic Acting: The Role of the Globe in the Development of Personation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, ed. Richard Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 478.
[25] Sir Thomas Overbury, "An Excellent Actor," *New Characters (Drawne to the life) of several personas, in several qualities* (London: Printed for L. Lisle, 1615).
[26] Royce, "Early Modern Naturalistic Acting," 479.

If Hamlet's response that his outward appearance is based on "that within" stresses the existence of an interiority, it also emphasizes an inability for anyone other than himself ever to know truly or have access to this inner realm. This unknowable inwardness reflects an assertion from Thomas Wright that "we cannot enter into a man's heart, and view the passions or inclinations which there reside and lie hidden."[27] Whereas the performatives of grief are simply "actions that a man might play," referencing both the theatre and the quotidian show of exterior signs, Hamlet references that his interiority is, as Wright suggests, secretly within. While outward signs can point to this interiority, it remains ineffable in its inability to be completely communicated through language. When he indicates that his actions are "*but* the trappings and the suits of woe" [emphasis added], it becomes clear that there is more underneath his surface manifestations. Although he is linking interiority and exteriority, Shakespeare makes it clear that one can never truly tell if outward signs truly express that which is within; Hamlet's exteriority does reflect "that within" himself, but it does so only through incomplete and imperfect representations. This inability to access the deepest (and perhaps "truest") aspect of a character, demonstrated by Hamlet, is what Richard Preiss calls the "interiority effect" in which theatre always conceals the most interior truth. Noting that the stage, "where the visible play transpires, is not really the center; it is a membrane, a skin, merely the lid of a box,"[28] Preiss echoes the unknowability of others in the social realm. Just as Queen Gertrude cannot possibly access Hamlet's genuine interior, audience members, even in witnessing the conventional asides and soliloquies, are always barred innermost access to the character.

Across the Thames, *Antonio's Revenge* offered spectators a different theatrical experience by emphasizing the outward actions of its bodies on stage. If Shakespeare used

---

[27] Wright. *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*, 105.
[28] Preiss, "Interiority," 63.

Hamlet's response to his mother to express his own inwardness, Marston similarly endeavored to highlight his theatre's use of exteriority. Exteriority for Marston, unlike Shakespeare, is constructed as something that is genuine and meant to be believed in its own right. For Shakespeare, when Queen Gertrude and King Claudius question Hamlet's interiority, it suggests a distrust of outward appearances. His black clothes, sighs, and tears still leave them questioning what is *really* going on inside of him. Similarly, Hamlet's romantic intentions towards Ophelia, which are characterized by Ophelia as the "many tenders of his affection" and "love in an honorable fashion," (1.3.108-9, 119-20) are misinterpreted by her brother and father simply as "forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting," and that she should "not believe his vows, for they are brokers, not of that dye which their investments show, but mere implorators of unholy suits" (1.3.9, 136-8). In other words, exteriorities, according to Shakespeare, are not to be believed as they can mislead or feign that which is (or is not) inside. Marston flips this argument in his revenge tragedy. When wrongly accused of misdeeds by her tyrannical father and made to appear in court to defend herself, Mellida argues that she can thwart any accusation against her "with tears, with blushes, sighs and claspèd hands, with innocent uprearèd arms to heaven: With my unnooked simplicity. These, these must, will, can only quit my heart of guilt"[29] (4.1.149-52). Mellida guarantees her father, herself, and her audience that her exteriority is not only capable of portraying an inner innocence, but that her exteriority *is* her innocence. She asserts that her performatives of unhidden simplicity become a synecdoche for her larger subjectivity; there is nothing hiding inside, only the truth laid bare through exteriority. This exteriority, furthermore, evokes meaning that is both genuine and believable as it is its own authority.

---

[29] John Marston, *Antonio's Revenge*, in *The Malcontent and Other Plays*, ed. Keith Sturgess (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Unfortunately for spectators, Mellida never receives the opportunity to test her limits of corporeal authenticity as her trial gets sidetracked through a planned confession by Strozzo, Piero's lackey, and his subsequent strangling. Audiences, here, never get to see the effects of Marston's exteriority through Mellida; however, one can assume that her efforts to perform sincerity through the body would have been effective given the play's prior evocations of successful exteriority. Early in the play, Piero explains to the audience how he murdered his rival duke and Antonio's father, Andrugio, by poisoning his glass of wine.[30] He then charges his sidekick to enter as if just finding the dead body and to break the news to the others. When Strozzo follows this command and begins to recount this strange and sudden death, it becomes clear that his outward performatives are unconvincing. Piero, acting here as the voice of the playwright, spurs Strozzo to "give seeming passion; Fut! Weep, act, feign" (1.2.239-40). After a reminder to focus on his exteriority, Strozzo's message is read as completely convincing and efficacious; his outward acts of weeping and feigning accomplish his objective. There is no trace of questioning or arguing against this unhappy news. His exterior performance proves so believable that Maria, Andrugio's wife, even faints (1.2.248).

Strozzo's success in outwardly performing sorrow and dismay is later matched by Antonio's success in using his body as an indicator for his current emotional state and to shame his mother's acceptance of Piero's romantic advances. Saddened and angered by the combined death of his father, the murderer's romantic interest in his mother, and the imprisonment of his beloved, Antonio expresses the state of his character physically. While originally not wanting to "swell like a tragedian in forced passion of affected strains," (2.2.105) he eventually crumples on the stage weeping. Asked by his mother if he will do nothing but weep, Antonio responds that "I

---

[30] Piero's story of poisoning Andrugio's cup of wine would have taken place at the end of the first of Marston's *Antonio* plays. See 5.2.255-64 in *Antonio and Mellida*.

do sigh and wring my hands, beat my poor breast and wreathe my tender arms" (2.2.141-2). The action of wringing one's hands, in particular, was an important external signifier in the Early Modern period. In *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* and *Chironomia; or the Art of Manual Rhetorique*, John Bulwer argues that "to wring the hands is a *natural* expression of excessive grief used by those who condole, bewail, and lament" [emphasis added].[31] In a pseudo-scientific explanation for this gesture, Bulwer notes how the "spirits of the brain," in an attempt to produce mental tears to match actual ones, causes the body to act in a gesture which expresses this internal moisture. Although Bulwer places an interior motive on external gestures, Antonio's wringing of hands effectively communicates his frustration to his mother who is next seen rejecting Piero's advances, stating that "my son's distraught, accursed" (2.2.167). Importantly, the success of Antonio's physical gesture counters a failed attempt in *Hamlet* when an anxious Gertrude is commanded by her son to "leave wringing of your hands" (3.4.41-43) and to let him wring her heart. Again, then, exteriority fails in the adult theatre only to succeed in the boy companies.

Whereas Hamlet's outward show of both melancholy and love are interrogated because of a suspicion that his actions do not match a sincere interiority and his mother's physical portrayal of worry is scorned as mere fabrication, the successful examples of Strozzo's feigned sorrow and Antonio's believable gestures (and Mellida's assumed success from her exterior knowability) show a different kind of theatre in which exteriority is privileged over anything that may be beneath the surface. Outward displays fail in *Hamlet*: his sadness is questioned, his madness examined, and the alibis of characters like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are immediately seen through. In contrast, Marston's exteriority is efficacious as the principle means

---

[31] John Bulwer, *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* [And] *Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), 32.

through which meaning is made. As Rick Bowers notes in his discussion of Marston's ludic theatre, there is no attempt to expose any essential element of inner characterization. For Bowers, any attempt to draw meaning is only exposed through the playwright's "essential theatricality and self-consciousness of representation."[32] Representation, then, that quality that scornfully only "seems" in *Hamlet*, becomes all that there "is" in *Antonio's Revenge*. Unlike how exteriority is portrayed as an inferior simulation by Shakespeare, Marston reverses this notion, demonstrating exteriorities that carry weight and produce meaning in the context of the narrative.

Not only did Marston reject "that within" on which Hamlet predicates his behavior, he ignored interiority completely by putting a strong and immediate emphasis on the bodies of his actors. *Antonio's Revenge* wastes no time and immediately highlights exteriority before the first lines of dialogue are spoken. The first image the spectators see is the figure of Piero who enters "*unbraced, his arms bare, smeared in blood, a poniard in one hand, bloody, and a torch in the other.*" ([*SD*]1.1.1) The play itself begins not with language, signaling an interior from which to produce it, but with the body itself, exposed to reveal bare skin, an instrument to pierce the body, and the physical remnants from a body pierced. Having just murdered Andrugio, Antonio's father, and Felice, Pandulfo's son, Piero arrives on stage to gloat over his victories and explain his objective to the audience: "Poison the father, butcher the son, and marry the mother, ha!" (1.1.105). For spectators, Piero's explanation coupled with his physical body leaves little room for interiority. Whatever hidden machinations there might be are laid bare in the presence of his physical body. Whatever inwardness he possessed has been exposed to the audiences, creating the image of a body that exists solely as an external presence.

---

[32] Rick Bowers, "John Marston at the 'Mart of Woe': the *Antonio* Plays," in *The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-Visions*, ed. T. F. Wharton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 24.

Furthermore, this detailed attention focused on the exposed body is repeated throughout the first part of the play. Spectators shift their attention from one bloodied body to a second in the next scene. Felice's body, murdered by Piero, is dramatically revealed to spectators in the upper window of St. Paul's Cathedral. As Antonio and others begin to sing, attempting to wake up his sleeping fiancé, "*the curtain is drawn, and the body of Felice, stabbed thick with wounds, appears hung up*" ([*SD*] 1.2.193), surely creating quite the spectacle. Audience members were forced to witness the punctured body of a child actor hanging above them. Another reminder of the actor's physical state immediately follows. As Piero lies, explaining that it was he who killed Felice because he caught him and Mellida in an adulterous affair, Antonio flies at him with his rapier for speaking slanderous words about his betrothed. Piero slyly counters Antonio's "courage of vengeance" (1.2.212) by exposing his own skin. Manipulating Antonio, he challenges "Behold my stomach; strike me quite through with the relentless edge of raging fury" (1.2.206-8). More than costumes, then, such as Hamlet's "inky cloak," spectators are called to view the real skin—the actual body—of the boy actors. This insistence on remembering the tangible bodies on stage is enacted again later, but through Antonio, who enters after having killed Piero's son, in an almost identical manner as the play's antagonist at the top of the performance with "*arms bloody, carrying a torch and a poniard*" ([*SD*] 3.3.73). In all of these examples, notions of interiority are ignored or dismissed and replaced by an insistence on the body itself to make meaning in time and place. Exteriority, in these cases, both replaces the unknowability of any inwardness—audiences know the limp body is lifeless and not just faking just as they know Antonio has reached new depths of rage as he arrives unbraced and covered in blood—and diverts the audience's attention away from any ponderings of interiority and onto the physical presence of child bodies on stage.

If interiority is disregarded in *Antonio's Revenge* by focusing attention on the bodies of

its performers, *Hamlet*'s attention on corporeality is used to reinforce the body's

meaninglessness compared to what lies within. Secretly returning to Denmark at the beginning of

Act 5, Hamlet stumbles on the work of a callous gravedigger as he is finishing the plot for

Ophelia's body. Appalled by the gravedigger's unceremonious littering of excavated bones,

Hamlet muses with Horatio (and the audience) as to what identity might have matched the

various skulls produced from the earth. He ponders how the physical remnants must have

corresponded to actual lives, professions, and personalities; maybe this skull belonged to a

politician, a courtier, or a lawyer? The bones themselves become unimportant to Hamlet. While

he criticizes the demeanor and actions of the gravedigger and his casual tossing of bones during

his work, Hamlet acknowledges that the exterior remnants of these bodies are unable to actually

describe or reveal any truth about the individuals. These bones, then, are only imbued with

meaning by the interiors which they previously held. This insignificance of corporeality is

reinforced by the gravedigger. When asked by Hamlet who is to be buried in this plot, he

responds in a manner both humorous but very sincere that it is no man nor woman to be buried

but "one what *was* a woman, sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead" (5.1.138-9 [emphasis added]).

With her death, Ophelia's gender, along with her body, become inconsequential. Her soul, the

inner, eternal part of herself, is perceived to be the only important element of her that is left

behind. Again, Shakespeare drives home his message of an unobtainable interiority as Ophelia's

body is laid to rest. Just as the gravedigger acknowledges that her body is unimportant but her

soul lives on, Laertes becomes frustrated by the impossibility of accessing the true nature of his

sister once more. Jumping into the grave, he commands the gravedigger to "hold off the earth

awhile, Till I have caught her once more in mine arms" (5.1.261-2). Both Laertes and the

audience experience the fruitlessness of such an action as his attempt is blocked by a body with no interiority; the corporeal remains of Ophelia are portrayed as hollow remnants to what *was* instead of, as in *Antonio's Revenge*, an outward sign for what *is.* Whereas Marston uses the bodies of the boy actors to reinforce a knowability and a sense of meaning-making in and through the body, the burial scene in *Hamlet* reminds Shakespeare's audience of the predominant nature of a character's interiority and how outward signs are always hollow.

Finally, if the different theatrical modes of interiority and exteriority between *Hamlet* and *Antonio's Revenge* have, so far, been centered on distrustful, intersubjective negotiations between characters, assertions that exterior actions create meaning, and a narrowed focus on the body itself, then no shared aspect of the two plays proves more appropriate for investigation than the act of revenge itself. In both plays, ghosts of murdered fathers beseech their sons to avenge their improper deaths and, in both cases, this revenge is fulfilled; however, the manner with which revenge occurs differs substantially between the two plays. While revenge in *Hamlet* is occupied with spiritual punishment and enacted through internal poisons (albeit caused by blades), that in *Antonio's Revenge* bears a preoccupation for maximum exterior destruction.

While an easy comparison can be drawn between the two plays concerning the amount of time the protagonists take between learning of their fathers' murders and their vengeful actions,[33] both characters do share a period of internalized struggle and decision-making. Although Hamlet immediately vows vengeance to fulfill his father's command that "all alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain, unmixed with baser matter" (1.5.109-11), he famously wavers. Frustrated by players who can simply follow their passions and act in accord with their interior selves, Hamlet laments, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" before

---

[33] Hamlet takes the bulk of the play before taking direct action against Claudius whereas Antonio kills Piero's son within 135 lines of his father's ghost's departure.

admonishing himself for being "pigeon-livered" and lacking gall (2.2.577, 604). Hamlet's

frustrations with himself points to an inward conflict between desire, certainty, and conviction.

Although Marston's play has been discussed here as espousing exteriority, there are small

moments directed at interiority that help shape his narrative. When confronted by his own

father's ghost, Antonio, too, takes a moment (although a *very* short one) with which to resolve

himself to the coming task. Quoting from Seneca's *Thyestes*, Antonio briefly ponders the

punishments that lie in store for the dead before quickly asserting "hear the words of Antonio

now hastening towards you: 'I shall be revenged'" [34] (3.2.72-3). Although Antonio's resolve is

fortified within ten lines, it is clear that in this instance he shares Hamlet's inward reflections on

the costs of avenging his father.

Barring Antonio's brief look inwards, Marston's revenge takes a markedly outward

quality compared with Shakespeare's, who begins his revenge with Hamlet investigating this

interiority and only continuing its theme of inwardness. This is clearly seen through investigating

why each protagonist delays his vengeance half way though the play. In the third act of both

plays, revenge is postponed; both Hamlet and Antonio approach their unsuspecting target with

sword in hand, ready to fulfill their obligation to their murdered father, only to change their

minds at the last moment. While their actions are similar, their intentions are vastly different. For

Hamlet, as he accosts his quarry, he realizes that Claudius is in the act of prayer and that killing

him at that moment would send his soul to heaven. Hamlet reasons, "A villain kills my father,

and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send to heaven. Why, this is hire and salary, not

revenge" (3.3.81-4). Hamlet quickly decides that his vengeance must wait for a moment when

---

[34] "*Antonii vocem excipe/ Properantis ad vos: Ulciscar.*" I am indebted to Keith Sturgess' notes and translations for this section. See Sturgess' note in John Marston, *Antonio's Revenge*, in *The Malcontent and Other Plays*, ed. Keith Sturgess (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 318.

Claudius' soul is blackened by sin so that his death does not equate to eternal salvation. Antonio, too, approaches Piero with the intent to kill him only to change his mind. However, he differs from Hamlet as he seems to place no prominence on the fate of Piero's soul, but instead seeks to cause the greatest amount of earthly pain and suffering possible. Withdrawing from the duke, Antonio performs an Early Modern equivalent to the modern, action-movie adage "he'll only wish he were dead" as he whispers that death "shall be sought for; I'll force him feed on life till he shall loathe it. This shall be the close of vengeance' strain" (3.2.140-2). For Antonio, rather than killing Piero quickly and efficiently, revenge is best enacted if the victim is truly made to suffer for his wrongdoings; he is more concerned with physical and emotional pain than any eternal suffering of an inner soul. This sentiment of an excruciating death is revisited near the end of the play by Pandulfo who postpones the inevitable stabbing of Piero, "And yet not die till he hath died and died ten thousand deaths in agony of heart" (5.3.106-7). With corresponding sentiments, Antonio and Pandulfo both express a belief in which proper vengeance deploys the greatest physical and emotional harm to its living, breathing victim.

Just as these postponed moments of revenge highlight their respective plays' usage of interiority and exteriority, so do the completed acts of revenge themselves. The climactic final scene in Shakespeare's play lacks the blood and gore of other revenge tragedies such as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and instead substitutes for blood the dramatic usage of poisons. King Claudius and Laertes conspire to kill Hamlet by either wounding him with a poison tipped sword or having him drink from a poisoned goblet of wine. Commenting on the potent, easy, and interior causes of death, Laertes notes that his poison is so effective that there is no cure in all the world that "can save the thing from death that is but scratched withal" (4.7.165-6) and the audience has the opportunity to witness Claudius as he "*drops the pearl in*

69

the cup" ([*SD*]5.2.307) in his preparation of a contingency plan in case Laertes fails to mortally

wound Hamlet. Due to the dramatic set up of these fatal devices, the final scene of *Hamlet*

features four corresponding deaths via interior means. Gertrude mistakenly drinks the poisoned

cup. Laertes and Hamlet scratch each other with the same poison tipped sword. And finally

fulfilling his promise to his murdered father, Hamlet both wounds Claudius with the venomous

sword and forces him to drink the rest of the poisoned wine. All of these deaths are,

uncoincidentally, internal. None of the men are killed through the carnage of material weapons;

instead, they are simply grazed by external tools that allow the poisons to operate from within.

Shakespeare emphasizes these inward-orientated deaths through dialogue and stage directions.

When Hamlet wounds Claudius, he stresses the internal workings of his revenge before striking:

"the point envenomed too! Then, venom, to they work" (5.2.352-3). Importantly, Shakespeare's

stage directions here do not call for Hamlet to stab the king but only to "hurt" him before pouring

poison down his throat (5.2.353). By only "hurting" instead of stabbing, killing, or driving his

sword through Claudius, he makes clear that it is not the outward manifestations of revenge—

Hamlet or Hamlet's sword—that make meaning, but a hidden, interiorized cause of death.

Whereas *Hamlet* offered audiences a prevalent case of interiority seen through both its

agents and causes of death, those viewing *Antonio's Revenge* witnessed the bloody opposite. In

his comparison between *Antonio's Revenge* and *Titus Andronicus*, George L. Geckle notes the

extremely bloody rhetoric of Marston's play and locates "over seventy references to *blood* and

its adjectival and verbal variants, plus a few well-chosen comments about *gore*."[35] All of these

references, he argued, simply point to a drama of "excess."[36] While Geckle's argument does

---

[35] George L. Geckle, *John Marston's Drama: Themes, Images, Sources* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980), 84.
[36] Geckle, *John Marston's Drama*, 84.

seem to fall in line with Antonio's final monologue, in which he laments that "Never more woe in lesser plot was found" (5.3.174), his conclusion concerning excess fails to recognize how this mode of exteriority directly challenges Shakespeare's interiority. More than simple excess, the mode of exterior revenge in Marston's play works to dismiss notions of inwardness and position the body as a site of meaning. As opposed to Shakespeare's killing of his characters from the inside out, Piero is eventually murdered in Marston's tragedy from just the outside. With a large group of conspirators working together to disempower the duke, he is eventually stabbed repeatedly, not wounded or poisoned. Marston is specific that "*They run all at Piero with their rapiers*" ([*SD*] 5.3.111). Focused on the physical image of bodies on stage, the scene replaces poisoning of the interior with puncturing of the exterior.

Even before the climactic stabbing of the play's antagonist, the focused relationship between revenge and the body begins soon after Antonio chooses not to kill Piero immediately but instead to cause him the greatest physical and emotional harm. Withdrawing from Piero, Antonio comes across the duke's child, Julio, and decides to punish the father by first murdering the son. Thinking not of souls and interiority as Hamlet does, Antonio ties identity to blood and flesh and laments, before stabbing Julio, that if only he knew "which joint, which side, which limb were father all and had no mother in't, that I might rip it vein by vein and carve revenge in bleeding rases!" (3.2.164-7). Julio, here, loses all individuality and becomes merely a surrogate of Piero's flesh and blood for Antonio's revenge, which is temporarily satiated as Antonio claims that "he is all Piero, father all; this blood, this breast, this heart, Piero all, whom thus I mangle" (3.2.200-2). Any interiority of Julio is promptly dismissed as Piero's son becomes a physical manifestation of the duke and punished as such. This focus on the child's body and the physical harm done to it in the name of revenge is revisited at the end of the play during the large,

mutinous revenge sequence. After Piero has been tied up, a large serving tray is brought before him as if it were a platter of sweetmeats but is instead revealed to be the disembodied limbs of his son. Antonio mocks the captured duke that "here lies a dish to feast thy father's gorge; here's flesh and blood which I am sure thou lov'st" (5.3.80-1), the outward action of eating is intricately tied to the physical body of Julio and his corporeal dismemberment. Revenge on and through the son, therefore, points to a reinforcing of exteriority as the means through which vengeance becomes effective, ignoring individual subjectivity. Julio is treated as a surrogate Piero, and the duke's confrontation with his mangled son is positioned as a forced witnessing of his own death before he is eventually killed.

Whereas Shakespeare allowed his poisons to take effect slowly, offering his characters small moments of public confession and reconciliation, as when Laertes pleads to "exchange forgiveness" with Hamlet (5.2.361-3), any expression of inner remorse or humanity is promptly stripped from Piero as his tongue is ripped out of his mouth just before he is offered a taste of his only son. Without his tongue, he can only "*seem to condole his son*" ([*SD*] 5.3.82) but is prohibited from expressing any inner desires, confessions, or sentiments. This "seeming," without the ability to speak or express anything more, puts all of the spectator's attention on Piero's body as a locus of meaning-making. In this way, the removal of his tongue stands in sharp contrast to a similar dramatic event in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* in which Hieronimo bites out his own tongue. Surely, Marston's audiences would have noted the imitation of such a well-known (and grotesque) dramatic event; however, while Kyd's removal of Hieronimo's tongue reinforces themes of interiority common in adult playhouses, Marston's emphasizes exteriority. Unlike Piero, whose tongue is forcibly ripped from his mouth, Hieronimo bites out his *own* tongue as a gesture of defiance. Threatened with torture by the king unless Hieronimo explains

his motives for the murders of the Duke and Viceroy's children, Hieronimo asserts that "never shalt thou force me to reveal the thing which I have vowed inviolate"[37] (4.4.188-9) before biting out his tongue. While he had been straight-forward with his motivations of revenge, the prospect that he might give away some unknowable information to the King (and the audience) proves too dreadful for Hieronimo, who exercises his will to protect his own interiority. As Richard Preiss notes, while spectators *thought* they had access to the protagonist's interiority, through "the disgorgement of that organ, inside becomes outside again" and spectators are forever barred from the innermost reaches of Hieronimo's person.[38] This conscious attempt to hide forever one's innermost thoughts and feelings is inverted by Marston. Through ripping out Piero's tongue, Antonio denies the antagonist any interiority. His tongue—the physical manifestation of his powers of deceit—is thrown onto the stage, leaving only his physical body available for characters and spectators to enact their revenge. Through removing Piero's ability to communicate verbally, Marston focuses the audience's attention on his body as a site of meaning; he cannot tell how he is feeling but must *show* it, as when he "seems" to condole his son. This "seems," compared to Hamlet's dichotomy between what "seems" and "that within which passes show," truly becomes that which "is" for Piero. With no means to differentiate the two, Marston uses these final moments of Piero to dismiss interiority and place all meaning solely on the body.

Thus, similar to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Marston's revenge tragedy performed by the Children of St. Paul's engages in the period's conversations concerning interiority and exteriority. However, where *Hamlet* draws the audience's attention to a secret and unknowable

---

[37] Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, eds. David Bevington et. al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).
[38] Preiss, "Interiority," 67.

interior, *Antonio's Revenge* focuses on the body. These bodies on stage produce meaning not by manifesting, accurately or otherwise, interior impulses, but by positioning their meaning *on* their bodies. From efficacious performatives, such as Mellida's presumed ability to exonerate herself through outward displays, to focused attention on the body as meaning-making, as when Piero shows his stomach to Antonio to assert his innocence, the body is always placed at the center of discussions. Marston's corporeally-focused drama highlights the children's companies as a site that focuses spectators' attention on the youthful bodies of its actors. As demonstrated here, this focus on the body is not random but shows an intentional and repeated pattern by which the boy companies reminded their audience that they were watching productions performed by children.

The Unpredictable Child and the Spectatorial Risk to Form

An abundance of attention has been spent on this close reading between *Hamlet* and *Antonio's Revenge* to demonstrate the deliberate ways that exteriority was reinforced by the boy companies. As shown above, Marston consciously and repeatedly turns his audience's attention to the performer's body. This attention on exteriority is not simply a means of differentiating the children's theatres from their adult theatre counterparts but of consistently reminding the audience of the phenomenological state of the performers themselves. Drawing attention to the physical components of the character's body—their flesh, skin, blood, limbs, posture, movement—and the capacity for their outward signs to demonstrate meaning—Strozzo's unquestioned display of sorrow and Antonio's credible wringing of hands—simultaneously draws the spectator's attention to the actor's body underneath. This is perhaps most evident in Marston's play when Antonio, grieving the loss of his beloved Mellida, takes off his hat to expose his head and laments, "I turn my prostrate breast upon thy face, and vent a heaving sigh.

O hear but this: I am a poor, poor orphan; a weak, weak, child" (4.2.12-4). Audiences are asked to focus on the character's exteriority in order to discern the child actor underneath whose labor produces the on-stage narrative. This double reading of character and performer follows R. A. Foakes's observation that Marston's emphasis on exteriority was not for its own sake but to draw attention to the child actor and "keep his audience consciously aware that they are watching children imitating adults."[39] Similarly, Michael Shapiro notes the widespread pattern of "dual consciousness"—an audience's concurrent awareness of both the actor's identity and character's identity—as a particularly salient feature of the boy companies "because of the obvious disparity between child actors and adult characters."[40] Antonio's physical exposure and self-referential line, therefore, provide a blatant example of the common practice by boy companies to remind audiences that it was children playing on the stage before them.

The focus on exteriority and its steady reminder that the actors were children was not simply done for the sake of novelty nor, as Rosalind Kerr suggests in her exploration of boy actors more broadly, as a kind of "running metatheatrical joke" that prepared the audience to accept the children's "personations" of adult characters and to believe "the emotional plausibility of what they were witnessing."[41] Instead, I argue that this constant awareness of the performer's status as a child reinforces his unpredictable nature that was commonly associated with childhood. Furthermore, this unpredictability positions the boy companies as indeterminate sites where audiences could engage with a spectatorial risk to form. The children's unpredictability threatened not only what was presented on stage but the very form and function of theatre itself.

---

[39] R. A. Foakes, "John Marston's Fantastical Plays: *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio's Revenge*." *Philological Quarterly* 41.1 (1962): 230.
[40] Shapiro, *Children of the Revels*, 104
[41] Rosalind Kerr, "'Boying Their Greatness': Transnational Effects of the Italian Divas on the Shakespearean Stage," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Anglo-Italian Renaissance Literature and Culture,* ed. Michele Marrapodi (New York: Routledge, 2019), 350.

For audiences, to recognize the child actor was to also recognize the child's capacity to act in ways both responsible and chaotic. The child, unlike their adult counterparts, was not equally bound to conventions, obligations, and social norms and could, therefore, be read as unpredictable and dangerous in the public sphere. While the young actor had the ability play his role correctly—both in society and on the stage—as deferential and obedient, he could also prove to be either unruly or incapable. This unknowability produced a spectatorial risk to form in which spectators interacted with the possibility that theatrical conventions could be upheld or shattered. The actors' status as children positioned them as performers who *might* uphold the decency of the stage, who *might* rebel and ruin the performance, or who *might* simply fail at playing their parts.

Discussing a spectatorial risk to form means both acknowledging and pushing back against the limits of Claire M. Busse's investigation into the allure of unpredictable children upon the stage. In her article "'Pretty Fiction' and 'Little Stories': Child Actors on the Early Modern Stage," Busse insightfully explores the economic relationship between theatres, playwrights, audiences, and performers to construct an image of the boy actors as both property and agent. Acknowledging that these children were owned by their respective companies and "legally forced into their service as vehicles for the author's representations,"[42] she argues that, as public performers on stage, they carried with them the agency and possibility of rebelling against their owners. While adult actors had the opportunity to benefit financially from their relationship with their theatre and its playwrights, the child actor as property is "as likely to use his celebrity against the success of the production as he is to use it in favor of it."[43] For Busse,

---

[42] Claire M. Busse, "'Pretty Fictions' and 'Little Stories': Child Actors on the Early Modern Stage," in *Childhood and Children's Books in Early Modern Europe, 1550-1800*, eds. Andrea Immel and Michael Witmore (New York: Routledge, 2006), 77.
[43] Busse, "'Pretty Fictions' and 'Little Stories': Child Actors on the Early Modern Stage," 80.

then, the child actor retains the potential to rebel and act outside of theatrical and social conventions. While I do not agree with Busse's positioning the boy actors as "agents"—I have yet to find any evidence that speaks to these child actors asserting their own will and behaving outside of the normative conventions by which they are bound—I am indebted to her framing of potentiality. Because as children they were property rather than stockholders in the company, there was the *potential* that these actors might not do as they were instructed.

However, while Busse limits her discussion to the possibility that the child actors might assert their celebrity status and revolt against the demands of theatre managers and playwrights, I widen this scope of unpredictability to better understand how spectators engaged with a perceived risk to theatrical form. For audiences watching children on stage, the possibility of unruly behavior was certainly present; the actors very well might rebel against the playwright and theatrical conventions. Equally possible, however, was the likelihood that these children would perform with dutiful and respectful decorum. Yet still, the prospect always loomed that they might simply be incapable of performing the playwright's work. Beginning from where Busse leaves off, the allure of boy companies should not be read simply as threatening spaces in which actors might rebel, but as unpredictable spaces in which the cultural logic and decorum that dominated the adult theatres might be disrupted. Within a robust theatrical marketplace, audiences were quickly taught what to expect from the transactional nature of public performance. While Richard Preiss has aptly noted that being forced to pay for entertainment before witnessing it created anxiety and uncertainly for audiences,[44] a social contract existed nonetheless in which payment to enter the public playhouses corresponded to receiving a particular *type* of entertainment. Although the nature of an individual production might vary in

---

[44] See Richard Preiss, "Interiority," in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

terms of genre, theatricality, and quality, audiences associated "theatre-going" with the promise

of a certain kind of experience. This promise was threatened by children; their unpredictability

meant that theatrical assurances—those basic rules and conventions that governed the theatre-

going experience—were not guaranteed but subject to the whims of the child actors. Importantly,

the unpredictability of childhood that threatened to undermine the very form of the theatre was

both a danger and a magnetic attraction for audiences. With the seemingly equal potential that

the boy actors might uphold the stage's integrity, prove unable to perform their roles, or revolt

against the theatre and refuse to enact the production, the spectatorial risk to form created a

powerful allure for audiences. Regardless of the dramatic narrative, audiences looked forward to

something new and unexpected as they intertwined their theatre-going experience with the ability

and willingness of child actors who might succeed or fail, please or shock. To better understand

how the recognition of children on stage produced these dangers and pleasures, we will inspect

how childhood more broadly was understood in Early Modern England and how their

unpredictability created three distinct theatrical possibilities for audiences to encounter.

 Understanding the Early Modern child faces many of the same obstacles as understanding

the Early Modern audience. Faced with a lack of archival evidence from subjects themselves and

the acknowledged heterogeneity of the group, scholars have been tasked to interpret materials

concerning childhood to analyze their possible lived experiences. In this regard, Keith Thomas

places children alongside women in the historical archive as a "muted group," in his critique that

scholarly attention on the historicized child is, in actuality, often scholarship on adult attitudes *to*

children.[45] Here, I heed Thomas' warning and direct our attention deliberately to exploring how

---

[45] Keith Thomas, "Children in Early Modern England," in *Children and Their Books: A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie*, eds. Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 47.

adults viewed children. After all, it was adult perceptions of childhood that made risks of uncertainty legible on the stages of boy companies.

Early Modern scholars have drawn nuanced and often contradictory portraits of the child, but some major patterns are worth extracting here. As Anna French concisely summarizes, while the term "childhood" is a more modern concept that was not used at the time, Early Modern families and society certainly understood the concept as pertaining to a designated time period different to, and separate from, infancy and adulthood.[46] This distinction as being neither quite *this* nor *that* provides the communal undercurrent through which diverse interpretations have been grounded. In perhaps the most seminal work to jump-start scholarship on the Early Modern child, Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* famously argues that before the Early Modern period, "the idea of childhood did not exist." He clarifies that while love and affection were surely common, there was just little awareness during the Medieval period of a particular nature of childhood to distinguish it from adulthood; children were simply unimportant.[47] While childhood becomes an established concept by the eighteenth-century, Ariès marks the Early Modern period as one of shifting perspectives. On the one hand, children are still ignored as invisible and inconsequential. To illustrate this continued trend, Ariès points to examples such as Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid*, in which Béralde questions Argan's decision to place his eldest daughter, Angélique, in a convent, "when you have all the money you have and only the one daughter—for I'm not counting the little one."[48] Even far into the seventeenth-century, prepubescent children are still viewed as unimportant. On the other hand, Ariès notes, the

---

[46] Anna French, "Locating the Early Modern Child," in *Early Modern Childhood: An Introduction*, ed. Anna French (New York: Routledge, 2020), 7.

[47] Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life,* trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 128.

[48] Molière, *The Misanthrope and Other Plays,* translated with an introduction by John Wood (London: Penguin Books, 1959), 256.

developing trend of children's fashion and increased references to "coddling" point to a growing

interest in childhood as a distinguishable stage in one's life. Ariès' analysis, then, points to the

Early Modern child as a liminal figure capable of both disappearing and becoming a source of

pride or amusement.

If Ariès located the Early Modern child between poles of invisibility and presence, others

position the liminal children as oscillating between the realms of sacred and profane. Alongside

new behaviors of coddling came a larger conceptualization of the child as inherently good,

innocent, and dependent on others for their survival and development. Naomi J. Miller and Diane

Purkiss catalog a list of positively framed descriptions that begin to be associated with childhood

during this period. Drawing inspiration from the art of the Italian Renaissance, they explain that

the child is increasingly envisioned as "innocent of the burdens of adulthood, able to enjoy and

appreciate nature as an extension of itself, often unconsciously and unstudiedly pious, [and]

mistaken for an angel." Here, I purposefully write "envisioned" as they conclude their catalog

with the recognition that this ideal childhood was actually "an imaginative refuge for adults,

almost a paracosm alongside the much less comfortable real world which adults rule."[49]

However, if childhood was perceived as pure and innocent to reflect adult hopes for the future, it

also reflected social and religious anxieties. Alongside this positive imagining, the child was also

thought to be inherently dangerous. As Lawrence Stone argues, while children represented hope

for the future and embodied their parents' ambitions to create a generation of piousness and

virtue, they also embodied the "negation of all such aspirations" as they epitomized original

---

[49] Naomi J. Miller and Diane Purkiss, "Introduction: Reading Childhood Through Literature," in *Literary Cultures and Medieval and Early Modern Childhoods*, eds. Naomi J. Miller and Diane Purkiss (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), xxiv.

sin.[50] This aspect of original sin sparked a fear of the "liability of children to corruption and sin, particularly those cardinal sins of pride and disobedience."[51] This threat of children behaving in an unruly or monstrous capacity was especially apparent in the ubiquitous prints and folk tales of a "World Upside Down." In addition to gender inversions and anthropomorphic depictions of animals governing people, stories and images inverted the hierarchical relationship between children and their parents; for instance, boys are shown whipping their fathers and daughters are occupied feeding their mothers like an infant. As Rachel L. Chantos argues, these depictions reveal "an alternate and undesirable reality" that reflects "hierarchic anxieties" posed by children.[52] The sinfulness of children that Stone describes, then, not only to personal corruption but to a widespread, social perversion. Children, thus, could be perceived as both sacred and profane; they had the capacity to make the world a better place but also threatened to undermine core values and institutions. Moreover, adults did not view these dichotomous understandings of children as fixed but, instead, recognized that children could alternate between these extremes or embody both poles at once.

Seen through these oppositions of invisibility/presence and sacred/profane, the Early Modern child was both fluid and formless, capable of existing in extremes or manifesting a wide range of possibilities at any moment. As such, the actual actions of children were equally unpredictable. They had the potential to manifest their inner angelic quality and become a beacon of moral righteousness and civic decorum. At the same time, their inner sinfulness could unleash a flurry of disobedience and chaos. Or, just like Argan's youngest daughter, they might

---

[50] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 175.
[51] Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 174.
[52] Rachel L. Chantos, "'These Stories are Not for Children': Misbehaving Children in 'World Upside Down' Prints and the Origins of Folk Tales," in *The Early Modern Child in Art and History*, ed. Matthew Knox Averett (New York: Routledge, 2015), 71.

simply disappear from sight due to their inability to contribute to adult activities and conversations.

       The stage endeavored to capture the essence of this socially unfixed and undetermined child. As Bethany Packard notes, the heavy use of metatheatricality, especial in the boy companies' inductions, effectively froze the actor's status to that of a perpetual child. She argues that the simultaneous performance of adult characters by child actors—and, as I should add, the recognition of such by spectators—"forecloses any sense of childhood as a discrete developmental stage and undercuts the inevitability of growing up into adulthood."[53] In other words, the contrast of ages reaffirms the nebulous identity of the random "child player" and dismisses the possibility of an actual subjectivity that will soon become an adult. The stage, then, maintains the reading of its actors *as* children who are capable of anything, including the dichotomous extremes discussed above. In a similar vein, Edel Lamb makes the far-reaching argument that the stage took advantage of the unfixed nature of children and positioned them as passive objects waiting to be written upon by adults. As children were conceptualized as transitory objects moving towards a state of completion (adulthood), they were often characterized as blank canvases, empty vessels, or fresh wax waiting for adult inscription through which they became meaningful to, and able to join, their respective adult communities. The stage then, as Lamb contends, offered a multitude of possibilities by which adult identity was repeatedly forged.[54] Drawing from Judith Butler's performativity of gender, Lamb conceptualizes this period's childhood as a process through which repetitive behaviors are

---

[53] Bethany Packard, "Inducting Childhood: The Scripted Spontaneity of Self-Referential Child Players," in *Literary Cultures and Medieval and Early Modern Childhoods*, eds. Naomi J. Miller and Diane Purkiss (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 104.
[54] Edel Lamb, *Performing Childhood in the Early Modern Theatre: The Children's Playing Companies (1599-1613)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5-7.

practiced and an adult identity is eventually formed. Working on the stage, Lamb argues, these children were always given new parts, or new adult identities, through which they were always practicing and transforming into adults. As a blank object, then, these children were given access to a multitude of future selves and expected to dutifully embody each.

Spectators, therefore, perceived the child in two overlapping ways. Through focusing on the actor's exteriority, audiences recognized the child beneath the costume and were able to associate him with larger social beliefs about the nature of children. Unfixed and fluid, the child maintained his capacity for good and evil, to excel or disappear. Similarly, through focusing on the staged portrayal of character, audiences recognized the endless permutations of the child actor. Although all actors could portray diverse characters, the child actor's objectivity as a passive object and blank canvas supported the notion that any role was temporary and could change in an instant. These overlapping perspectives offered spectators a double reinforcement of the child actor as inherently unpredictable and emphasized the children's theatres as sites where anything might happen.

For spectators, the perception that the unpredictable child could behave in innumerable ways suggested that the integrity of the theatre experience itself might be compromised or threatened. The innate unknowability of the child actor offered audiences pleasures and dangers through a spectatorial risk to form. Audiences engaged with the alluring possibility that they might witness a new theatrical experience or, likewise, the threatening potential that their evening might be ruined. Importantly, this sense of pleasure and danger works hand-in-hand; having a performance ruined by rebellious children could be itself a pleasurable, novel encounter for some—one that they would certainly want to talk about with their acquaintances. The excitement, then, was the uncertainty of what kind of theatrical product spectators would

encounter; might they witness devout servants? Inadequate performers? Unruly children? Spectators had to attend to find out.

One major possibility within a spectatorial risk to form was that the children would behave accordingly and act as devoted caretakers of the day's performance. Associated with the child's inherent potential of innate goodness, spectators might discover actors who diligently and obediently worked to fulfill their roles and please the adults in the playhouse. Perhaps, spectators considered this obedience to be the least risky of potential threats to form as, after all, it upheld standard theatrical practices. However, the dutiful and respectful child was an important element of the wider range of performance experiences and offered a point of contrast between this "expected" servitude and possible instances of inadequacy and rebellion that might be only moments away. In other words, it was only though steady reminders of the child's piety that contrasting ideas could be conjured. Metatheatrical devices, especially inductions and prologues, were convenient ways to reinforce this devotion to spectators. For instance, Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* features a prologue that highlights the child actor, seemingly as himself and not portraying a character, and his capacity to serve the adult spectators. The child beseeches the audience that the players' desires to appease and entertain outweigh their capacity: "O that our power could lackey or keep wing with our desires, that with unused peise of style and sense we might weight massy in judicious scale!" (Pro.27-30). The players remind their interlocutors of their size and status; they are only children doing their best to not only play adults but play *for* adults. Marston's strategy here of having young bodies humbly request patience and patronage was a recycled maneuver by the playwright. In his induction to *Jack Drum's Entertainment* the year before, a young player finishes his speech by imploring that "for our parts to gratifie your favour, weele studie till our cheeks looke wan with care, that you our pleasures, we your loves

84

may share."[55] Spectators are asked to perceive the boy players as diligent school children, working tirelessly for their adult interlocutors until their bodies are exhausted and pale.

If the child actor's purity framed them as devoted servants for the audience's amusement, it also positioned them as steadfast defenders of the stage itself against unruly spectators. As Andrew Gurr has noted, the Early Modern audience viewed itself as an "active participant in the collective experience of playgoing."[56] This was especially true for the boy companies' playhouses. Within the smaller and more intimate setting, the child actors performed to spectators who were there to both see and be seen. While behaviors such as laughing, applauding, and vocalizing short responses were normal, rising gallants would often interject themselves to shift attention away from the stage and onto themselves. Michael Shapiro notes that the boisterous spectator could disrupt the play in any number of ways to demonstrate his own wit, critical assessment, and public presence. Through these interjections, the spectator "was actually giving a counterperformance of his own in order to assert his social worth."[57] An exaggerated example of this can be seen in Thomas Dekker's 1609 satire, *The Gull's Hornbook*. Ridiculing the histrionic gallant, Dekker devotes an entire section to how one "should" conduct himself in the playhouse. He recommends ostentatious behaviors such as arriving late and laughing loudly in the middle of tragic or serious scenes so that "all the eyes in the galleries will leaue walking after the Players, and onely follow you."[58] All of these obnoxious "counterperformances" threatened to undermine the production.

---

[55] John Marston, *Jack Drum's Entertainment: or The Comedie of Pasquill and Katherine* (London: Printed for Richard Olive, dwelling in Long Lane, 1601).

[56] Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London, Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 53.

[57] Shapiro, *Children of the Revels*, 70.

[58] Thomas Dekker, *The Guls Horne-booke* (Imprinted at London for R. S., 1609), 30.

Amongst these distractions by entitled gallants, it was the young actors who demonstrated their attention to decorum and responsibility and acted as the last line of defense to safeguard the theatrical experience for all other interlocutors. Surely, the actors had to balance maintaining the integrity of the performance without offending their more willful interlocutors. This is especially seen in the prologue of John Day's *Isle of Gulls*. Day's play opens with a trio of gallants who, perhaps providing inspiration to Dekker's satire, interrupt the start of the performance and demand to be furnished with seats. The child actor speaking the prologue walks a thin line between respecting these customers and pleasing the rest of the crowd: "Pardon me sir, my office is to speake a Prologue, not to prouide you stooles."[59] Acting as a patient gatekeeper to a rowdy audience, the child affirms his capacity to improve the world around him. While Day's prologue actor eventually settles the boisterous gallants and allows the play to begin, Francis Beaumont's ensemble of children work tirelessly throughout the entire performance to appease their demanding spectators and still uphold the theatrical event for everyone else. In Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, children are positioned as the theatre's saviors as the stage is encroached upon by a man and his wife who treat the cast as servants and slowly make the evening about themselves. They interrupt the prologue, reject the proposed show and desire a new one, then put themselves and their own servant in the middle of the action. Meanwhile, the child actors work to simultaneously honor the requests of the belligerent theatre-goers while still striving to make a pleasant theatre experience for the rest of the audience. This attempt to maintain the order of the theatre while being amenable to all is clearly seen after the citizen and his wife have hijacked the performance and are calling for their servant to engage in (staged?) combat with the boy actors:

---

[59] John Day, *The ile of guls. As it hath been often playd in the blacke Fryars, by the Children of the Reuels* (Printed for John Trundle, 1606), A2.

BOY:	Sir, you must pardon us; the plot of our play
	lies contrary, and 'twill hazard the spoiling
	of our play.
CITIZEN:	Plot me no plots! I'll ha' Rafe come out. I'll
	make your house too hot for you else.
BOY:	Why, sir, he shall, but if anything fall out of
	order, the gentlemen must pardon us.
CITIZEN:	Go your ways, goodman boy! (2.4.59-65)[60]

Beaumont's child actors become the supervisors of theatrical decorum. In this way, the boys are

not only meeting social expectations placed on them but exceeding them; they are maintaining

their own decorum, instead of losing their composure, but also maintaining the respectability of

the theatre itself. As Lamb might note of this instance, their roles become efficacious practice for

a future of responsible adulthood. Although these examples demonstrate respect and integrity on

the part of these young performers, the constant iterations of these positive qualities reaffirmed

the child's capacity to act in contradictory manners as well. For spectators, watching boys protect

the sanctity of the theatre only emphasized the possibility they might do the opposite in the next

moment.

If the unpredictability of childhood meant that spectators might witness young actors

working hard until their "cheeks looke wan with care," they might also encounter children who

simply lacked the skill, stamina, or desire to uphold theatrical standards. A major possibility

framed within the spectatorial risk to form was that child actors might simply lack the ability to

fulfill successfully their dramatic roles and theatrical duties. The unpredictability of boy actors

encompassed not only whether or not they *would* professionally perform a show but whether

they even *could*. It should be made clear that some child actors were known for being terrific and

capable performers. In a published collection of epitaphs, Jonson leaves a glowing

---

[60] Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington et. al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

commendation for Salomon Pavy, one of the young men of the Blackfriars, who died at only thirteen years of age. Calling him the "stage's jewel,"[61] Jonson describes Pavy as able to perform the roles of "old men so duly" that, unfortunately, the fates "thought him one."[62] From the popularity of the child companies, especially in competition with their adult counterparts, one can safely assume that most of these players were accomplished performers.[63]

However, due to their nature as children, the uncertainty remained within each new performance as to whether or not they would be *able* to accurately portray their role. We return one final time to Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* for an example of how anxieties were produced on stage. The comic relief of Marston's revenge tragedy, Balurdo embodies both a character and actor who is not nearly as capable as the others around him. Deciding that he needs a beard because he was told that his "wit was bald" (2.1.24), Balurdo enters "*with a beard half off, half on*" ([*SD*] 2.1.21). Criticized by Piero, who wants to continue with the narrative, Balurdo passes the theatrical blame onto the tiring-man who "hath not glued on my beard half fast enough" (21.1.30). Just as the poor character cannot seem to properly prepare his costume, he is also seen learning new words throughout the play (which he continues to misuse for comic effect). As Mazzagente boasts that he would "scorn to retort the obtuse jest of a fool," Balurdo "*draws out his writing tables and writes*" 'Retort' and 'obtuse'—good words, very good words" (1.2.85-6). Throughout the play, Balurdo is seemingly always a step behind the others. While one might simply note the foolish nature of his character, his inability to appear on stage dressed and ready and his study of new words to use throughout the performance both hint at the suspect dangers of

---

[61] Jonson, *Epigrams*, 77.
[62] Jonson, *Epigrams*, 77.
[63] Rather than simply relying on a historic presumption, one might look to modern boy companies such as the Edward's Boys, based out of King Edward VI School in Stratford-upon-Avon, who have recently garnered substantial academic and professional praise and accolades. See Harry R. McCarthy, *Performing Early Modern Drama Beyond Shakespeare: Edward's Boys* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 5-6, n.5, n.6.

unprepared and unqualified children performing on stage. While some children were certainly

well equipped for the stage, it must be assumed that some would be less so. The unpredictable

nature of children, then, also pertains to their ability to actually perform the script the playwright

has written. Indeed, this was both a pleasure and danger that spectators and playwrights

negotiated; just as playwrights like Marston want to remind audiences of possible performance

blunders, spectators were excited to experience the thrills and anxiety by potentials errors.

Finally, the most threatening possibility within the spectatorial risk to form was that the

children might fully revolt against the playwright, theatre manager, and children's company

itself. Given the devious, sinful nature of the child's fluid identity, the boy actors' very presence

carried with it the threat that they might rebel against social institutions to create a "world upside

down." For the audience, the pride and disobedience of children created the lingering threat that

at any moment during the production, they might switch from loyal stewards to unruly agents

and transform the theatre from a predictable economic transaction to a site of utter chaos. This is

perhaps best seen in Ben Jonson's induction to *Cynthia's Revels*. First produced in 1600, the play

falls directly between Marston's pair of *Antonio* plays discussed above. Whereas Marston uses

metatheatrical conventions to suggest the players' willingness to perform their roles but anxieties

as to their capacity, Jonson explores what might happen if they simply refused to enact their

duties. Jonson's induction opens with three child actors physically struggling and verbally

arguing over who should get to recite the play's prologue. Sensing his defeat, one of the children

spitefully contends that not only will he not participate in the drama, "Slid, I'll play nothing in

the play: unless I speak it"[64] (12), but that he will also avenge himself on the author by telling

"all the argument of the play afore-hand, and so stale his invention to the auditory, before it

---

[64] Ben Jonson, *Cynthia's Revels*, in *Ben Jonson, Volume IV: Cynthia's Revels; Poetaster; Sejanus; Eastward Ho*, eds. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932).

come forth" (35-7). As he keeps his word, the rest of the induction features a comical battle of

interruptions and apologies as the third boy "ruins" the plot. To accentuate this theatrical

derailing by children, "adult" voices punctuate from offstage, noting how they should be

ashamed by their immaturity. Outside of any specific character framed by the narrative action,

these boys are portrayed as their true selves—children prone to juvenile and profane behavior.

Jonson's induction, then, speaks to cultural anxieties that conceive of children as unruly,

blasphemous, and disrespectful; he forces spectators to imagine what a production would be like

if these inherent, childish qualities were unleashed on stage. Furthermore, as Jonson places this

battle in the prologue, he is counting on audiences to enjoy this possibility as well.

The prospect of rebellious children produced distinct dangers and pleasures for the

audience. Certainly, the refusal of child actors to perform their obligations upon the stage

threatened to ruin the performance. While Jonson's induction attempts to invoke a realistic

atmosphere, his scripted unruliness eventually comes to an end and the performance begins. The

true danger for spectators lay in the potential that a revolt such as this would end with the

collapse of theatrical conventions and a fully ruined performance. However, the possibility of

pleasure existed within this danger. Witnessing genuine rebellion by the child actors allowed

spectators to engage fully with a spectatorial risk to form as they were invited to stand on the

edge of acceptable behavior and experience the chaos of others. As the rules of society were

much more ingrained and expected in adults, the opportunity to be part of any rebellion against

the regulations of social order without being punished were virtually nonexistent. Pleasure

existed for spectators to be part of these potential risks to theatrical form without actually having

to break the rules themselves; they get to witness social constraint and regulation being broken

from a comfortable distance. Their laughter and enjoyment of the risky, nonnormative behaviors offer audiences a comfortable complicity with breaking the rules.

Rather than simply framed as an effect of potentially unruly children, the performance of child actors in Early Modern England should be read as wholly unpredictable. The appearance of children on stage, who exist in a liminal space of becoming adults, is marked with an allure and fascination that is largely absent on adult stages. Whereas spectators enter a social and contractual obligation with adult performers, exchanging money for a product, audiences could recognize that this same relationship was muddled with child actors. They *could* perform as requested but they also might not and defy their expectations. Or, furthermore, they might be willing but simply unable because of their age and skill. These diverse possibilities both promised and threatened a spectatorial risk to form; Audience members were able to engage with the pleasures and dangers associated with fulfilling or disrupting theatrical conventions and the playgoing experience. The child actors offered their audiences not only exciting new plays to watch but the unique possibility that things might not go as planned. While the boys might work tirelessly to save the day's entertainment as in Beaumont's play, they just as likely might be in over their heads as was the case with Balurdo in Marston's revenge tragedy or even revolt and ruin the plot as Jonson's actors do. The multitude of potential expectations provided spectators with a sense of fascination for not only the dramatic narrative but the overall theatrical experience.

Marketing the Risk to Form: Ben Jonson's *Epicene*

Playwrights and boy companies fully understood the pleasures and dangers associated with a spectatorial risk to form and intentionally produced material that allowed audiences to

engage with the unpredictability of children. Nowhere can this be better seen than in Ben Jonson's *Epicene*, which John Dryden praised as "the greatest and most noble of any pure unmix'd Comedy in any Language."[65] While many of the boy companies' playwrights incorporated aspects of children's disparate potential, Jonson's play stands out for its unceasing suggestions of the different ways the child actors might respond from moment to moment. Indeed, written for the boys of the Queen's Revels in 1609, the play seems to reflect over a decade's worth of strategies to capture the essence of children's unpredictability and is, in the words of Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, "a play of suggestion rather than of definitive statement."[66] As we will see, plays like *Epicene* demonstrate that a spectatorial risk to form was understood by both spectators and theatre-makers, and the pleasures and dangers of its uncertainty were incorporated into the period's performance. In this brief case study, we will explore the ways in which Jonson emphasized exteriority to remind his spectators of the phenomenological presence of children on stage. These child actors, furthermore, are framed as constantly oscillating between and evoking all three possibilities that produce a spectatorial risk to form; Jonson reminds audiences that his actors are capable of being devout servants, incapable performs, and unruly children. Together, *Epicene* attempts to capture the possibility that the audience's theatrical experience might, at any moment, risk falling apart.

Epicene revolves around the conflict between Morose, a misanthrope who despises the noise and commotion of a recently developed, urban London, and his nephew Dauphine. Motivate by a small series of tricks, Morose decides to take a wife, produce an heir, and disinherit his nephew. To retaliate and teach his uncle a lesson, Dauphine "finds" a wife exceptionally suitable for Morose; the young woman Epicene is soon presented as the perfect

---

[65] John Dryden, *Of Dramatick Poesie, an essay* (London: Printed for Henry Herringman, 1668), 51.
[66] Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, *Ben Jonson Revised* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 66.

match for Morose due to her loyal obedience and, most importantly, her silence. After their

marriage, Epicene's façade proves false as she immediately overwhelms Morose with noise. Not

only does Epicene prove to be loud and boisterous, but their nuptials spark a rowdy reception

within the sanctity of Morose's quiet home. Overwhelmed with the terrible prospect of a lifetime

of clamor, Morose accepts Dauphine's agreement that his nephew will solve his problems in

exchange for a contractual guarantee of his inheritance. Dauphine, true to his word, releases

Morose from the confines of marriage by publicly removing Epicene's wig and explaining that

Epicene is actually a prepubescent boy whom he has employed to trick his uncle. Around this

central conflict, supporting characters buzz about Morose's home and offer unique insights into

the period's anxieties concerning gender, class decorum, and artificiality.

Similar to Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* and other plays written for the boy companies,

Epicene continually emphasizes exteriority in order to draw spectator's attention to the child's

body behind the veneer of dramatic character. Rather than relying on showing the boys' real skin

underneath costumes or emphasizing the efficacious nature of outward performatives, Jonson

highlights exteriority through pointing to the manufactured-ness of both the theatre and society.

As such, the play relies heavily on the comedic trope of disguises used to trick other characters.

Most obvious to our discussion here is the titular character of Epicene, who spends almost the

entire play disguised to all but a few. The removal of this manufactured disguise, however,

reveals a young gentleman, "almost of years" (5.4.244),[67] whose impersonation was so

convincing that it not only produced a (false) marriage to the oblivious Morose but also gained

Epicene admittance to the "mysteries" and intimate knowledge of the Ladies Collegiate

(5.4.243). In addition to Epicene, supporting characters Cutbeard and Otter also don disguises to

---

[67] Ben Jonson, *Epicene*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington et. al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

highlight Jonson's manufactured exteriority. Dressed as a lawyer and cleric, respectively, Cutbeard and Otter are unleashed on Morose to induce stress and eventually convince the misanthrope to publicly declare his impotency. Truewit supervises the men as they don their convincing disguises and newly dyed beards and reinforces the power of artificiality as he notes that "the knaves do not know themselves, they are so exalted and altered" (5.3.3-4). In the cases of both Epicene and the pair of disguised compatriots, disguises prove to be effective. Their ability to convince and fool their interlocutors not only offers audiences a reminder of the power of exteriority but reinforces the artificial nature of costuming and characterization within the theatre.

Jonson's play also asks spectators to discern the constructed-ness of exteriority in society at large. While the play features many characters endeavoring to learn and perform acceptable social roles, Otter offers a harsh critique of his wife and new trends of urban cosmetics. Noting that "every part o'the town owns a piece of" his wife, he catalogues how teeth, hair, eyebrows, and other cosmetics are purchased in their respective districts (4.2.92-96). As these individual pieces are purchased separately, assembly is required on a daily basis. Otter explains that she "takes herself asunder still when she goes to bed, into some twenty boxes, and about next day noon is put together again like a great German clock" (4.2.98-100). Not unlike the manufactured quality of Epicene, Cutbeard, and Otter's costumes, Jonson points to a larger theme of artificiality regarding exteriority. In both the theatre and broader society, exteriorities can be deceiving; the play asks audiences to look past the outer layer to notice the real character beneath. For spectators, then, this focus on fake exteriorities reminds the audience to look past the costume and note the unpredictable children playing these roles.

Epicene draws attention to the phenomenological perception of child actors to remind audiences that these children *might* behave as they should and work to uphold the form and conventions of the playhouse. In particular, Jonson associates the positive attributes of obedience and judiciousness to Epicene and Dauphine to reaffirm the child's angelic nature. As audiences are introduced to Epicene, they witnessed a gentle submission that was perfectly in line with larger ideals of the child's sacredness. In a ridiculous scene in which Epicene is inspected by Morose, she follows his every command. Spectators observe as she patiently allows Morose to examine her body and face, perceiving his hatred of noise, she curtsies demurely, and when asked about fashion and frugality, she respectfully responds that she will "leave it to wisdom and you, sir" (2.5.81). Morose, for his part, immediately agrees to marry the young woman due to her submissive and, above all else, quiet nature. However, what Morose perceives as passivity, the audience recognizes as an actor playing his role obediently. In the scene immediately prior, Dauphine explains the elaborate trick to his fellow gallants and, thus, the audience. This crucial dramaturgical order allows spectators to resist interpreting Epicene as the modest fulfillment of patriarchal gender norms and, instead, as a child actor working diligently to satisfy the goals of adults—just like the true actor underneath both costume and character. Epicene, then, supplies the audience with steady reminders of the sacred nature of children.

Epicene suggests, furthermore that the child actors might, at any moment, fail to play their parts. Not unlike Marston's Balurdo who is seen trying to learn new lines during the performance, the foolish knight, John Daw, reminds Jonson's audience that he may simply be too unexperienced to do his work correctly. This is best seen early in the play after Daw has been ignored by Epicene. Expressing his frustrations, or, perhaps trying too hard to conceal his frustrations, Daw becomes the butt of several jokes as his ignorance and inability to think

quickly on his feet are taken advantage of by the much wittier gallants Clerimont and Truewit.

Truewit works to convince Daw that the best way to get back at Epicene is simply to stay silent, at which Daw immediately fails, and the pair successfully convince the knight to promise to remain melancholy, to which Daw swears over a loose toothpick. While spectators might simply interpret Daw as an iteration of the popular "foolish knight"—I, for one, am always reminded of Sir Andrew Aguecheek when Daw is mentioned—, Jonson anticipates this association and works to conjure notions of the inexperienced child. After Daw leaves, Truewit guides the audience to a specific reading of the foolish knight. He laughs with Clerimont, "Hang him, no mushroom was ever so fresh. A fellow so utterly nothing as he knows not what he would be" (2.4.152-154). Truewit frames Daw as having been just recently born and so unaware of himself that he cannot even notice his own foibles. Certainly, while Daw's inexperience never reaches the level of inept incapability that might grind a production to a halt, the positioning of his shortcomings as associated with age and experience reminds the audience that theatrical tasks could prove too advanced for the child actors. While, like Epicene and Dauphine, the children might prove to be loyal stewards of the theatre, they might also, like Daw, simply prove unable to fulfill their duties.

Finally, and most dangerously, Jonson's play highlights the profane and disorderly nature of children. Comprising the full spectrum of possible behaviors associated with the child, *Epicene* reminds spectators that rebellious behavior might also occur. This is especially evident in the last moments of the play in which the persistent theme of constructed exteriority crescendos for Jonson's final reveal. While Morose had happily believed he had found a wife with the "rare virtue" of silence (2.4.91), the second half of the play finds him distraught by Epicene's seeming transformation into a noisy and demanding woman. Finally, as Morose thinks

all hope is lost, his nephew Dauphine "*takes off Epicene's peruke*" ([*SD*]5.4.200-1) and explains that his uncle has "married a boy, a gentleman's son that I have brought up this half year at my great charges, and for this composition which I have now made with you" (5.4.201-3). Jonson's tongue-in-cheek reveal not only emphasizes the exteriority of the boy actors and the sarcastic revelations that *all* of the characters are, in fact, boys, but the removing of a costume piece to expose the boy beneath also recalls possible unruly behavior that could happen during any performance if a boy actor simply wished to stop performing. Whereas Jonson's induction to *Cynthia's Revels* above occupies a liminal position as part of the performance but not the narrative—the fighting boys are simply seen as children getting carried away—, the removal of Epicene's wig signals a more dangerous threat in the child simply quitting his role and ruining the play mid-performance. At the end of a play emphasizing the actors' exteriorities, the removal of Epicene's peruke illustrates the spectator's fear that the children might act outside of theatrical and social conventions.

Keenly aware of his audiences' desires and anxieties, Jonson engages his theatre-goers in the boy company's full range of spectatorial risk to form. Through focusing attention on the actor as, indeed, a child, he reminds the spectators that the bodies on stage are inherently unpredictable. As *Epicene* demonstrates, this unpredictability might manifest in a number of ways; the child actor might embody purity and decorum, he might prove too unexperienced and inept to execute his responsibilities, or he might revolt and disrupt the production all together. By focusing on all three, Jonson constantly keeps his audience on the edge of their seats; while a child is seen behaving respectfully in one moment, he very well could behave differently in the next. As Jonson places contrasting portrayals adjacent to one another, his play can be read as an attempt to engage in the pleasures and dangers of the child's unpredictability. Indeed, by placing

the removal of Epicene's wig in the very last moments of the play, Jonson's dramaturgy intentionally lingers on the disruption of theatrical conventions. In this way, Epicene's final reveal simultaneously enacts the narrative's conclusion as well as rewards the spectators' hopes and fears that the child actors might disrupt theatrical form. This intentional layering of meaning is supported by Claire M. Busse who argues that Jonson used children as "both the material through which [the] play is performed and the unstable force that can potentially undermine the performance."[68] Jonson, then, demonstrates that the boy companies and their playwrights recognized the attraction and theatrical power associated with the unpredictability of children. The child actor's capacity to uphold, fail, or ruin theatrical forms and conventions produced both excitement and anxiety that was captured and even highlighted in productions such as *Epicene* in order to offer new and exciting experiences for consumers.

---

[68] Busse, "'Pretty Fictions' and 'Little Stories': Child Actors on the Early Modern Stage," 86.

Chapter 2

Spectatorial Risk to Morality:

Improvisation and Commedia dell'Arte

Even a staunch anti-theatricalist like Tomasso Garzoni was won over by the flawless

performance and captivating grace of one of the commedia dell'arte's first *prime donne*,

Vincenza Armani. Although he routinely worked to expose the dangers and depravity that theatre

unleashed on society, Garzoni admitted that Armani's skill elevated the comic art to that of more

reputable entertainments such as oratory. Of the actress herself, he argued that in "part by her

admirable beauty, part by her indescribable grace, she has elevated herself as a most amplified

triumph to a world of spectators."[1] Spectators, indeed, seemed to have fawned over her. For

example, the playwright and early theorist on stage direction, Leone de' Sommi, wrote verses in

her honor. He generously described Armani's qualities "in which has appeared/ everything that

Nature and Art can give."[2] De' Sommi was not alone in his praise. In the summer of 1567, the

citizens of Mantua were invited to compare rival commedia troupes featuring Armani and her

prima donna rival, Flaminia. Although the rival troupe seems to have prevailed,[3] it was Armani

who "was lauded for her music, for the elegance of her costumes, and for other reasons still."[4]

Her popularity—produced by theatrical skill and personal charisma and reflected by these

admiring voices—was so palpable that recent scholars have pointed to her prominence as a

---

[1] "…ha posto l'arte comica in concorrenza con l'oratorio e, parte con la beltà mirabile, parte con la grazia indicibile, ha eretto uno amplissimo trionfo di se stessa al mondo spettatore." Tommaso Garzoni, *La piazza universal.* Excerpted in Ferruccio Marotti and Giovanna Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte e la società barocca. La professione del teatro* (Rome: Bulzoni editore, 1991), 28. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[2] "e pur diella a Vincenza, in cui comparte/ tutto ciò che può dar, Natura & Arte." Leone de' Sommi, *Quatto dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*, ed. Ferruccio Marotti (Milan: Edizioni Il Polifilo, 1968), 91.

[3] A fact that Robert Henke hypothesizes was likely due more to their choices of repertoire than the actresses' actual performance. He observes that Flaminia's troupe "displayed a somewhat wider generic range than their competitors" and seemed to rely more heavily on enticing portrayals of sex and violence. See Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 93.

[4] "La Vincenza, all'incontro, era lodata per la musica, per la vaghezza degli habiti et per altro…" In Alessandro D'Ancona, *Origini del teatro italiano,* 2 vols., (Turin: Ermanno Loescher, 1891), vol. II, 451.

nascent form of celebrity culture. Rosalind Kerr, for instance, has demonstrated how conceptions

of the celebrity, which Joseph Roach had convincingly identified as a long-eighteenth-century

phenomenon, easily apply to earlier cases such as Armani.[5]

Among all these admirers, Adriano Valerini stands out for delivering the most poignant

tribute to the actress in which he extols both her artistic ability and honorable virtue. After her

untimely death in 1569 (likely by poison and possibly by the hand of a scorned lover), Valerini

published a powerful funeral oration to immortalize Armani's legacy as a benevolent presence

that performed "with so much decorum and honesty, that one should say that the Stage had

recovered its extinguished honors."[6] His panegyric, described by Ferruccio Marotti as a classic

example that "implements the stylistic and thematic reservoir of the great humanistic-

Renaissance oratory," spends its energy tying Armani's virtuosity to the morally instructive

capacity of the stage.[7] Valerini positions Armani as a skilled orator that could inspire others in

the audience through her convincing and emotional portrayals. The way she devoted herself to

the stage could motivate in others a similar devotion towards noble ends. And, most importantly,

her skill as a performer could effectively lead others to look at the vices of their own lives, as if

in a mirror, and make meaningful changes. This skill, moreover, was not simply the result of

dutiful memorization. Surpassing the topic-based, extemporaneous discussions delivered by

"honest courtesans" in court parlors, Armani participated in the improvisational construction of

commedia performances. Her virtuosity became visible through her ability to respond to her

---

[5] See Rosalind Kerr, "'Boying Their Greatness': Transnational Effects of the Italian Divas on the Shakespearean Stage," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Anglo-Italian Renaissance Literature and Culture,* ed. Michele Marrapodi (New York: Routledge, 2019); Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007).
[6] "la comedia dunque fu dalla Signora Vincenza recitata con tanto decoro d'onestà, che ben si può dir che le Scene avean ricovrati gli estinti onori suoi." Adriano Valerini, *Orazione d'Adriano Valerini Veronese, in morte della Divina Signora Vincenza Armani, Comica Eccellentissima, 1570*. Excerpted in Marotti and Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte e la società barocca*, 34.
[7] "un panegirico funebre che mette a frutto il serbatoio stilistico e tematico della grande oratoria umanistico-rinascimentale." Marotti and Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte e la società barocca*, 29.

compatriots and spectators and offer them exactly what was needed in a given moment. Her

improvisatory skills were even praised by Siena's Accademia degli Intronati who argued that

Armani was better at improvising than skilled authors were at premeditated writing.[8] For

Valerini, then, skill and virtue were entwined as "the excellence of the actress derives, therefore,

from the excellence of the spirit"[9] In both life and death, Armani was seen as a purveyor of

moral fortitude due to her artistic virtuosity and personal charm.

However, as Valerini praised Armani's ability, he also hinted at the very palpable

dangers associated with the stage. While his funeral oration endeavored to paint the theatre as a

compelling site of instruction and its performers as morally virtuous, it also reflected social

anxieties concerning the power of actors to sway the hearts and minds of their audience. Valerini

makes this point especially clear as he discusses Armani's compelling performances that guide

her interlocutors into parallel emotions and actions. For instance, within a romantic pastoral

setting, if Armani, "having found some limpid fountain and showing herself longing to quench

her ardent thirst, the men [in the audience] were induced to the very same desire to drink."

Valerini continues, describing how spectators "would lower their head, accompanying her

movements, as if their body was her shadow, her words had so much strength with which she

described this or that feeling."[10] He expresses, then, the power of the actress not only to inspire

onlookers to moral virtue but to influence spectators in regard to emotions and actions more

broadly. His oration reminds readers that at a performance, they might be impelled to think, feel,

---

[8] Valerini, *Orazione d'Adriano Valerini Veronese,* Excerpted in Marotti and Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte e la società barocca*, 35.

[9] "l'eccellenza dell'attrice procede quindi anche dall'eccellenza dell'animo." Marotti and Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte e la società barocca*, 29.

[10] "e se di trovar qualche limpido fonte mostrava esser bramosa per estinguer la sete ardente, induceva a gli uomini il medesimo desio di bere."; "chinavano anch'essi il capo, accompagnando I suoi movimenti, come se del suo corpo fossero stati l'ombra, tanta forza avean le parole con che ella descriveva or questo or quell'affetto." Valerini, *Orazione d'Adriano Valerini Veronese,* Excerpted in Marotti and Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte e la società barocca*, 36.

or do certain things as guided by the production. While he frames the performer's capacity to motivate others as socially good—Armani holds a mirror to a corrupted society and makes audience members change their ways—critics of the stage repeatedly iterate its dangers—performers could incite emotions or actions deemed socially immoral or inappropriate.

This chapter argues that it was not despite these risks but *because* of them that the commedia dell'arte was immensely popular. Crowds flocked to commedia performances despite warnings by critics. Both the indeterminacy of commedia's improvisation and the captivating performances by dynamic actors combined into a product that many feared could be used to undermine social restraint and decorum. What if the troupes decided to perform material—manifest in plots, actions, and language—deem unacceptable or corrupting? What if spectators, who enjoyed this salacious material, began to reconsider its inappropriateness in society? What if they began to question larger socio-religious patterns of what was prescribed and proscribed? What if they mimicked this objectionable material just as they dipped their heads to enjoy the cool fountain water along with Armani? Although critics like Garzoni were won over by individual performers, they still recognized that commedia's unpredictability and power of suggestion could be used for less noble ends. Indeed, Armani's virtuousness seems a rarity compared to the perceived lasciviousness of the theatre in general.

This chapter argues that the fears and dangers publicized by critics combined with commedia's unpredictability produced a spectatorial risk to morality. Spectators engaged with an indeterminate landscape in which the witnessing of risqué material might jeopardize their moral virtue. Certainly, as cases like Armani illustrate, the theatre had the potential to mirror corrupting behaviors and strengthen the spectator's moral resolve; however, the improvisatory nature of commedia meant that audiences could never know for sure what they might see on stage. Instead

of Armani's virtuous didacticism, spectators might encounter actions depicting sexual and scatological perversion as well as reversals to established class hierarchies. All of these potential encounters offered the audiences not only the pleasures of witnessing others behave in ways contrary to accepted norms but the dangers that these subversive acts might infect their very person. On the one hand, spectators can enjoy watching others act in nonnormative ways without having to perform those acts themselves; they can witness what they are proscribed from ever doing. On the other hand, spectators who watch these illicit acts might change their understanding of what constitutes socially acceptable behavior and might even repeat what they have seen. Importantly, commedia's improvisatory structure added additional uncertainty to this range of possible encounters that audiences might experience. There was little way to know and even less way to guarantee that forbidden materials would not appear on stage. Spectators, then, engaged with a spectatorial risk to morality as they weighed the thrilling but dangerous unknowability of the itinerant troupes they rushed see.

To understand the relationship between commedia and spectatorial risk, we will first explore the ways that improvisation became a collaborative meaning-making experience not just between actors on stage but between performers and spectators. We will pay close attention especially to the unique mode of commedia's improvisation that relied heavily on defined character roles and individual actors' *generici*—their reservoirs of common phrases and bits. By focusing on improvisation first, I hope to show how these masks invited their spectators to join them on the very edge between normative society and the anarchic unknown. After this, we will attempt to examine the myriad ways that spectators might have engaged with commedia's risk to morality. Special attention will be placed here concerning the new pleasures, dangers, and anxieties produced through the presence of the actress. Finally, similar to Ben Jonson's *Epicene*

in Chapter 1, we will inspect how the commedia troupes themselves understood this spectatorial

risk to morality and consciously employed strategies to highlight their stages as increasingly

unknowable and, therefore, risky. Specifically, Flaminio Scala's *Il teatro delle favole*

rappresentative and Tristano Martinelli's *Compositions de Rhetorique* will be analyzed to

demonstrate how theatrical indeterminacy can be evoked through different strategies.

Improvisation: An Invitation to the Spectator

Improvisation was a hallmark feature of the commedia dell'arte and the site of its

acclaimed virtuosity and contention. It is a mistake, however, to imagine this performative

spontaneity as only involving the actors on stage. In fact, the act of improvising was an inherent

collaboration that involved everyone from the actors above to the audience below to the socio-

political circumstances and events that provided the contextual backdrop in that given historical

moment. For the commedia masks, the ability to respond to external stimuli and produce action

and language extemporaneously established a relationship between actors and their audience that

was unique at every performance and based on the composition of those in attendance. Within

improvisation, as Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow observe, the performance space and the

larger social world exist in a dialectical relationship with one another.[11] In other words, a cyclical

pattern emerges where an actor's action, language, and other semiotic cues produce

individualized responses in spectators that, in turn, produce new actions or shape existing

repertoires for the actors on stage. In this way, while scholars label the commedia actors as the

subjects and participants in improvisation, spectators are also inherently involved as active

interlocutors who provide their attention, energy, and feedback to staged action. Unlike our

---

[11] Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama, Theatre and Performance: History, Practice, Theory*, 3rd Edition (London: Palgrave, 2016), xvi.

upcoming discussion in Chapter 3 in which audiences become implicated in the risky action that takes place on stage, the spectators of commedia dell'arte's improvisation are simply invited up-close to the action.[12] In this section, we will explore the ways by which improvisation encouraged spectators to travel to the edges of their comfort, individually engage with improvised action, and be intimately present and responsive to the act of meaning-making taking place in front of them.

Despite Richard Andrews' ironic observation concerning the paucity of evidence describing what commedia's improvising looked like in performance, since "whenever we find a written script which looks as if it might be informative, then by definition it is no longer improvised and therefore no longer commedia dell'arte," recent scholarship has revealed new insights into the form and function of Italian improvisation.[13] While it is outside of our purview to examines the nuances of this fascinating scholarship, a brief explanation here will help us explore how improvising engaged the audience.

The improvisatory nature of commedia dell'arte is structured quite unlike modern improv games and sketches with which some readers might be more familiar. Whereas some modern forms of improvisation rely on audience contributions for determining character, place, and conflict and are meant to develop and test an actor's ability to respond naturally, the

---

[12] However, I would add that this personal implication was possible. As seen in our introductory example, performative power wielded by dynamic actors such as Vincenza Armani could impel spectators to physically or verbally take part in the enactment of indecent and risky content.

[13] Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 174. For a broader discussion of improvisation in commedia dell'arte, see Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 169-203; Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte*, 12-49; Tim Fitzpatrick, *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes in the Commedia dell'Arte: Beyond the Improvisation/Memorization Divide* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), especially Chapters 1-2. For an interesting discussion on how the architecture of the physical masks impels physical formation and the parameters of staged improvisation, see also Carlos García Estévez, "Mask Performance for a Contemporary Commedia dell'Arte," in *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte*, eds. Judith Chaffee and Olly Crick (London: Routledge, 2015). As a personal note, I had the pleasure of working with Carlos in 2006 at the Accademia dell'Arte, Arezzo, Italy, and his less restrictive, more personal form of commedia pedagogy has inspired me to this day through its attention to dynamic presence and liveness.

improvisation of commedia was much more structured in regard to plot, character, action, and dialogue. Actors did not mount the stage and perform "from nothing." Commedia's plots, while not fully written like that of more conventional dramatic literature, existed as scenarios that detailed not only the major action of the narrative but also the sequence of entrances and exits of characters and their guiding objectives. These scenarios created the backbone for the performance and constituted an agreement amongst players regarding the story that would be portrayed.

Within the building blocks of this narrative, actors could improvise their material so long as the main objectives were communicated. Even this improvisation, however, was organized and limited based on the repertoires of individual masks. Actors typically played only one or two roles during their lifetime as each mask required a significant amount of time and energy to compile a warehouse of usable speeches, retorts, praises, laments, and attacks. Stored in either their own mental catalogue or their personal *libri generici*—written collections of transposable material—, these actors, as Andrews succinctly explains, "were constantly drawing on an accumulated stock of existing repertoire…securely held by an existing framework and always moving towards a known conclusion or comic climax."[14] Again, to improvise in this manner meant agreement amongst the players to respect and build upon one another's repertoires while never forgetting the larger objective of the narrative. Unsurprisingly, this cooperation was often tested. For instance, in Pier Maria Cecchini's *Frutti delle moderne comedie*, he argues that "*Above all*, the improvisor should be careful not to speak at the same time as the other actor, so that he does not produce confusion and annoyance to the listener and disorientation to the

---

[14] Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios*, 181.

speaker" (emphasis added).[15] Likely speaking to the *buffone* actor, Tristano Martinelli,

Cecchini's advise underscores how improvisation balanced individual and collective elements.

Recognizing the structure of commedia's improvisation and repertoires of individual

actors was important not only to maintain a troupe's cohesion but also to draw spectators into the

action and invite them guess what might come next. The actor's storehouse included not only

larger speeches but also quick comebacks and pieces of verbal repartee appropriate to their

character. As Domenico Pietropaolo has argued, improvisation in these dialogic back-and-forth

bits was a stochastic composition process in which actors only had a finite amount of phrases

available to them but could deploy them randomly based on the audience's response. He explains

that a performer "must, in fact, decide whether to surprise the audience by producing the least

expected response or to give them exactly what they expect along with the pleasure that comes

with the sense of having made an accurate prediction."[16] While Pietropaolo's investigation is on

the actor who improvises, we can turn his analysis around to reconsider how this undetermined

order impacts the spectator. The ability to be surprised or gratified is predicated on the

assumption that the spectator is actively following along with the improvisation and making

guesses as to what kinds of responses might come next. For literate, well-read spectators, it is

even possible that they might try to guess what literary source a character might draw from to

support their position; or, similarly, might try to devise their own responses. This process of

active thinking is supported by Davide Sparti who theorizes that improvisation manifests in

participants as "knowledge-in-action, in which the body becomes the vector of knowledge,

---

[15] "sopra tutto debbe il recitante guardarsi di non parlare nello stesso tempo che l'altro ragiona, per non generar quella confusione tanto noiosa a chi ascolta, e così disconcia a chi parla." Pier Maria Cecchini, *Frutti delle moderne comedie ed avisi a chi le recita.* Excerpted in Marotti and Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte e la società barocca*, 82.
[16] Domenico Pietropaolo, "Improvisation as a Stochastic Composition Process," in *The Science of Buffoonery: Theory and History of the Commedia dell'Arte*, ed. Domenico Pietropaolo (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions Inc, 1989), 172.

[showing that] we know *more* than we are able to articulate verbally."[17] In other words, while

spectators might not be able to explain what they think might come next in a pattern or verbal

contrasti, their internal knowledge produces both expectations and responses. The improvisation

of commedia, then, invites participation, even if only mental, from the spectators through relying

on predictable structures and sourcebooks of material. This engagement, furthermore, asks

spectators to join the actors at the limits of social acceptability and to be present in the action.

Improvisatory techniques not only invited spectators to join the actors cognitively, but it

also reached out and pulled them into the action. Even if an audience member arrived at a

commedia performance with hesitancy and wanted to mentally distance himself from the

indecorous performance on stage, actors employed strategies that closed this distance and

produced intimacy. One way this was accomplished was through direct addresses by actors to the

audience. In between the characters' comings and goings, the success of commedia scenarios

depended on the Plautine-style direct address to update the audience to not only the plot but also

the characters' hopes and fears. Through being spoken to, the spectator—even the one who did

not want to be fully present—becomes the direct recipient of the actor's energy; he is pulled into

the play's conflict and asked to take a closer look at the behaviors of various characters. Rosalind

Kerr notes that this inclusion is particularly prominent in Flaminio Scala's scenario "The

Disguised Servants," which features the distraught *innamorata* Isabella who is forced to disguise

herself as the servant Fabritio.[18] Near the beginning of the play, Fabritio/Isabella finds herself

alone on stage and laments about her situation in a direct address to the audience. Kerr argues

that this address implicates the audiences as they gain intimate knowledge about the

---

[17] Davide Sparti, "On the Edge: A Frame of Analysis for Improvisation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies,* vol. 1, eds. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
[18] Flaminio Scala, *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, trans. Henry F. Salerno (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 218-226.

actor/character from seeing her through her disguise.[19] While I disagree with Kerr's assessment that this address *implicates* the audience, which suggests some sort of crime or wrongdoing that now falls on spectators, I agree that it is an excellent example of the intimacy used by actors to pull audience members further into the action. Rather than implicating, I contend that Fabritio's lament offers an alluring secret for the audience. reach out Performers could use these intimate moments alone on stage to reach out both literally and figuratively and invite the audience to share in the social and emotional stakes of the narrative.

If some actors involved spectators through moments of intimacy, others engaged spectators through literally bringing the action of the stage to them. The edges of the commedia stage were far from solid and produced porous moments in which the action spilled out into the crowd. For instance, in one *lazzi*, Arlecchino, while being pursued, breaks free from the confines of the stage and leaps across spectator boxes and through the seating area.[20] In a similar gag, which Mel Gordon refers to as the "Lazzo of the Interruption," an actor walks out into the audience during the middle of the performance and begins to heckle the other actors who are speaking on stage. Yelling out ridiculous phrases such as "Be quiet, the hen is laying the egg," or "The pot won't boil!" the actor enfolds the spectator into the action of the play through joining them from where they watched.[21]

Finally, if actors spoke directly to the spectators and even entered the audience to physically mingle with them, it is likely that spectators might have also been inspired from the air of unpredictability and instigated a connection between themselves and the masks on stage. While I have yet to find archival evidence that this actually happened, it seems exceptionally

---

[19] Kerr, "'Boying Their Greatness,' 351.
[20] See "Lazzo of Running Along the Balcony Rail" in Mel Gordon's *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), 13.
[21] Gordon's *Lazzi*, 41.

likely if one considers the plethora of actor/spectator interaction in Richard Tarlton's

posthumously published jestbook. In *Tarton's Jests*, a number of incidents are recorded that

remember Tarlton responding to external stimuli while performing on the English stage. For

instance, in one of this author's personal favorite anecdotes, Tarlton is seen coming on stage at

The Bull when someone from the balcony throws an apple at him. The jestbook continues:

"Tarlton tooke vp the Pip, and looking on it, made this sudden iest.

> Pip in, or nose in, chuse you whether,
> Put yours in, ere I put in the other.
> Pippin you haue put in: then, for my grace,
> Would I might put your nose in another place."[22]

Tarlton, then, not only responds to the apple being thrown at him but also demonstrates his

artistic virtuosity to please the rest of the audience. Although this example strays from this

chapter's focus on the commedia dell'arte, it demonstrates an active play-going culture that was

created through improvised comedy. It is very likely that our commedia actors faced similar

interruptions from spectators and might have even had to handle some thrown fruit as well.

  Together, these improvisational strategies of direct address, moving out into the audience,

and responding to spectator's interjections all point to ways in which commedia actors harnessed

the flexibility of their improvisational structure to engage audiences. They add to more private

and cognitive interactions as seen in spectators recognizing patterns and potentially trying to

guess what witty comeback or severe attack might come next. In sum, the improvisation of the

commedia dell'arte was not solely between performers but between actors and audience. These

actors used their improvisational form to draw spectators further into the action and further *away*

---

[22] *Tarltons jests Drawne into these three parts. 1 His court-witty jests. 2 His sound city jests. 3 His countrey pretty jests. Full of delight, wit, and honest mirth.* (London: Printed by I. H. for Andrew Crook, 1628), B2.

from the safety of normative, constrained society. As an important piece of the improvisation, audience members were asked to join actors at the edge of what was known and what might be.

The Competing Threats and Pleasures of Commedia dell'Arte

Commedia dell'arte offered audiences the opportunity to engage with a spectatorial risk to morality in which they might experience salacious material. Audiences risked being present at a performance featuring content, actions, and language that cultural authorities deemed inappropriate, perverse, and corrupting. Truly, the rise and popularity of commedia dell'arte is a story marked by persistent and damning antitheatrical rhetoric; its success from witty dialogue, physical routines, and imaginative (often socially daring) plots continuously negotiated critiques from civic and religious authorities that painted the masked troupes as immoral and dangerous. While commedia troupes found some hostility in town officials and occasionally in other laypeople, their largest and most vocal opponents were religious authorities. Historically, commedia developed in the wake of the Council of Trent, which produced new efforts towards both religious reform and a more integrated incorporation of the Church into the public's everyday life. To many of these religious voices, the concurrent rise of commedia was seen as the antithesis to their cultural objectives. As Michael A. Zampelli explains, "Not only did the professional theatre inadvertently compete with professional religion for a place at the cultural table, the *commedia*, as professional, itinerant, and gender-inclusive, also functioned as a physical countersign to the ideals of religious renewal."[23] Individuals debating whether or not to attend a performance of the itinerant troupes were forced to juggle the music and laughter

---

[23] Michael A. Zampelli, "The 'Most Honest and Most Devoted of Women': An Early Modern Defense of the Professional Actress," *Theatre Survey* 42, no. 1 (2001): 1.

coming from the streets and customs houses with the antitheatrical rhetoric disseminated from the pulpit and published in pamphlets.

Although many strategies were employed against commedia, the most prevalent one aimed to target theatre in general as wholly perverse and irrelevant. Both Zampelli and Kenneth and Laura Richards frame this strategy as one that posits theatre as a dismantling force against an ideal religious world view. Richards argues that commedia was "seen by its very nature to subvert the Christian social order in that it substituted an artificial for a real world, denied temporal space and time, and trafficked in dreams and imaginations."[24] Attacks on commedia (its moral content, its players, and its mercantile motivations) were legion but typically directed against actions that were seen as dialectical opposite of the world the Church was actively imagining; in this ideal world, moral conduct was high, traditional gender norms were reinforced, and established structures of power were respected. Tommaso Garzoni, whom we encountered earlier along with his glowing review of Vincenza Armani, lambasted the comedic form and its players, declaiming that commedia introduced only "untruths and scurrilities" into the art form and that its players "have perverted the language in order to argue in a way as dirty and offensive as they are themselves." His hyperbolic language paints the masked actors as a "vile race that spreads disarray everywhere and introduces a thousand scandals wherever it goes" because of their uncivil actions, vulgar gestures, scandalous language, and villainous inventions.[25] While perhaps a bit exaggerated, Garzoni's diatribe is tempered with truth when compared to other attacks. In Venice, where a partial, license-only prohibition against players was put into effect, authorities warned against the skill that commedia performers have "to

---

[24] Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 235.
[25] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 69-70.

subvert the ingenuousness of the young" from which "innumerable follies ensue against the honour of God, the wellbeing of souls, and to the shame of public government."[26] This perceived threat against cultural norms, moral order, and the soul is echoed again by a father's petition to Cardinal Carlo Borromeo after the "corruption" of his son. The father compares the rise of commedia to a virus made of "profane men and shameless women who defile the young" and "set a bad example to all who hear them."[27]

If commedia was seen as a threat to established social constraints, the actress became the epicenter of both this threat and antitheatrical attacks. Portrayed as both a prostitute herself and a purveyor of lascivious behavior, the actress by her very existence chafed up against religious anxieties around traditional gender norms. The cleric Hurtado de Mendoza condemned actresses as rapacious, shameless, and prostitutes. Noting that commedia scenarios featured players embracing, kissing, and engaged in sexually suggestive and explicit language, Mendoza argued, "why should they not perform for real in the bedroom what they feign on the stage?"[28] Mendoza's attack can be viewed as one against mimesis and the blurring of the character actor duality.

While Mendoza borrows from standard antitheatrical arguments aimed to collapse distinctions between the stage and reality, other critics were more worried about the phenomenological risks present when spectators witnessed salacious content on stage. Jesuit critic Giulio Domenico Ottonelli framed the sights and sounds of women on stage as a risk to virtue. He contended that the presence of beautiful women on stage would certainly "fascinate the eyes and hearts of lascivious admirers" who would be inclined to offer gifts at the expense of

---

[26] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 249.
[27] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 248.
[28] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 251-252.

his own family and wellbeing.[29] Ottonelli saw the actress as easy temptation for spectators weak in virtue who risked not only their own social reputation but also financial stability by attending these shows. Rosalind Kerr further explores this risk of falling prey to the actresses' charms while examining the early relationship between the actress's body and its commercial value. Analyzing Ottonelli's observation in which patrons would throw handkerchiefs with money in it aimed at the actress's face or breasts,[30] Kerr argues for a "symbolic displacement of the value of the product onto an embodied self."[31] Here, the actress becomes an agent of sexual, cultural, and commodified fetishism.[32] In a type of second-order prostitution, both Ottonelli and Kerr paint a picture of actresses either luring weak-in-virtue men or asserting their own commodification through embodiment (depending on whose view one considers). Either way, however, the actress is framed as a site of social risk in which one may be morally or economically corrupted by a woman's public presence in a social order of which traditionalists were grasping to keep control.

Frankly, however, the critiques waged by religious and civic authorities were certainly based in reality; commedia audiences knew that their attendance at these performances produced the risk that they might encounter the very perverse sexual, scatological, and nonnormative experiences that church authorities vehemently cautioned them against. Moreover, while commedia troupes generally avoided mocking or attacking religious institutions, their material can certainly be read to undermine the behavioral values of Catholicism. Even a cursory investigation into commedia performances, scenarios, and iconography leads to a multitude of examples featuring the characters engaged in erotic and deviant behaviors. As Mel Gordon

---

[29] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 247.
[30] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 245.
[31] Rosalind Kerr, *The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell'Arte Stage* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 29.
[32] Kerr, *The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell'Arte Stage*, 29.

systematically organizes and lists, violent, sexual, and scatological comedic bits (*lazzi*) punctuate performances and were among the most popular types of jokes inserted into commedia performances. These edgy lazzi, for instance, featured the repeated physical beating of Capitano, forced and public enemas, and the feigned perception of bulging genitalia.[33] In addition, the "Lazzo of Looking to Measure Her"[34]—perhaps one of the most sexually suggestive—features a Petrarchan blazon of the sleeping Isabella. After visually inspecting her body point by point, praising her attributes and sexually moaning over some anticipated pleasures, Coviello mimes a detailed and graphic sex scene with the sleeping lover. These bits, then, both unscripted and unpredictable, provided spectators with the sexual or sadistic arousal that antitheatricalists had warned them about.

If lazzi provided sexual suggestions and double entendres, then scenarios themselves produced commedia's most enticing aspect—the naked female figure. While cross-dressing was exceptionally common and popular in commedia dell'arte for it allowed young women to be present on the street and show the figure of their legs,[35] it was the possibility of encountering nudity that especially attracted patrons and repelled critics. While not rampant like elements of slapstick or sexually suggestive humor, nudity still appeared to be an occasional commodity offered by troupes. Several images from the sixteenth and seventeenth century show actresses with exposed breasts [Figures 3-5]. Far from gratuitous, these images suggest a connection to the

---

[33] See "Lazzo of 'God Give You Joy!'" (15), "Lazzo of the Enema" (32), and "Lazzo of Enlarging the Legs" (34) in Mel Gordon's *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983).

[34] Gordon, Lazzi, 33.

[35] A popular carry over from *commedia erudita*. Its popularity and long-lasting favor is especially apparent in Flaminio Scala's "The Jealousy of Isabella" that features a cross-dressing Isabella within a plot exceptionally similar to the Intronati of Siena's *Gl'ingannati.* See Flaminio Scala's "The Jealousy of Isabella" in *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, trans. Henry F. Salerno (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 177-183. For a discussion of similarities to *Gl'ingannati*, see Richard Andrews' *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: A Translation and Analysis of 30 Scenarios* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 147-150.

Figure 3. An anonymous drawing from the "Recueil Fossard," a collection of commedia dell'arte images owned by King Louis XIV. From Pierre Louis Duchartre's *The Italian Comedy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966).

Figure 4. Ambrogio Brambilla's *Il bellissimo ballo di Zan Trippu* (1583). From M. A. Katritzky's *The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560-1620 with Special References to the Visual Records* (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2006).

Figure 5. Depiction of a commedia dell'arte scenario. Fresco in Castle Trausnitz, Bavaria, late sixteenth century. From Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards' *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990).

improvised plot, and the possibility of nudity might occur because of storytelling needs. A fresco

from the Trausnitz Castle in Bavaria [Figure 5], for instance, shows a commedia performance in

progress; Pantalone and his servant rush outside with weapons in hand while a naked innamorata

stands at the window. Similar to the fresco at Trausnitz Castle, Ottonelli describes a "shameful"

scenario involving a licentious attempt to rape a woman in her bedroom. He notes that "the

woman, getting down from a window, escaped in an almost naked condition. She tried to cover

herself with a large sheet, but, in point of fact, she remained upon the stage a shameful, naked

figure."[36] Scenes similar to what Ottonelli describes were likely common as commedia's improvisational nature made events of plot all but impossible for authorities to control.

Perhaps the most well-known and acclaimed instance of plot-based nudity was prima donna Isabella Andreini's virtuosic performance in "La Pazzia d'Isabella." In this scenario, the lover Isabella goes mad after discovering that her betrothed will not remain faithful to her. After initially being struck dumb, Isabella races across the stage and into the audience as a madwoman. One observer noted that Isabella "became wholly possessed by her grief, and thus dominated by her passion, and allowing herself to be consumed by rage and fury, was beside herself,"[37] while Flaminio Scala, in his publishing of commedia scenarios, dictates that Isabella "goes completely mad, tears her clothes from her body, and as if pushed by some force, goes running up the street."[38] While neither Scala's stage directions nor our anecdote specifically state that Andreini became nude, performative traditions of madness in the Early Modern period continually involved nudity as an exterior sign of internal frenzy. To "tear off one's clothes," then, becomes a historicized code for the exposing of bare skin—something that would never be done when a person is in their right state of mind. Performative actions of the frenzied individuals are explained by Natsu Hattori, who looks at the presentational style of madness during the Early Modern period. Hattori argues that the mad were expected to *display* their symptoms through their physiognomy and speech and that tearing off their clothes and going about naked were common and repetitive performatives.[39] This equation of external nudity equaling internal madness is prolific in the arts across Europe in the Early Modern period as evidenced by

---

[36] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 238.
[37] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 75.
[38] Scala, *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, 288.
[39] Natsu Hattori, "'The Pleasure of Your Bedlam': The Theatre of Madness in the Renaissance," *History of Psychiatry, vi* (1995), 286.

numerous nude sculptures of individuals suffering madness. Examples include Gerard

Lambertsz' *Frenzy* (1619-20) as well as King Lear's debasing descent into madness when he is

discovered "unbonneted" (3.1.16) and soon afterwards fully strips as supported by the stage

direction "*Tearing off his clothes* [SD]" (3.4.116).[40] Isabella Andreini, then, combined

virtuosity—many were spellbound by her ability to speak in several different languages and

physically mimic the other performers—with the risqué revealing of her naked—or at least

partially naked—body.

　　While just one example of the potential erotic encounters that audiences could hope to

experience in a performance by commedia actors, Andreini's "La Pazzia" provides an insight

into what spectators risked by attending these shows. Audiences could count on a lively,

virtuosic performance but they could also find themselves confronted with explicit or suggestive

material condemned by authorities. It should be noted that risk in this way was about what one

might see by attending this performance. Through the nature of their improvisational character,

large repertoire, and itinerant business model, there was no guarantee that one would encounter

this sexually risky content. Instead, I argue that spectators were drawn by what *might* happen in

performance—that is, the *chance* to engage with material otherwise regulated and reproved.

Spectators, then, engaged with a spectatorial risk to morality through their hopes that they might

encounter suggestive material but also their anxieties that they might witness something to push

them beyond their comfort.

　　This unknowability of what might happen in the venues of the piazza or customs house—

what embodied pleasures one might see given commedia's reputation and oeuvre—enabled

interest and curiosity to prevail against official warnings. Tommaso Garzoni claims that the

---

[40] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1993).

commedia troupes were so wicked that "lords banish them from their lands, the law holds them in contempt, different nations scorn them in a variety of ways and the whole world, as if to punish them for their improper conduct, rightly rejects them," but still admits that when the cross-dressed actresses sings and invites the public to come watch, "the mob, by nature eager for novelties and curiosities, immediately rushes to get seats."[41] The allure of what *might* happen was a powerful incentive, and Ottonelli even noted that attendance was greater when the actresses were prettier, as one could look and listen with more pleasure.[42] While this might not be surprising, it is still worth observing that for many patrons, the risk of attending the theatre in a given afternoon might create consequences in the form of clerical reproach. In this way, spectators were often forced to decide which direction to take: to satisfy their curiosity or to heed the staunch warnings of their local clergyman. In many ways, then, this decision between possible rebuke and possible pleasures, especially concerning the eroticism of the actress, came down to an opposition between sex and fear. With the rapid growth of commedia's popularity, sex seems often to prevail.

Those studying cognition, like Donald Pfaff, work to explain this decision-making process, especially in regard to risk taken and avoided concerning sex and fear. Pfaff argues that it is the arousal system within ourselves that dictates behavioral response. In wavering between sex and fear, Pfaff concludes that the unpredictability of a given situation is the greatest elevator of the thrill of sex and grip of fear.[43] If unpredictability intensifies these states of arousal, then the demand of "Do not go see this" made by clergy carries with it a rather predictable and trivial threat of consequences that might include public or private reprimand or hindered opportunities

---

[41] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History,* 70.

[42] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 246.

[43] Donald Pfaff, *Brain Arousal and Information Theory: Neural and Genetic Mechanisms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 99.

to engage with their church; however, these demands lacked the unknowability of intense

punishment. They were not coupled with rumors of imprisonment or chances that one might be

excluded from eternal salvation. The unpredictable pleasures of commedia were spread by

pictures, advertisements, and stories. These rewards offered by the masked companies were not

guaranteed but suggested; one could safely assume to witness sufficient entertainment, but one

might also hope to be present for moments of arousal deemed unfit by societal standards.

As seen, commedia audiences engaged with a spectatorial risk to morality and

experienced subsequent arousal and anxiety. Both the pleasures and dangers they encountered

can be better understood through placing them on the edge between normative society and

anarchic unpredictability. The antitheatrical rhetoric that attacked the commedia in the sixteenth

and seventeenth century, as shown, represented a renewed attempt of world-building where

religious prerogatives attempted to determine quotidian life. Performances of commedia pushed

up against the proscribed regulations of morality, decency, and recreation. As Steven Lyng

explains fifteen years after his initial theorization, edgework works to explore the ways in which

"the risk-taking experience can be understood as either a radical form of escape from the

institutional routines of contemporary life (variously conceived) or an especially pure expression

of the central institutional and cultural imperatives of the emerging social order."[44] These

performances, and by proxy the spectatorship of them, act as counter-cultural activities by which

the role enactment dictated by authorities, characterized by constraint and regulation of moral

norms, are contested. Due to the inherent unknowability of each performance, the act of

watching and listening are imbued with qualities of spontaneity and impulse that skirt the edge,

those shifting borderlands, of acceptable social and moral behavior.

---

[44] Lyng, "Edgework and the Risk-Taking Experience," 5.

Although Lyng's theory of edgework presumes a modern or post-modern society in which participants are alienated from their total selves by societal prescriptions and oversocialized in order to form an identity of self based on the notions of their social others, one can see similar patterns of social control in the Early Modern period. The consolidation of accepted thought and dominant logic determined by civic and religious authorities clearly created a field of normative consciousness and behavior in which individuals were compelled to abide. Self-identity in this way is constructed through engagement with conventions. As this period saw drastic and rapid social change in the form of urbanization and mercantilism, adhering to the strict social code of regulating authorities was the customary way in which individuals were standardized and made to accept who they were. Outside of this regulated and standardizing center, multiplicity, illegal activity, and chaos become present as the antithesis of social order. This area was seen as a dangerous and undesirable place in which to live; however, performances of the commedia dell'arte offered momentary escape and an opportunity to discover new things about the world and self. Existing on this borderline, commedia offered spectators a form of second-hand, experiential risk to morality. For a couple hours, audiences could inhabit a realm of potential, spontaneity, and anarchy that flew in the face of the orthodox society. This sense of temporality on the edge of acceptability is important. Individuals could momentarily experience socially forbidden content—that of an erotic, scatological, and anti-institutional nature—without having to forego their place in the social order. Simply witnessing a performance would not permanently expel oneself from the established social order, nor was it seen as choosing to reside in the undeveloped boundaries of society. Being an audience member, instead, allowed for a momentary spectatorial risk as individuals cohabitated this borderland with commedia's masks. Attending these performances and voluntarily engaging with spectatorial risk wrested control of

one's life and choices out of the constraints of a society constructed around them and allowed for a temporary sense of agency as spectators pronounced their own volition of self-determination. Cultivating a sense of spontaneous self, onlookers presented themselves at performances as ready and open for unpredictable experiences.

If conceptualizing audiences as participating in spontaneous and anarchic edgework in the face of renewed social constraints can help describe why commedia drew such crowds, analyzing those spectators' experience of sensation and arousal can help theorize audience responses in the moment and their desire to return to the theatre. These sensations, too, are naturally heightened as the experience of spectatorial risk to morality sits on the brink of standardization and unpredictability; audiences, then, can seek out certain types of risk, but it should always be remembered that their individual experiences may vary depending on the given performance. The lure of seeking a specific criterion of sensation may or may not be fulfilled by *that* performance, leading one to return again the next time a troupe visits—for instance, the desire to witness the public, naked female body may or may not be fulfilled. The pursuit of certain sensations, though, offers valuable insight into the motivations present for audiences engaged in spectatorial risk at commedia performances.

In this discussion of the pleasures and dangers of engaging with a spectatorial risk to morality, it will be helpful to briefly return to this project's introduction and Marvin Zuckerman's Sensation Seeking Scale. Perhaps more than other criteria, Thrill and Adventure Seeking should be analyzed as a particularly individualistic type of arousal to be sought after by audience members. Focusing on the thrill of physical or social danger, Thrill and Adventure Seeking might apply more often to the comedic *zanni*, because of their physical stunts and agitation against social hierarchy, than to their viewers. However, sensation seeking of this sort

123

would be particularly seen in individuals consciously rebelling against the institutional pressures to avoid performances of commedia. If one's cleric or city official bans attendance because of moral or social motivations, being present at a performance might mean risking one's social reputation or suffering punitive measures. More than simply seeking a new experience, spectators looking for this criterion of sensation seeking are looking to risk their social status; they consciously step up to the wavering borderline between legal and illegal, constrained and anarchic, to see what social actions they might be able to get away with.

Perhaps the most obvious way for spectators to pursue unique states of arousal is through Experience Seeking. Uniquely tied to edgework, Experience Seeking presents an attempt to seek sensations through new experiences and unfamiliar stimuli. Similarly, commedia presented the opportunity for this type of sensation seeking by offering audience members the potential to meet new masks, learn new stories, hear new jokes, and see a new way of conceptualizing the world. Zuckerman points out that this form of sensation seeking is intrinsically tied to looking outside of the established social order for new kinds of arousal not found within a controlled, normative society. Commedia's audiences then, as evidenced through the theatre's position on the outskirts, the edge, between acceptable and radical society, are able to safely pursue new experiences that would have been absent or even forbidden within the constraints of their everyday world. A fresh breath of air from work, family, and the Church, spectators could expect a performance to offer new sights, sounds, ideas, and emotions.

Tied not only to the actress but also to the various sexual, scatological, and anarchic behaviors present in the plot, evidence exists for spectators seeking sensation through disinhibition. Focused on a desire to find arousal through sex, drinking, and partying, the bacchanal-driven audience members would certainly find non-normative states of arousal

124

through commedia. Recall that commedia troupes tantalized their supporters and critics with the possibility of encountering a variety of deviant behaviors. From bodily functions to outright nudity, commedia offered a licensed form of debauchery within a society constantly working to contain this very urge. For audience members, this sensation from spectatorial risk would appear as second-order stimulation. While spectators themselves are not engaging in shameless and gratuitous sex or debauchery, the witnessing of such still offers sensations comparable to self-experience. The act of witnessing puts the spectator into a symbiotic relationship with the actor; the actor's performance becomes reciprocal action and arousal for the audience. Again, however, this sensation seeking of erotic, bacchanal stimuli, like Experience Seeking's quest for that which is on the limits of normative society, was not necessarily guaranteed but became a potential opportunity and risk for stimulation. Presence at a showing of commedia, inherently unknowable, was a chance to engage indirectly with licentious behavior and a risk both that one might *not* fulfill the obtaining of sensation but also that one might experience this sensation and be influenced or changed by it. Regardless, for a population overly inhibited by social decorum, a desire for disinhibition or the experience of perverse and inappropriate behaviors became a possible driving force in why audiences flocked to commedia dell'arte.

Finally, in some ways related to or overlapping with the other three criteria, spectators might have looked to commedia for sensations due to Boredom Susceptibility. Searching for stimuli outside of people, situations, and contexts deemed predictable or unstimulating, audiences would have been aroused by characters, language, and actions designed to be dynamic. Although touching on real social issues such as class and ethnicity, commedia's hyperbolic gestures and heightened language create an exaggerated world in which those typically bored by everyday living can find stimulation. This form of sensation seeking could easily overlap with

125

arousal acquired through violating social regulations and taking indirect part in counter-cultural experiences and sexual pleasures.

A myriad motivations might have compelled spectators to seek sensations from watching performances of the commedia dell'arte. While commedia's critics framed the theatre as only offering subversive, antiestablishment pleasures, commedia advocates explored the various enjoyments present in the art that consumers would enjoy. In his defense of the craft, Niccolò Barbieri hypothesized a multitude of reasons individuals came to the masked theatre, echoing Zuckerman's diverse criteria of sensation seeking. In his *La Supplica* (1634), Barbieri emphasized Experience Seeking, noting that "many go to see all the novelties" and that "many go to hear new ideas and good discourse."[45] His comments highlight both the unpredictable nature of commedia performances nonetheless coupled with the expectation that what was seen would be novel and outside the typical variety of entertainments available to Early Modern audiences. Barbieri also noted that a possible spectator might simply be "he who goes to pass his boredom" or "he who does not know where to go in that hour,"[46]indicating a type of sensation seeking based in Boredom Susceptibility. Notably, but predictably, he neglects to mention any possibility of sensation seeking through Thrill and Adventure seeking or Disinhibition. Although these criteria would certainly have been applicable for some spectators, to reference them would be an admission from Barbieri of the non-normative or subversive qualities of commedia.

Thus, one can analyze performances of commedia dell'arte through the spectator's engagement with a spectatorial risk to morality. Engaging in spectatorial risk, audiences seek to inhabit a realm of possibility in which access to particular stimuli or the exploration of a given

---

[45] "molti per l'uso di vedere tutte le novità," "molti vanno per udir concetti nuovi o bei discorsi." Niccolò Barbieri, *La Supplica: discorso famigliare a quelli che trattano de' comici*, Ed. Ferdinando Taviani (Milan: Il Polifilo, 1971), 37.
[46] "chi va per passer l'ozio," "chi per non saper dove andar in quall'ora." Niccolò Barbieri, *La Supplica,* 37.

self-identity *might* occur. Present in an era characterized by increased social pressures for regulating conformity, commedia presented an opportunity for spectatorial risk in which unknowability, impulsiveness, and anarchy are commodified. Alongside, or in cooperation with, performers, audiences placed themselves on the border between normative and non-normative, legal and illegal, in- and out-of-control in order to be present in a given moment when anything *could* happen. While these subversive, dangerous qualities were not guaranteed, the possibility that one could hear, see, or feel something that conflicted with the social status quo provided spectators with the impetus to attend.

To conclude, the search for unique sensations was far from homogenous; some craved the thrill of violating social authority while others craved new erotic stimuli. This sensation seeking, furthermore, was heightened by its possibility to remain unfulfilled. Audiences risked witnessing nothing that pushed against cultural and moral limits; they might only receive an interesting story or a joke that made them chuckle. The possibility remained, however, to be present for a performance that skirted the edges of acceptability and offered spectators new experiences, stimuli, and the opportunity to reevaluate and reimagine their place in the world. When social cues and constraints were actively employed to regulate both bodies and identities, the risk of non-normative experiences created a space in which self-determination encouraged by unique modes of arousal dominated. The audiences of commedia dell'arte, then, experienced a form of spectatorial risk dictated by the possibility of engaging with non-normative ideas and behaviors that could cause not only disparate kinds of unique sensations but might also lead to the formation of a new self-identity or a new way of conceptualizing the world. Commedia produced a peripheral world predicated on what *might* be rather than reaffirming what was.

Marketing Unpredictability: Flaminio Scala and Tristano Martinelli

The spectatorial risk to morality was not unfamiliar to commedia actors. In fact, commedia troupes and individual actors recognized the link between their art and risk and actively sought, in many cases, to calm fears about potential risks. From defenses of the profession like Pier Maria Cecchini's *Frutti delle moderne comedie* (1628) and Niccolò Barbieri's *La supplica* (1634) to defenses of the actress like Adriano Valerini's *Oratione D'Adriano Valerini Veronese, in morte della divina signora Vincenza Armani, Comica Eccellentissima* (1569), the comedic craft and its actors were framed far from counter-cultural risks but instead as upstanding citizens diligently striving to promote the Horatian link between pleasure and profit, entertainment and education. To dispel any threats of risk to society, Robert Henke notes that in these defenses "praise and description of the actor's technical abilities went hand-in-hand with the moral defense," as it was argued that "beauty generated by refined technical skills could not but produce the good."[47] Through the very existence of these defenses of the theatre, nonetheless, it becomes clear that the subversive risk of simply watching a performance was a present notion in social conversations about commedia.

However, if many actors defended the profession against the possibility of non-normative ideas and actions, there were some who understood this spectatorial risk as a benefit to their enterprise and actively worked to foster a sense of unknowability and edgework that was inherently present in the commedia dell'arte. If spectators arrived at the theatre to take proximate part in the social risks and sensations offered, their expectations and understandings of what kinds of arousals were possible were highlighted by those few actors who understood this draw. I interrogate the oeuvres of Flaminio Scala and Tristano Martinelli to demonstrate how each of

---

[47] Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 94.

these actor/writers, although in many ways diametrically opposed and occasionally even at odds with one another, consciously contributed to a sense of spectatorial risk around the turn of the seventeenth century. Although one can view Flaminio Scala, troupe *capocomico* and avid supporter of regulation, promotability, and respectability for the masked theatre, and Tristano Martinelli, a rebellious *zanni* whose own life seems to blur the divide between spontaneity and restraint, as dialectical opposites in how risk was constructed, they each, in their own way, intentionally fostered the allure of risk as a marketing strategy. These actors both promoted spectatorial risk by focusing on the unknowability of what *might* happen in performance.

Known for his portrayal as the *innamorato* Flavio as well as his serving as *capocomico* to the Confidenti, Scala used his capacity as author to defend the commedia dell'arte as serious art. His best-known work, the 1611 composition *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative* features a Boccaccian-like compilation of fifty commedia scenarios (broken into days) that offer readers a scene-by-scene of various commedia plots. These scenarios feature a background, or argument, list of characters and props, and an organized action that denotes entrances and exits, marking opportunities for *lazzi* and important plot elements. While this compilation of scenarios can certainly be seen as an attempt to elevate the prestige of commedia into the realm of respectable written culture, I also read Scala's publication as a reaffirmation of unpredictability and risk.

As opposed to a typical reading of Scala, which offers commedia scholars a framework for piecing together what a typical commedia scenario looked like, it is important to read also what is *absent* from the composition. Published to be read at home, Scala's book gives individuals the opportunity to learn more about the types of stories that troupes performed,[48] but also leaves them wanting. Reading the outlines of these performances forces consumers to

---

[48] Scala's *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative* includes not only comedies but also tragedies, pastorals, and operas.

recognize that the only way to really appreciate everything these troupes are doing is to be physically present for the live event. Dotted throughout Scala's scenarios are suggestions of what *might* be: indications that *lazzi* are performed here, hints of sexual suggestion, outlines of verbal altercations or physical violence. Although the spine of the plot is present, Scala intentionally leaves out the nuances, word-play, gestures, and subversive hints that made the theatre infamous. Although using written expression as a means by which to defend his profession, Scala through this compilation adamantly advocates for liveness and spontaneity.

Scala's intentional preference and advertisement for the unknowability of liveness is evidenced through his occasional use of full dialogue and his prologue for his fully scripted *Il finto marito*. It is important to note that Scala's lack of full dialogue in his scenarios is less about an inability to prescribe the improvisation of commedia and more about his *unwillingness* to do so. Occasionally, Scala offers specific phrases that act as important plot pieces, clever jokes, and witty word play. In "La Pazzia d'Isabella" for instance, Scala clearly offers usable full-text for Isabella to say in performance when performing madness.[49] This dialogue, however, is sporadic and incomplete, suggesting a strategy to use these occasional bits of language as an example of the kinds of word play one *might* witness in performance. Acting as a "teaser," these moments of fully scripted dialogue work alongside the plot outlines to give the nature of what is to be expected; yet, they force the audience to realize that live attendance is the only way to truly experience the performance. This emphasis on direct experience is echoed in the prologue of Scala's fully scripted play, *Il finto marito* (1619). Featuring a theoretical debate between a commedia performer and potential spectator, Scala makes the case that fully scripted plays fail to garner audiences' attention and, without the syncing of performative experience, are missing a

---

[49] See Scala's "La Pazzia d'Isabella," *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, 282-291.

crucial element of their ability to amuse audiences and succeed. Scala's Player argues that "all rules are desirable, but the essence of any art or science lies in putting things into practice" and that written plays that are not based in live experiences "disgust audiences and fail to achieve the end of pleasure."[50] His prologue makes the case that the enjoyment of theatre comes in watching the live event, as it is only in this capacity that art can remain flexible to giving audiences what they desire. The importance of this is especially made clear a century later as commedia was seen to have lost its value by becoming prescriptive. Richards, for instance, notes how a multitude of eighteenth-century complaints against commedia arose concerning "the extent to which stage dialogue had become facile, monotonous, and repetitious."[51] Scala, realizing this, encouraged his audiences to understand that prescribed language lacking real performance—or even prescribed language *with* real performance—would create stale and unaffecting experience. The endorsement of liveness in this case, therefore, is also an endorsement for the risks of unpredictability. Unlike the static words on the page created by fully scripted drama, Scala's use of outlines, his hints at possible lines and phrases, and his emphasis on craft gained through live experience all point to a malleable script that supports its own spontaneity. In this way, although Scala's published scenarios certainly seem to align him to others using print to validate and elevate the theatre, the absence of and hints towards specific language and action should be seen as an advertisement toward an art form that sits on the fringes between controlled society and chaos.

While Scala used language, or a lack thereof, to encourage audiences to participate in the spectatorial risk offered by commedia, Tristano Martinelli used the unpredictability of the performer's action, or again, the lack thereof, to entice audiences to see what *might* happen.

---

[50] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 199-200.
[51] Richards and Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*, 188.

Famously known for the creation of the Arlecchino mask, Martinelli built a wide-reaching

reputation of spontaneity, impulsiveness, and anarchy through conflating his own identity with

that of his *secondo zanni*; his physical and verbal *lazzi* constantly worked to subvert traditional

class structure and social order. A dynamic performer, via a combination of written composition

and reputation, Martinelli harnessed the power and allure of spectatorial risk as he marketed to

audiences that through him, anything *might* happen in a given performance.

Although gaining immense popularity, Martinelli only ever published one piece of

writing. His *Compositions de Rhetorique* was a perplexing pamphlet distributed to only a select

number of recipients including King Henry IV of France and his court. Consisting of a mere

seventy-two pages, his *Compositions* contained grotesque pictures of himself in his masked

persona and of his fellow actors of the Accesi company as well as muddled riddles and

macaronic poems, which "constitute in itself an enigmatic and jocose buffone performance."[52]

Within the published work, Martinelli directly identifies himself as his theatrical character,

simultaneously begging for employment from the French courts and threatening his own

departure back to Italy if his mercantilist demands are not met. Through this direct plea for

money, some scholars including Siro Ferrone have argued for the *Compositions* to be read as a

piece of economic bargaining. Combining direct economic exchange with buffoonery, Ferrone

calls the piece a "parodic inversion" in which Martinelli works to actively set the rules for his

performance.[53] While I agree with Henke and Ferrone about viewing this document as a textual

piece of performative buffoonery, consider the unique composition of the document as one that

is never completed. With writing and images on only a select few of its pages, Martinelli

---

[52] Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte*, 161.
[53] Siro Ferrone, *Attori mercanti corsari: La Commedia dell'arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), 193.

publishes a document in which a large majority of pages remain completely blank. Adding to the taste of buffoonery that is inspired by text and images that are "printed from beyond the edge of the world,"[54] the empty pages should be read as a forced imagining of unknowable content. Between word play in which Arlecchino vows to give the king his heart and images of a supplicating mask on his knees, Martinelli seems to follow the same strategy of Scala by offering tidbits of what *might* happen in performance. Importantly, however, the absence of any text or images for most of the pages pushes against a reading that hypothesizes that a performance will be similar to this or that and instead constructs a pure realm of unpredictability in which not even Martinelli is aware of what might happen. These blank pages force the reader past the comfort of reconstructing possible performance outcomes based on culturally normative entertainment. They even underscore counter-cultural actions that challenge the status quo and make visible Milovanovic's peripheral realm of pure chaos, ungovernability, and spontaneity. Whereas Scala's texts offer an assortment of suggestions that one needs to be present to witness, Martinelli's blank pages dangerously allow the interlocutor's imagination to run free; these blank pages are not confined within given boundaries but positioned as an advertisement of chaotic unknowability.

As the *Compositions'* blank pages push against simple allusions to possible outcomes, spectators are left to imagine what might happen in performance based on his reputation. With an identity of mask and self conflated into one, Martinelli established himself as an actor who might act in any socially non-normative manner similar to his masked character. One famous anecdote, for instance, shows Arlecchino slipping into the throne of Henry IV and inverting social order by addressing the king as himself and demanding "All right! Harlequin, because you have come

---

[54] Ferrone, *Attori mercanti corsari*, 191.

here with your troupe to entertain me, I am very pleased, and I will promise to protect you, and to give you a lot of money etc."[55] If spectators are left to imagine what the actor will do in performance, notable examples of boundary-pushing actions such as this would not only certainly come to mind but also act as the starting place from which more outrageous imagined activity would occur. Potential actions in this way, both real and imagined, help to build Martinelli's reputation as risk-taker and boundary-pusher. Even imagined activities, bolstered by his reputation for daring action, combine to create an enlarged sense of artistic ability. Furthermore, Martinelli used blank pages to create an extreme form of unpredictability in which his virtuosity in cohabitating with chaos is reinforced. In this way, readers could anticipate and become excited about the unpredictability of what might happen in performance. Martinelli, then, like Scala fostered a sense of spontaneity to give his interlocutors the impression that anything *might* happen in performance.

As evidenced by Flaminio Scala and Tristano Martinelli, the concept of spectatorial risk was not only understood by Early Modern practitioners but was actively harnessed as a strategy for advertising and performance. Coupled with commedia's inherent unfixedness due to its improvisational nature, Scala and Martinelli worked to tease audiences with bits of possible interaction and use the hyperbolic tendencies of imagination to amplify performers' virtuosity and engagement with spontaneity. The actions of these two performers, furthermore, fall in line with larger impulses surrounding commedia. Positioned on the edge of standardization and chaos, decorum and impulsivity, and constraint and spontaneity, Scala and Martinelli highlighted the edgework appeal of the masked theatre by emphasizing its marginal character between societal control and pure ungovernability. These actors emphasized the unknowability of their

---

[55] Armand Baschet, *Les comédiens italiens a la cour de France sous Charles IX, Henri III, Henri IV et Louis XIII* (Paris: E. Plon, 1882), 118.

performances to attract those looking to engage with spectatorial risk. Simply watching these performances put spectators in communication with new ideas, actions, and modes of language that did not always fall in line with that dictated by local and religious authorities. Spectators, linked to the performers they witnessed, risked taking part in an environment that might put them on the borderline of their own society, forcing the reevaluation of self and the world in which they lived. Understanding the desire of audience members to join them on the edges of society, performers worked to emphasize the possibility of encountering several models of sensation seeking that fit a variety of individual spectators. Demonstrated by Martinelli's blank pages, commedia drew audiences through their conscious incorporating of spectatorial risk to morality; spectators might discover ways to determine their self-identity or they might simply laugh at a couple of socially inappropriate jokes. Either way, this element of "might" kept them coming back to see the next show as it pulled its wagon into town.

Chapter 3

Spectatorial Risk to Self:

Self-Implication and Watching Witchcraft

Early modern spectators experienced witchcraft through two very different modes: reality and representation. In reality, witchcraft was a looming threat that manifested its presence in the lives of everyday citizens through the growing number of public witch trials and the dissemination of sensational news broadsheets and pamphlets. The practices of witches, perceived as actively challenging the hegemonic authority of God and the Church, were related to lay audiences who actively engaged in court proceedings, listened to and imagined the dangerous crimes committed in secret, and watched the executions of these witches by hanging, burning, or drowning. Witchcraft was a peripheral event—one that occurred on the margins of society and seeped its way into the lives of its interlocutors—in which hidden acts produced deadly results, which were presumed for the victims of witchcraft but certain for the witches themselves. Drawing from the very real events, threats, and anxieties that witch narratives brought into the cities, the steady representation of witchcraft and conjuration on stage operated in an inverted fashion by revealing and making public these dark acts but with a presumed loss of efficacy. The theatre allowed the representation of events that were previously relegated to the imagination only; the secret acts—signs, gestures, devices, incantations, and conjurations—that were once only available in the mind's eye manifested themselves on the stage. These theatrical representations removed the distance between the spectator and witchcraft in order to bring the damning acts in full view of everyday citizens. To explore real witchcraft and its representations, then, is to explore the layers of meaning whereby these distinct performances inform one another and make meaning both within society and the theatre.

This relationship between reality and representation can easily be seen through the available "entertainments" offered to English residents between 1589 and 1590. In 1589, the dangerous reality of witchcraft was clear and present to those living in and around London. A string of witch trials at Chelmsford rocked the small town, and the defendants' confessions and executions were published and consumed by London's readership as *The Apprehension and confession of three notorious Witches*. Whether at the live witch-trials themselves or reading about them after the fact, audiences gained firsthand knowledge as to how these witches conjured spirits, made pacts with the Devil, and used their charms for nefarious purposes. For instance, Joan Cunny, one of the confessed witches, explained how she would "kneele down upon her knees, and make a Circle on the ground, and pray unto Sathan the cheefe of the Devills."[1] Cunny's gestures and symbol tracings, coupled with specific prayers or incantations— which she confessed she had all but forgotten by the time of her trial—effectively worked to invoke Satan as "two Spirits did appeare unto her within the said Circle, in the similitude and likeness of two black Frogges" who demanded her soul in exchange for favors.[2] As testament from the Chelmsford witch trials, the semiotics of witchcraft were efficacious practices that resulted in the very real hangings of several witches "as worthily they had deserved."[3]

While crowds gathered to take communal part in the reality of these witch trial spectacles, they simultaneously experienced the acts of witchcraft which led to these executions through theatrical representation. Written between 1589 and 1590, Christopher Marlowe's supernatural tragicomedy, *Doctor Faustus*, enjoyed decades of popularity as audiences were able

---

[1] *The Apprehension and confession of three notorious Witches. Arreigned and by Justice condemned and executed at Chelmes-forde, in the Countye of Essex* (London, 1589; Ann Arbor: Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011), http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A18586.0001.001.
[2] *The Apprehension and confession of three notorious Witches*.
[3] *The Apprehension and confession of three notorious Witches*.

to experience the very same conjuring-based performances of which news and judicial reports found the accused witches guilty. With bated breath, audiences witnessed as Faustus entered the scene at the end of the first act to perform his conjurations. They watched Faustus create a circle on the ground and fill it in with names, symbols, and "figures of every adjunct to the heavens/ And characters of signs and erring stars/ By which the spirits are enforced to rise" (1.3.11-13).[4] They listened as Faustus read from a secret book of magical incantations while simultaneously blaspheming the use of holy tools—he sprinkles holy water—and religious semiotics—he calls upon the devil while making the sign of the cross. Like the witches at Chelmsford, Faustus' demonic supplication is successful as the ghastly Mephistopheles enters and trades Faustus the knowledge and power he desires in exchange for his soul.

The great success of Marlowe's play[5] points to a major motif of Early Modern drama: the performance of witchcraft. From magical circles to destructive spells, cauldrons to talismans, and Wild Rides to Satan himself, the representative performatives on stage of the witch's machinations were a source of curiosity, fear, and excitement for theatre goers. The stage operated parallel to real social events and endeavored to bring the peripheral reality of witchcraft intimately close to everyday city dwellers; it allowed them to witness the embodiment, both realistic and imagined, of trial testimonies and recordings. If the live witch-trials and subsequent publications allowed spectators, church-goers, business men, craftsmen, and everyday folk to see first-hand the *results* of witchcraft—confession, atonement, and often, execution—, then

---

[4] Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington et. al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).
[5] Indeed, David Bevington argues that along with Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* launched an era of greatness for Elizabethan tragedy. See Bevington's "Introduction to *Doctor Faustus*," in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 245.

theatrical representation allowed these same spectators to witness the *acts* of witchcraft that were performed in secret and manifested only in one's imagination.

The popularity and wide-spread usage of witchcraft on stage indicates the allure for spectators to put themselves dangerously close to these forbidden and criminal actions. If the real events produced material penalties, then performances of witchcraft on stage provided a thin layer of distancing—but a layer of distancing nonetheless—by which audience members flocked to get as close as they dared. This desire to get close, however, should not simply be read as an attempt to witness "magic" up close and "see the wonders and illusions of the fairground jugglers and practitioners of legerdemain translated into the theatre" as suggested by Michael Mangan in his historical study of performances of magic.[6] Instead, as this chapter will argue, spectators gathered not only to watch performances of witchcraft but to find themselves dangerously muddled in the performative events themselves. Through positioning the audience in close proximity to the action and demonstrating firsthand knowledge of the myriad of practices that defined the dark arts, the use of witchcraft on stage transformed the spectator's experience from the allure of simply witnessing something forbidden to being *implicated* in it. No longer just passive onlookers, the audiences of this staged witchcraft became peripheral participants and accomplices in those same acts that produced torture and capital punishment just outside the theatre walls. Performances of witchcraft, then, fostered a distinct type of spectatorial risk that presented interlocutors with a theoretical risk to their very self; their presence might explicitly contribute to invoking demons or implicitly teach them the verbal and gestural lexicon that might slip from their lips later at home. Unlike the audiences previously discussed who flocked to the boy companies or who attended performances of the commedia dell'arte, the

---

[6] Michael Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Ltd., 2007), 32.

spectators of witchcraft were privy to more than simply being present for the risky pleasure of witnessing something on the border of normative society; truly, they were asked to place themselves on the very edge of socially accepted behavior and reach out into the unknown. In order to understand how spectators experienced the risks associated with witchcraft, this chapter will first investigate the varied threats that witchcraft posed to communities, socio-political structures, and the balance between heaven and hell. Then, we will interrogate the strategies used by theatres to incorporate witchcraft onto the stage. We will explore how these strategies produced unique pleasures and risks to spectators that ultimately produced a unique spectatorial risk to self.

Finally, this chapter will end with an exploration of the ways in which this distinct risk to self was employed and commodified by playwrights and acting companies. Keen to the limits of social constraint and allure of anarchic possibility, the Early Modern theatre scene capitalized by producing that which was expressly forbidden in reality. Just as our example of the Chelmsford witch-trials and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* demonstrates, theatres were consciously attuned to the fascination and anxiety produced by the prospect of hidden witches and secret dealings with the devil. This intentional marketing of a spectatorial risk to self is especially evident through an investigation of the 1621 collaboratively written *The Witch of Edmonton*, which dramatized the confessed acts of witchcraft by Elizabeth Sawyer that were uncovered that same year. Theatres, then, were not only aware of what topics interested audiences but purposefully developed strategies to position spectators on the edge of perceived danger and uncertainty.

The Threat of Witchcraft

To understand the ways in which stage performances of witchcraft created a proximate risk to theatre goers, it is necessary to understand how the larger threats of witchcraft to both society and the individual were perceived. Despite variants of spatial and temporal differences, the nuanced conceptions and manifestations of witchcraft can collectively be understood first and foremost as a threat to social order. The threat of witchcraft was both amorphous and multifaceted; not unlike the Renaissance, it developed and swelled in different parts of Europe in different moments and fostered distinct characteristics that reflected larger social, political, and religious concerns. Popular conceptions involving the power and abilities of witches varied across cultures—some witches flew to midnight *sabbats* while others were isolated except for their demonic familiar[7]—while the practice of witchcraft itself became identified with inherent attacks on larger social structures from systemic patriarchy to the Catholic Church. Whether social order is defined by acceptable quotidian practices by everyday citizens, political sovereignty, or homogenous spiritual beliefs, witchcraft presented an attack on accepted, normative life that extended from the individual to the cosmological.

While various forms and iterations of "magic" had always been part of social, political, and religious life in Europe,[8] witchcraft was largely viewed as something different. Witchcraft was seen as far more damaging, nefarious, and in need of repression than the ubiquitous, folkloric forms of fortune-telling and love potions. These lines between popular magic and

---

[7] These differing perceptions and presentations of witches were present between spatial and temporal boundaries but were certainly not fixed. While flying "Wild Rides" and midnight *sabbats* were most popular in southwest Germany and familiars mostly exclusive to England, discursive identifiers of witchcraft were fluid and open to new possibilities driven by the spread of respected tracts and guides on witchcraft. For instance, while the *Malleus Maleficarum* was slow to gain popular traction in England, it heavily influenced both skeptical writings against the prevalence of witchcraft by Reginald Scot and George Gifford and the reaffirming tract for its presence and threat in King James VI of Scotland's *Daemonologie*. For an interesting discussion of the blurry edges of English perceptions of witchcraft, see Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge's Introduction of *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays*.

[8] See *Keith Thomas' Religion and the Decline of Magic* for an exhaustive exploration of folkloric traditions and popular forms of magic that composed the makeup of Early Modern English beliefs. Also see Matteo Duni's *Witches, Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in Renaissance Italy, 41-75* for a similar exploration of magical and folkloric beliefs in Early Modern Italy.

witchcraft, however, were often undefined and porous, resulting in a landscape of cautious—and

fervent—debate as "magic" and "witchcraft" existed side by side. While the antecedents to the

widespread witch-hunt of the Early Modern period stretched back to the medieval period and

were often predicated as a threat to the hegemonic power of Christendom and framed as heresy,

it is worth noting that some authorities were exceptionally cautious about punishing popular

customs.[9] For instance, when early inquisitors sought to punish magicians and sorcerers, a Papal

Bull by Pope Alexander IV in 1258 cautioned that judicators "not intervene in cases of

divination or sorcery unless these *clearly savour* of manifest heresy. Nor should they punish

those who are engaged in these things but leave them" to their local authorities to judge.[10] The

freedoms and allowances offered by some like Pope Alexander IV, however, were not

widespread; the punitive lines between magic and witchcraft were often established (and

reestablished) within specific communities based on the beliefs of those in positions of power.

For instance, Pope Alexander's Bull stands in sharp contrast with Pope John XXII's edict in

1326 that framed all forms of magic as a "most pestilential disease" and threatened any who

"dare to teach or learn anything at all concerning these perverse dogmas…[or] to use any of them

by whatever means for whatever purpose."[11] As demonstrated here, folkloric magic, could be

excused as the innocuous actions of local custom or castigated as the harmful practices of those

working to undermine religious faith and social structures. It should not be surprising, then, that

a year after Pope John XXII's edict, the Florentine astrologer, physician, and poet Cecco

d'Ascoli was charged by inquisitors for using astrology to chart and predict human and scriptural

---

[9] Matteo Duni, *Under the Devil's Spell: Witches, Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in Renaissance Italy* (Florence, Syracuse University in Florence: 2007), 11-38; Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 3-15, 25-104.
[10] Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700*, 79.
[11] Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700*, 82.

events. While this persecution would likely not have happened under Pope Alexander IV, d'Ascoli's execution points to the willingness of some tribunals to blur the traditional divisions between magic and witchcraft and increasingly persecute practitioners of folkloric practices.[12]

Although the blurry line between magic and witchcraft changed throughout spatial and temporal moments, Keith Thomas offers a useful and wide-reaching definition of witchcraft in his exhaustive *Religion and the Decline of Magic.* He identifies witchcraft as the "attribution of misfortune to occult human agency."[13] While his definition should be clarified to note a *perceived* attribution of misfortune—as witchcraft itself was nearly impossible to detect or derive substantial evidence about outside of hearsay and personal testimony—, it is still helpful in categorizing the various forms of *maleficium* (harmful magic) propagated through demonic assistance with which witchcraft gradually became linked. Over time, both authorities and laymen began to identify various types of personal and environmental tragedy with harmful witchcraft. Personal misfortune, such as unexplained illness and injury or frustrated sexual relations, and environmental obstacles, such as destructive weather or difficulties performing domestic operations like making butter, were labeled as disparate forms of *maleficium* and signaled the purported presence of witches in a given community.

Returning to Thomas' definition, the ability of witches to exercise vindictive misfortune on their enemies was less important than *how* they obtained the power to do so. Differentiating itself from various forms of folkloric magic—love spells, fortune telling, and even necromancy that commanded the powers of the dead, spirits, and/or demons—, witchcraft was defined as an

---

[12] While this chapter defines witchcraft as magic through an association with Satan, the dinction between witchcraft and folkloric magic was widely contested and blurry through the first half of the Early Modern period. Duni, *Under the Devil's Spell*, 27.

[13] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971; Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1991), 519.

occult process by which individuals entered into a deliberate pact with the Devil. In exchange for allegiance, and typically one's eternal soul, the Devil or one of his minions would enact or give the ability to enact an event of *maleficium*. Analyzed through this perspective, the threat of witches should be read as less about the destructive power of harmful spells or even an attempt to clarify the blurry line between magic and witchcraft. Instead, as Thomas argues, the "essence of witchcraft was not the damage it did to other persons, but its heretical character" in the form of devil-worship.[14] If magic and witchcraft were both capable of benevolent and malicious outcomes, it was only through witchcraft in which individuals were perceived to have rejected civic and religious duty and defiantly stand counter to normative social order. It was through this linking of witchcraft to harmful magic instigated through occult powers that witches were increasingly viewed as a dangerous threat to their communities.

Arguably the most meaningful text to define witchcraft and identify its practices as socially reprehensible was the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Written by inquisitors Henrich Kramer and James Sprenger in 1486,[15] it was enormously influential and went through numerous editions in the subsequent decades. Kramer and Sprenger's handbook, which was prompted by Pope Innocent VIII's 1484 Papal Bull and drew its authority directly from the Church's center, became the authoritative source in defining witchcraft, identifying its practices, and creating an organized system of its discovery and persecution for Catholics and Protestants alike. While the popularity of the *Malleus Maleficarum* certainly would have derived from its sensational reporting of witches, such as answering the vital questions of how witches were thought to

---

[14] Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 521.

[15] Although the two inquisitors were widely known as co-authors of the *Malleus*, modern scholarship has questioned James Sprenger's contribution. Some scholars, such as Hans Peter Broedel, have argued that Sprenger added little more than his reputable name to bolster Kramer's work. Other scholars, such as Keith Thomas and Matteo Duni ignore Sprenger completely. See Hans Peter Broedel, The Malleus Maleficarum *and The Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 18-19.

"perform the Carnal Act with Incubus Deveils,"[16] as well as its guidance in addressing the practical and systematic instructions for finding, trying, and punishing these witches, the handbook endeavored to highlight the larger threat created by the growing presence of witchcraft in the world.

Intended to be an accessible resource and guidebook for inquisitors across Europe, the *Malleus* made a strong effort to communicate the threat that witchcraft posed to individuals and everyday life. For rural communities and individuals largely uninterested in the larger machinations of the Church, Kramer's handbook offered a litany of warnings against the destructive practices of witchcraft on the domestic sphere from which no community was entirely safe.

Witches were viewed broadly as a social threat due to their disparate abilities to threaten aspects of domestic life. Perhaps the most frightening—and most cause for concern for violating a natural order dictated by religious belief—was the perceived capacity of witchcraft to frustrate reproduction in both humans and animals alike. The *Malleus* offered an early and authoritative explanation for witchcraft's role in impotence by describing how witches had powers to not only prevent erections but also to prevent the flow of semen through the penis. The handbook explained how witchcraft could close "the flow of the vital essences to the members in which resides the motive force" to cause not only an inability to become pregnant but also instances of miscarriage.[17] Witchcraft, in this case, threatened to impede natural order through hindering biological functions.

---

[16] Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. The Reverend Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 112.
[17] Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 117-118.
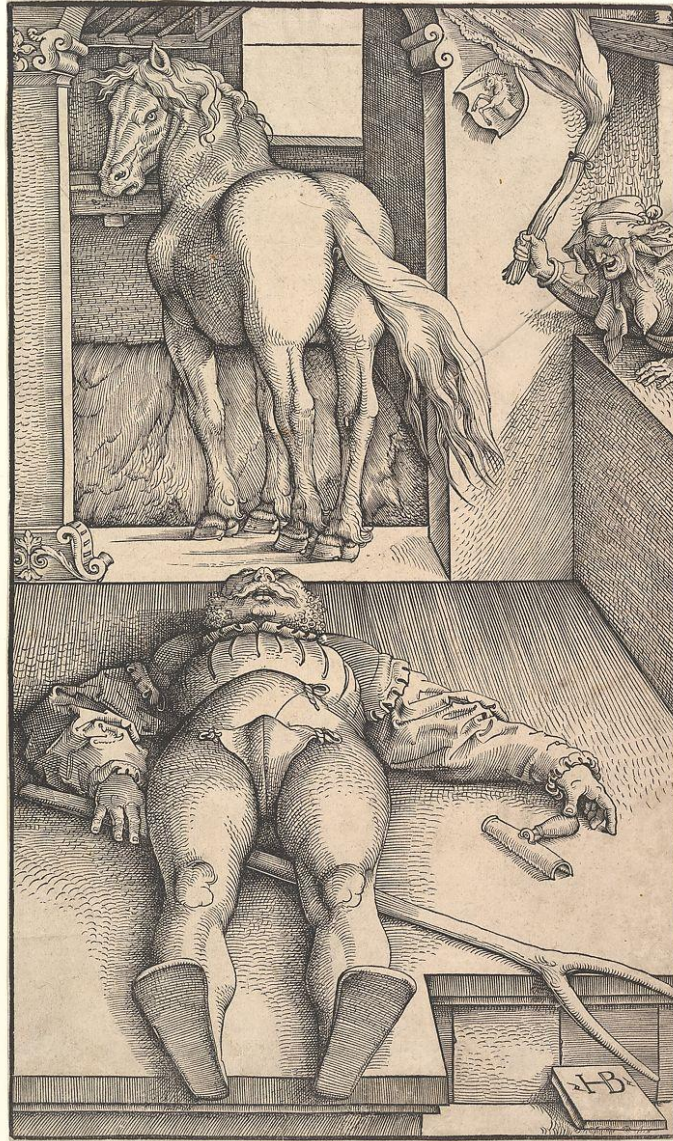
Figure 6. Hans Baldung Grien. *Bewitched Groom*. ca. 1544. From the Royal Academy of Arts.

Beyond the issue of reproduction, witches were perceived to disrupt other quotidian activities. Certainly, while producing miscarriages in livestock was devastating to a community's livelihood, witchcraft could be similarly distressing in its potential to interfere with nature by preventing animals from producing milk and eggs. The failure for other domestic operations such as making butter, cheese, or beer could also be interpreted as interference through *maleficium*.[18]

---

[18] Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 519.

Even stubborn behavior or violent outbursts by livestock were read as demonic intervention. Witches were typically to blame for accidents involving injury and destruction at the hands of livestock. For instance, in one of the final woodcuts before his death, the German artist Hans Baldung Grien depicted the aftermath of a horse whose backwards kick appears fatal to its handler (Figure 6). Well known for his representations of witchcraft, Baldung's *Bewitched Groom* focuses the spectator's eye on the incapacitated figure of a man in his stable while being watched by the threatening over-the-shoulder gaze of his horse. In one corner of the image, a witch is seen brandishing a flaming torch and causing a coat of arms on the wall to tilt askew. The image, then, not only communicates popular beliefs that witches could interfere with domestic operations, such as the behavior of livestock, but that these intrusions could negatively affect the stability of families and communities.

Local communities also feared witchcraft due to its perceived power to kill or maim their residents. When it came to animals and livestock, the potency of witchcraft exceeded simply affecting the creatures' temperament. In addition to the domestic disturbances of preventing an animal from giving milk or producing violent temperaments, the *Malleus* takes time to explore the ways the in which livestock could be injured or killed through the "evil knowledge" garnered through a relationship with Satan.[19] Pointing to the ubiquitous threat of witchcraft on everyday life, Kramer's handbook argued that "there is not even the smallest farm where women do not injure each other's cows, by drying up their milk, and very often killing them."[20] For instance, in the 1566 Chelmsford witch trial of Agnes Waterhouse—the very first witch to be executed in England—, the court records unveiled a pattern of exterminating livestock. Prompted by various disagreements and altercations with neighbors over the years, Waterhouse confessed that she had

---

[19] Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 145.
[20] Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 144.

sent her familiar to kill three of Father Kersyes hogs, drown the cow of widow Gooday, and kill

three geese of another unnamed neighbor.[21] Here, Waterhouse provides an early example of

witchcraft's threat to livestock. The vengeful actions of Waterhouse instilled a fear in

communities that witches were not only capable but willing to direct their *malificium* at personal

property.

While the loss of livestock could threaten to plunge families into poverty and hunger, the

potential threat of witches directing their black magic on the lives of neighbors themselves

produced an even greater fear. Through conjurations, violence performed onto wax figures, or

even calling upon demonic familiars, witches were recognized to have the unholy power to cause

a variety of mental and physical illnesses as well as death to their surrounding community

members. Returning to the trial and execution of Agnes Waterhouse, in addition to killing

several neighbors' livestock, she pleaded guilty to the murder of a neighbor through witchcraft.

Furthermore, the court documents refer to additional attempts on individual lives. It seems that

Waterhouse attributed witchcraft to the death of her own husband several years before the

proceedings and also attempted to strike down another neighbor in a failed attempt.[22] Perhaps

more frightening to local communities than the threat of witches targeting individuals with

maleficium was the threat of double injury at the hands of witches by both killing a newborn and

offering its soul to the Devil. The *Malleus* cites many examples of witches who posed as

midwives, quickly absconded with the infant, and offered its soul to all the devils. One such

witch, in the diocese of Strasburg, was apprehended while escaping with a murdered infant; she

---

[21] *The Examination and confession of certaine wytches at Chensforde in the countie of Essex : before the Quenes Maiesties judges, the xxvi daye of July, anno 1566* (London: By Willyam Powell for Wyllyam Pickeringe, 1566).
[22] Curiously, the court examinations make little of the death of Waterhouse's husband. The failed attempt on a neighbor, furthermore, is accredited to her neighbor's strong faith, which negated Satan's powers. See *The Examination and confession of certaine wytches at Chensforde in the countie of Essex*.

subsequently confessed that she had killed "more children than she could count."[23] While stories like these seem to position the *Malleus* as engaging in a bit of fearmongering, its framing of witchcraft's threat to the domestic sphere reflected widespread anxieties to the growing dangers present for everyday families. These anxieties, furthermore, are seen to bubble to the surface in local witch trials as seen through the accusations heaped on Waterhouse.

In addition to disrupting domestic life and injuring individuals and families, witchcraft was commonly seen as having the power to devastate both property and crops through manipulating environmental forces that could threaten an entire community's livelihood. Witchcraft as a whole (especially on the continent) was thought to work through demonic allegiances and spells of conjuration to produce inclement weather.[24] Rather than simply harming an individual, weather sorcery was seen as a particularly evil form of magic as it adversely affected an entire community. Here, the larger threat to society was repeatedly reflected in the period's iconography. Art historian Charles Zika, for instance, argues that storm-making "emerged as an iconic image for the new social crime and heresy of witchcraft."[25] Certainly, the conjuration of potentially destructive weather became a motif with which witches were associated. As seen in a woodcut by Ulrich Molitor and an anonymous image within Olaus Magnus' *historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (Figures 7-8), a direct link is made between the witches' ability to *create* weather and their ability to *use* that weather to destructive ends. Molitor's image depicts two witches adding a snake and rooster into a cauldron to create tumultuous weather and the image within Magnus' work showcases a witch physically engaged in directing a storm to capsize a

---

[23] Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 140.
[24] Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 147-149; George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York: Atheneum, 1972) 152-162.
[25] Charles Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft: Print and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London: Routledge, 2007), 20.

Figure 7. Ulrich Molitor. "Two witches putting a snake and a rooster into a cauldron." 1493. From Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Figure 8. A witch brewing up a storm. From Olaus Magnus' *historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, 1555.

ship offshore. Just as witches were believed to use their occult powers to target ships at sea, it

was similarly feared that destructive weather-magic could be used against fields of crops, thus

devastating an entire community's survival.

Indeed, the threat of witchcraft on various aspects of domestic life was palpable and

understood to be multifaceted; witches could disrupt quotidian life in numerous ways. These

disturbances to everyday life were illuminated, propagated, and reinforced through cultural

productions ranging from the prominent *Malleus* to local pamphlets on witch-trials and

demonological treatises. Even in our present moment, readers here are probably familiar with the

acts of mischief claimed by the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The witches' presence on

stage is accompanied by cues of lightning and thunder and they help one another by supplying

winds to blow a tempest-tossed ship off course; they admit guilt at killing the swine of a

neighbor who refused to extend to them hospitality; their prophecy to Macbeth seems to

indirectly cause a curdling of milk within the breasts of Lady Macbeth.[26] Even before reaching

the play's larger political threat, witchcraft is reinforced as producing disorder to daily functions.

From disrupting domestic life to manipulating weather, witchcraft had the power to devastate

individuals, property, and crops through upsetting the natural laws that governed life. Read

together, the attribution of witchcraft to domestic frustrations points to the larger threat against

social order that was associated with witches. While very little to no evidence could be produced

to *actually* tie these misfortunes to witchcraft—a fact that caused contemporary skeptics like

---

[26] While lightning and thunder are used as stage directions with the entrance of witches, the Weird Sisters make direct refences to raising storms and thwarting sea travel in 1.3.15-30. The story of killing swine can be found at 1.3.1-7. Lady Macbeth calls on spirits to "unsex" her and replace her milk for gall in 1.5.45-61. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992).

Reginald Scot to note sarcastically that "we thinke them bewitched that wax suddenlie poore"[27] and historians like Keith Thomas to mark witchcraft as "an explanation of failure"[28]—it is important, still, to understand these local beliefs within the larger attitudes that linked witchcraft to social disorder. For individuals, families, and communities, witches were not remote entities; their existence was not detached from the daily lives of common citizens. Instead, the hazards posed to locals were palpable as the threat of witchcraft loomed over the domestic sphere.

The dangers of witchcraft were understood to stretch past the threat to domestic order and threaten the socio-political stability of European countries and city-states. While the majority of witch trials focused on evils that can be read as small and local—the maiming of a neighbor, the murder of cattle, the stillbirth of a child—, occasional high-profile events turned the public's attention not only to the capacity of individual witches to impact political, religious, and civic leaders, but also to the greater notion that witches were in league with one another to destabilize socio-political institutions. In his introduction to the 1928 edition of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Reverend Montague Summers framed witchcraft as "a vast political movement, an organized society which was anti-social and anarchical, a world-wide plot against civilization."[29] Summers' insistence on a "world-wide plot" reflects Early Modern voices increasingly aware and alarmed at the growing number of witchcraft's nonnormative members. For instance, the Bishop of Salisbury, John Jewel, asserted in 1559 that "the number of witches and sorcerers had everywhere become enormous" and even in the span of a few years their ranks had "marvelously increased."[30] Similarly, Sir Edmund Anderson, Chief Justice under Queen Elizabeth, emphasized

---

[27] Scot's criticism appears in Book XII as he systematically works to refute the perceived belief of charms and incantations. Reginald Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft, Wherein the lewde dealing of witches and witchmongers is notablie detected…all latelie written by Reginald Scot Esquire* (London, 1584), 221.

[28] Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 644.

[29] Rev. Montague Summers, Introduction to *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. and with Introductions, Bibliography, and Notes by The Reverend Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), xviii.

[30] Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 541.

in 1602 that witches "abound in all places" and that their growth would "in short time overrun the whole land."[31] It is worth noting here the half century difference in these two extremely similar pieces of evidence; regardless of the reality of an increase in discovery and persecution of witches between these years, the shared sentiment indicates the continually prominent perception that witches were a growing force that threatened social order.

Furthermore, Summers' description of a "plot against civilization" should be understood as two competing but simultaneous threads. First, this danger to civilization was framed as an attempt by those with little power to disrupt systems of authority. It was thought that many witches were recruited from susceptible groups in rural areas that lacked education and suffered from poverty. This threat, then, was seen as the potential enactment from many fringe players in an attempt to destabilize the socio-political center. Quite contrary to this, but a theory that occurred concurrently, was the notion that witches had infiltrated the highest echelons of socio-political power and threatened a sophisticated undermining of hierarchical order from its center. Looking specifically at the numerous witch trials in France and the anti-witchcraft writings of jurist and philosopher Jean Bodin, Summers maintains that witches "maintained a relentless and ruthless war against the prevailing order and settled state" due to their complex organization that controlled "centers and cells in every district, utilizing an espionage in every land, with high-placed adherents at court, [and] with humble servitors" in every cottage.[32] Witchcraft's "plot against civilization," then, could take multiple forms. While the rhetoric used to describe the threat could at moments vary, the target remained consistent.

---

[31] C. L'Estrange Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism: A Concise Account Derived from Sworn Depositions and Confessions Obtained in the Courts of England and Wales* (London: Heath Cranton Limited, 1933), 127.
[32] Summers, Introduction to *The Malleus Maleficarum*, vii.

Regardless of whether witches were framed as fringe actors or centrally positioned conspirators, the threat of witchcraft on socio-political order was tangible. Jean Bodin, from whom Summers draws heavily, can be read as a leading voice on the substantial threat posed by witches to the state. While historically noted for voicing toleration for the coexistence of multiple religious groups within the commonwealth as well as support for the dismantling of slavery,[33] Bodin's fervent push against witchcraft was not framed as protecting Catholicism but, instead, as recognizing that witches threatened all socio-political institutions equally. Instead of calling up religious prosecutors, Bodin argued that the state needed to address this threat; otherwise, it made itself susceptible to the evils of witchcraft. He called on princes to discover and punish all witches and warned that those "who let the witches escape, or who do not punish them with the utmost rigor, may rest assured that they will be abandoned by God to the mercy of the witches."[34] He goes on to warn that this abandonment by God will lead to a state that will "be scourged with pestilences, famines, and wars."[35] While Bodin's warning might seem dire, it was received within a culture predisposed to imagine witchcraft as the antithesis to religious and political regulation as well as normative, quotidian life, which threatened to disrupt one's way of life.

The fear proselytized by Bodin took concrete shape through high profile attempts on religious and political leaders. For instance, a widely publicized assassination attempt of Pope Urban VIII shocked the masses when it was discovered in 1633. Giacinto Centini, nephew to

---

[33] It is interesting to note that Bodin's argument against slavery mirrors many contemporary arguments against the permanently damaging relationship created through witchcraft. Just as Satan was seen to distort and corrupt the hearts and minds of those who serve him and who can never be truly happy or safe again—see the argument by William Perkins on page ###of this essay##—Bodin argues that slavery similarly corrupts one's character. Arguing that "there is nothing that doth more discourage and ouerthrow, (and if I may so say) a[nd] bastardise a good and noble mind, than seruitude," Bodin uses similar anti-witchcraft rhetoric in his opposition to slavery. See Jean Bodin, *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale,* trans. Richard Knolles (London: Impensis G. Bishop, 1606), 46.

[34] Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700*, 215.

[35] Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700*, 215.

cardinal Felice Centini, was tried along with seven other conspirators for the use of witchcraft to murder and usurp the papal office. In April 1635, twenty thousand gathered in St. Peter's and the surrounding area to hear about how Centini had learned through a fortune teller that his uncle would become the next pope and how the accused had put forward a plan for Urban VIII's untimely death.[36] This sensational plan, which involved an abjuration ceremony, books of necromancy and wax statuettes of Pope Urban, and skilled accomplices who had knowledge on how to call upon devils to achieve their goal, was evidence that witchcraft not only threatened the souls of those that turned their backs on God but the stability of the world's most powerful religious institution.[37] Indeed, what had begun with the questionable use of a horoscope, or "white magic," stoked personal ambitions that led to the potentially destabilizing use of necromancy, or "black magic."

This scandalous use of witchcraft was not the first time that the news of witches targeting positions of power had reached the ears of citizens across Europe. In Scotland, a high-profile witch trial in 1590 of North Berwick witchcraft exposed a ring of *maleficium* that had threatened the safety of King James VI. Sailing home with his new wife, Anne of Denmark, King James' ship was wracked with storms that threatened not only to end James' life but also to disrupt the Scottish monarchy. When accused, the witches in North Berwick admitted to the attempted regicide through a frightening description of power in which they created a "winde contrarye and altogither against his Maiestie." Just as witches could manipulate environmental forces to destroy crops, this same power revealed its capacity to target individuals for political ends. Then, in what can be interpreted as repentant or simply conciliatory, they acknowledged that their

---

[36] Peter Rietbergen, *Power and Religion in Baroque Rome: Barberini Cultural Policies* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006), 349.

[37] For more details on the assassination attempt including thorough descriptions of the types of witchcraft used, see Rietbergen, *Power and Religion in Baroque Rome*, 336-376.

witchcraft had only failed because of James' strong faith, declaring that "his Maiestie had neuer come safelye from the Sea, if his faith had not preuailed aboue their ententions."[38] While the true nature of this episode should certainly be read with skepticism as it bids to label James as a beacon of faithful virtue, for the wider public it reads as a realization of Bodin's fears; the dangers of witchcraft extended past individual consequences and threatened socio-political stability.

In addition to specific threats to political destabilization, witchcraft was widely perceived as a gendered threat to social cohesion and prevailing patriarchal values. The Early Modern period witnessed the development of increasingly rigid gender norms which produced social hierarchies; men befitted from improved labor opportunities as well as new social and legal privileges that continued to relegate women into the domestic sphere where they could be controlled by their husbands and fathers.[39] Witchcraft, then, was largely seen as a set of nonnormative practices that worked to undermine the established authority of men within both the home and the state. Furthermore, this broad threat to social cohesion can help explain why the preponderance of accused and executed witches were female; scholarly consensus roughly estimates around 75-80% of accused witches were female.

Witchcraft threatened to use the power of Satan to invert social order and daily way of life. To illustrate this danger, the clergyman Thomas Cooper, in his 1617 *The Mystery of Witch-Craft*, warned that witches—specifically framed as female—would use Satan's power to invert social hierarchies and create a world turned upside down. He argued that witchcraft was a "plaine *usurpation* of the *diuine office,* and a flat perversion and disgracing of the *diuine*

---

[38] *Newes from Scotland, Declaring the Damnable life and death of Doctor Fian, a notable Sorcerer, who was burned at Edenbrough in Ianuary last. 1591,* (London: for William Wright, 1592).

[39] For more on the social and legal developments of women from the late-Medieval to Early Modern periods, see Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch.* Second, revised edition (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2014), 21-131.

Prouidēce."[40] In other words, Cooper expressed the popular belief that witches were intent on taking control of positions of power within the state, the papacy, and the household and, thus, reversing social structures. Acknowledging the presence of male witches as "suitable" given men's fitting aspirations and ability to command, Cooper later notes that most witches were women as they were "usually more ambitious and desirous of Soueraignety [sic]" and as they were "bound to subjection."[41] Cooper, then, framed witches as a potent threat to social order through recognizing women's diminished position within the prevailing patriarchal system.

Popular imagery was repeatedly employed to instill the threatening possibility of an inverted social order. Images depicting nudity and witches riding on top of demonic animals worked to reinforce social anxieties around sexual independence from men. Furthermore, the prevalent inclusion of domestic instruments and activities, such as cauldron pots and cooking, that were used to serve maleficent ends worked to further illustrate the threat of witchcraft to patriarchal norms. This ubiquitous repetition of artistic motifs, as Charles Zika has argued, reflected "a female grab for power" in which the inverted nature of witchcraft aspired for "the collapse of the gender order upon which the powers of church and society rest."[42] Echoing Zika's analysis, Viviana Comensoli's investigation into the social dynamics of the period's domestic sphere reflected a widespread perception of the witch as a "signifier of female insubordination" and the "inversion of the ideal Protestant wife, whose insubordination overturns the orderly household and, by extension, the social order."[43] Similarly, Christina Larner has succinctly argued that the figure of the witch became synonymous with an "independent adult woman who

---

[40] Thomas Cooper, *The Mystery of Witch-Craft: Discouering, the truth, nature, occasions, growth and power thereof* (London: Printed by Nicholas Okes, 1617), 158.
[41] Cooper, *The Mystery of Witch-Craft*, 181, 205.
[42] Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft*, 13, 15.
[43] Viviana Comensoli, *'Household business': Domestic Plays of Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 113.

does not conform to the male idea of proper female behavior."[44] Taken together, these

impressions of witchcraft help us to understand witches as harbingers of social disorder that

threatened both the household and body politic.

Importantly, witchcraft's threat to patriarchal values and social cohesion was intricately

tied to a larger threat to economic development. Just as witches stoked fears that they might

induce impotency in men and animals or injure or kill newborns, it was feared that they might

cripple population growth through empowering women to reclaim sexual agency and

independence. Noting a marked, regressive shift in female agency that occurs "as soon as

women's control over reproduction seemed to pose a threat to economic and social stability,"[45]

Silvia Federici interrogates the parallel rise of witch-hunts and capitalism. Using a feminist lens

to push back against Marx, Federici argues that the primitive accumulation of capitalism was not

limited to enclosures and the slave-trade but also included the subjugation of women's

reproductive capabilities. Barred from most forms of wage-labor, Federici notes that the

burgeoning capitalist system reinforced patriarchal values to confine women to their homes and

take possession of their reproductive labor. In this way, Federici concludes, "the construction of

a new patriarchal order, making of the women the servants of the male work-force, was a major

aspect of capitalist development."[46] Federici's intersectional argument can help us to understand

the dire threat that witchcraft posed to patriarchal values and social cohesion. In a symbolic

sense, witchcraft threatened gendered norms and conjured ideas of a world turned upside down

in which women dominated the household and state. This symbolic fear, however, operated

alongside a much more tangible fear that the spread of witchcraft as an ideological system could

---

[44] Christina Larner, "Was Witch-Hunting Woman-Hunting?" in *The Witchcraft Reader*, ed. Darren Oldridge (London: Routledge, 2002), 273.
[45] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch.* Second, revised edition (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2014), 40.
[46] Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 115.

empower women to usurp their own reproductive agency, endanger population growth, and produce less labor and income. Witchcraft, then, threatened the "proper" function of both the household and state. These examples, ranging from politically driven assassination attempts to challenges to gendered norms, demonstrate that the threat to social order extended far beyond individuals, livestock, and rural communities. Just as witchcraft had the ability to disrupt domestic functions, it was seen as powerful enough to threaten the very institutions that governed people's lives.

Yet, perhaps most frightening of all was the threat of witchcraft to cosmological order. Surpassing the threat to local communities and socio-political institutions, witchcraft threatened a holy war to plunge the world in darkness. Unsurprisingly, given the strength of religious institutions in Early Modern Europe and witches' perceived partnership with Satan, witchcraft's threat to social order was intricately tied to religion and spirituality. This spiritual threat of witchcraft was not simply a personal one in which an individual soul was lost to the machinations of the Devil and the eternal torments of hell. Certainly, this private threat of Satan on individual lives would have been a major concern for pastors and neighbors alike as they worried about the well-being of members of their community. However, this personal threat was eclipsed by what was perceived as a larger religious threat against all of society. Witches became increasingly framed not just as outliers committing religious heresy but as collaborative agents of Satan in his deliberate attempt to wage war on all of humanity.

The severity of this looming threat was explicated in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and echoed by religious leaders through the Early Modern period. In its instigating Papal Bull as well as the handbook itself, the *Malleus* intentionally used language that positioned the existence of witchcraft as a threat to society as a whole. Although locating witchcraft as a peripheral activity,

159

Pope Innocent VIII's Bull positions the threat of witchcraft as dangerous to city centers. Fearing the encroachment of witches as dangerous to the center of normative society, he gives license to expunge these people and practices from the fringes of civilized life so that the "foulest abomination" and "filthiest excesses" may be "driven far from the frontiers and bournes of the Faithful" and do not become a "cause of scandal and danger to very many."[47] Witches, here, are labeled as frightening outliers who, importantly, do not simply infect themselves with their sacrilegious decisions but serve as a threat to the great many across Europe. Within the handbook itself, the authors work to convince their readers that this threat is both novel and serious. Rather than link witchcraft to historically evil characters or frame the threat of witches as similar to competing faiths, Kramer and Sprenger labor to describe their current enemy as something far more nefarious and threatening; not only could witchcraft stealthily and unsuspectingly creep into one's village, but, they argued, "the evils which are perpetrated by modern witches exceed all other sin which God has ever permitted to be done."[48] The *Malleus*, then, endeavored not only to demonstrate the potential threat of witches upon the whole society but also to frame that threat as something far more ominous than anything previously seen in humanity.

While this notion of a diabolical plot to corrupt humanity was present within the works of early inquisitors and the *Malleus Maleficarum*, this threat of religious warfare gained momentum in the sixteenth century as the witch craze swelled across Europe. In northern Italy, after reviewing what appears to be a substantial archive of no longer extant Inquisition documents, a certain Bernardo da Como came to the frightening conclusion that "there was a conspiracy in

---

[47] Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, xliii.
[48] Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 74.

action, an underground attack on the one true religion guided by the devil."[49] This attack, framed as both deliberate and conscious, was seen to advance what the population of Europe knew the devil was capable of and to position this warfare as already underway. Similarly, Nicolas Rémy, reflecting on witchcraft after a long career as a jurist and counsellor to the Duke of Lorraine, argued in his *Demonolatry* that the Devil, who appears both in tangible form and internalized visions, was actively seducing his victims and recruiting witches for his legion to battle the faithful. Rémy noted that Satan was not only capable of perverting an individual by "burrowing into their very hearts" but warned of a larger plot by which the Devil would appear openly and declare warfare with the purpose "of deceiving and destroying mankind."[50] Comparing the increase of witchcraft to Satan's temptation of Christ in the wilderness, Rémy argued that through both enticing tricks and fearful threats, humanity had reached a pivotal moment in which Satan was building his forces against those that resisted him.[51] Echoing Rémy's warning, the Puritan cleric William Perkins endeavored to show how witches were used as tools of the Devil's onslaught against humanity. In his sermons, many of which were published posthumously, Perkins argued that witches were "the right hand of the deuill, by which he taketh and detroyeth the soules of men."[52] Seemingly unable to operate alone, Satan enlisted others to join his cause in order not only to take the souls of his volunteers but to create havoc for those that opposed him. It was this collaboration between witches and Satan and their perceived threat to the rest of humanity that led Perkins to conclude that even the penitent witch should never be pardoned. Seeing as how it was through the confederacy of witches that thousands of others were at risk of

---

[49] "*Dunque, la conclusione possible era una sola: che fosse in atto un complotto, un attacco sotterraneo alla vera religione guidato dal diavolo.*" Adriano Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza: Inquisitori, confessori, missionari* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1996), 387.

[50] Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700*, 237, 236.

[51] Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700*, 237-246.

[52] William Perkins, *A discourse of the damned art of witchcraft: so farre forth as it is reuealed in the Scriptures, and manifest by true experience* (Cambridge: Cantrel Legge, 1608), 256.

being harmed or cajoled by the Devil, even the remorseful witch deserved to die. He argued that "their present ungodly practices haue prepared them already to this cursed trade, and may bring them in time to be the ranckest Witches that can be."[53] In other words, simply having the knowledge gained through an association with witchcraft positioned one as a present and future threat to all others; a threat that could not be allowed to exist in any capacity. The knowledge of witchcraft, then, became a threat to local communities, governing institutions, and the entire cosmological order.

The threat of witchcraft, thus, extended far beyond a fear of personal harm. While this was certainly within the realm of a witch's capability, the threat of witchcraft was viewed both more broadly and more dangerously as a looming threat to social order. Witches threatened to disrupt the domestic sphere, socio-political stability, and the larger cosmological order through their entanglement with the nefarious powers of Satan. While the practices of witchcraft varied across spatial and temporal terrains, witches themselves were identified as the antithesis of structured society. They were seen as the embodied threat to various levels of social order from the quotidian to the spiritual. Existing on the fringes of society while threatening to infect its center, witchcraft was viewed as a truly unprecedented danger in Early Modern society.

The Pleasures and Threats of Watching Witchcraft

An abundance of attention has been paid here concerning the perceived threats and dangers of witchcraft in Early Modern Europe in the hopes of establishing the larger social environment within which theatrical performances of witchcraft occurred. While it is difficult for modern readers or playgoers to fully realize how great a sense of social anxiety revolved around

---

[53] Perkins, *A discourse of the damned art of witchcraft*, 171.

the looming presence of witches, it is indeed necessary to place ourselves in the center of this historic apprehension in order to appreciate the risks and pleasures associated with incorporating *maleficium* in theatres.

These worlds of real witches and staged witchcraft were intimately intertwined. The stage performances attempted to bring the hidden performances of witchcraft—those demonic interactions, incantations, and conjurations—that existed on the fringes of society into the city centers for spectators to enjoy. What was done in secret and could previously only be experienced through an individual's imagination took corporeal form to become a tangible, ontic experience in the theatre; abstract ideas and gossiping hearsay took shape through physical gestures and aural cues. For those sitting in the theatre, we can easily imagine the excitement of forbidden material spurring a frisson of thrilling captivation. However, in bringing reenactments of witchcraft onto the stage, playwrights, actors, and theatre companies also brought the *threats* of witchcraft along with them. No longer could the possibility of physical harm or social disruption through *maleficium* be a remote threat, located in rural villages or in the pages of broadsheets and pamphlets; instead, the threat of witchcraft was repositioned as one that was intimately close to its interlocutors and able to easily be seen, heard, and potentially even reached out and touched. The presence of witches, conjured devils, and a host of varied demonic subjects on stage, then, presented audiences with the opportunity to experience spectatorial risk as they got dangerously close to those forbidden actions that threatened Early Modern European society.

If *actual* witchcraft was perceived as a dangerous and efficacious means of engaging with demonic forces, the *performance* of witchcraft allowed spectators to get as close as possible while still enjoying the protections afforded by the edge of the stage. However, even the

distancing effect of the Early Modern stage was tenuous and subject to slippages as the line between actors and audience was often unstable and porous. Here, proximity is important to understanding the comingling of pleasure and danger for audience members. Audiences were drawn to these performances of witchcraft as it placed the threat of witches up close and on display; a voyeuristic pleasure occurs as spectators consume the mimetic enactment of nefarious deeds. Simultaneously, a dangerous risk existed for audiences as their close proximity to witchcraft had the potential to *implicate* them in the larger threat and power signified by these witches' actions. Those in attendance found themselves not just witnessing the religious and social crimes that made witches notorious social outliers but intertwined in the larger social threat that witches posed to society. They channeled their gaze and energies into the witches' *maleficium* through their attentiveness; they were complicit in wanting to witness demonic conjurings without speaking up to protest; they risked reciting common incantations along with the witches onstage; they might have even begun to empathize with the plight of individual witches. Whereas the wrongdoings of witchcraft previously existed only in the creeping shadows of society, dangerously lurking in secret behind closed doors and drawn curtains, suddenly, audiences were thrust into actually experiencing the encroaching world of looming witches and diabolical machinations. The threats of witchcraft were no longer seen as remote and isolated but immediate and commonly shared amongst all interlocutors present for a given performance. In this way, spectators became *complicit* in the gestures performed, incantations spoken, demons conjured, and *maleficium* enacted. Audiences did not simply view these staged activities passively; instead, their very presence, attention, and engagement positioned them as interlocutors in the very actions deemed socially destructive and penalized by death.

This simultaneous experience of pleasure and danger created a unique mode of spectatorial risk for audience members. Again, drawing on Stephen Lyng's theory of edgework in which risks are framed as valuable *experiences* that pose a "threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence,"[54] spectators of witchcraft enjoyed a manner of risk that reflected the dangerous events portrayed on stage. If witchcraft was perceived as dangerously anarchic and chaotic, antithetical to the constrained, normative society prescribed by institutional powers, its staged representations offered interlocutors the chance to stand at the edges between order and disorder and experience for themselves the world in a new way.

The threat present in the spectatorial risk of witchcraft, however, is different than that of our previously discussed modes produced by English boy actors and the commedia dell'arte. Whereas the externalized unpredictability of boy actors produced a risk to form and convention and the improvisational and risqué commedia enabled spectators to risk experiencing a nonnormative interaction between society and morality, both of these modes of spectatorial risk produced an event in which audiences witnessed alternative structures and ways of negotiating social and institutional norms. With performances of witchcraft, however, spectators are not simply asked to *witness* something in front of them but to actually *take part* in the live event. Spectators not only experienced a different way of engaging with the world via proxy, but by their proximity at the live event, they became implicated in the events on stage. In this way, performances of witchcraft offered audiences a unique spectatorial risk to self, whereby interlocutors became part of the threat, part of the danger, and part of the secret pact of witches. In other words, spectators risked their very lives and souls as *watching* these performances was very near to actually *practicing* witchcraft itself.

---

[54] Stephen Lyng, "Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking," *American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 4 (1990): 857.

Perhaps this blurring of observation and performance can be elucidated by a modern example outside of the world of theatre. Take, for instance, my own experiences as a child playing with friends at sleepovers with a Ouija board—a game that bridges the world of play with the paranormal. During an attempt to communicate with spirits, which is both the game's purpose and its looming threat, let's say an unnatural presence revealed itself (which never actually happened both to our great disappointment and relief). In this case, the efficacious experience cannot solely be pinned on whoever happened to have had their fingers on the board nor whoever chose to speak at the "right" moment; instead, responsibility was shared as all interlocuters—both those speaking and doing as well as those sitting nearby watching and listening—were involved in the game's results. In this case, simply by being present at the event, allowing the game to occur without protest and witnessing from the sidelines, made all of us implicated in whatever outcome might occur. Just as enjoyment was shared by all, so too would responsibility be communal *if* something were to happen. The communal nature of the activity, then, distributed responsibility to all.

Similar to modern day Ouija boards, Early Modern performances of witchcraft are noteworthy in their capacity to directly involve and implicate all interlocutors in both excitement and danger. In both observing play (in the form of a Ouija board game) and watching a play (in the form of staged drama), the experience, as Henry Bial reminds us in his analysis of play theory, "demands risks and promises rewards that may have consequences for our everyday lives."[55] Indeed, just as a Ouija board could put someone in communication with spirits, performances of witchcraft thrilled and threatened spectators with the possibility of intimate knowledge or experiences related to the occult. Just as my own boyhood experience playing with

---

[55] Henry Bial, "Play," in *The Performance Studies Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2007), 135.

a Ouija board combined both fear and hope that something *might* happen—that our attempt at witchcraft would have proved efficacious—, a similar mixture of fear of hope enticed Early Modern audiences. Performances of witchcraft were alluring to audiences due to their capacity to offer excitement and apprehension through the possibility of actual, if accidental, conjuration. This allure, furthermore, can be read as a dangerous hope in spectators. They *hoped* that someone might happen and were relieved when it did not. They arrived at the theatre enticed to see and hear what they knew they should not. Truly, simply by attending the theatre, audiences toed the line between what was socially acceptable and religiously damnable. Their presence, then, implicated themselves in the larger social threat of witchcraft and placed themselves at risk for being connected to those same heresies and crimes that prompted executions outside the theatre's walls. Importantly, this self-implication into the world of witchcraft was multifaceted; audiences were driven into taking indirect part in proscribed activities through the communal nature of both witch covens and theatre, through the blurred lines between efficacy and entertainment on the Early Modern stage, and through the instructional capacity of representation to teach tangible practices.

Audiences became associated with the communal nature of witchcraft simply through attending the theatre. Although some representations of witches focused on isolated individuals—a lone entity secretly practicing magic at home—, Early Modern witchcraft was innately tied to concepts of communal action and community. As their ability to threaten religious and political institutions demonstrates, witchcraft was perceived as a group activity; indeed, while an individual witch might be identified, it was understood that they operated within a larger, collective system of witches. This notion of witches' collectivity gained momentum through popular witchcraft iconography of the early sixteenth century. Following on the heels of

the prominent *Malleus Maleficarum* and responding to the popular sensation it spurred, artists set about visually depicting witchcraft for further consumption. While several popular motifs of witchcraft were solidified during this time—the use of cauldrons, flying on cooking forks and brooms, disheveled hair, and demonic copulation—, art historian Charles Zika argues that the variety of dominant visual codes all worked to emphasize the key notion that witches acted as a group.[56] Tracing the lineage of witchcraft in Early Modern art, Zika notes how earlier representations of lone witches are increasingly replaced by witches engaged in group activities: reciting and practicing together, dancing together, eating together, and even being tried and hanged together. For example, an early popular work that propagated witchcraft as a collective endeavor was Hans Baldung Grien's *A Group of Female Witches* (Figure 9). This woodcut, loaded with symbolism to mark witches' perceived threats to society,[57] is dominated by the collection of six female witches working in unison. Rather than independently practicing spells, Baldung's witches are seen operating in an entangled fashion. While one witch is seen stirring the cauldron and cracking open the lid to release a wave of smoke, another witch behind her holds up embers under the genitals of a goat, causing him to fly through the air so a third witch can scoop the brew into her small pot. Furthermore, the labor of the three witches seated around the centered cauldron produces a powerful steam that propels the sixth witch—barely discernable behind the steam—through the night sky. The woodcut highlights the emerging notion of witchcraft and various witch covens as a communal, interconnected society.

---

[56] Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft*, 1, 13-14.

[57] Numerous visual codes are layered within Baldung's image to indicate symbolically the multitude of ways witchcraft threated Early Modern society. One can note the skulls of man and beast in the lower left to signify potential physical harm at the hands of these witches; a cooking fork on the left is balancing several sausages to imply flaccid penises and the witches' ability to frustrate intercourse, reproduction, and masculinity; the plumes of smoke that rise from a cauldron float up like a tidal wave to suggest powers over manipulating nature and weather; a witch rides backwards on a goat to symbolize not only sacrilegious copulation with the Devil but also an inverted mode of sexual intercourse in which the dominant woman is seen asserting power and control as she mounts and rides an emasculated man.

Figure 9. Hans Baldung Grien. *A Group of Female Witches.* 1510. From the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The perception of the communal nature of witchcraft was both reflected by and reaffirmed

through large scale witch trials. Understanding that witches operated collectively primed the

public for what Brian P. Levack describes as a "communal anxiety" within both urban and rural

areas.[58] If a society of witches indeed existed right under a village's nose, Levack argued that it

would often only take a religious sermon, a new demonological treatise, or a bad harvest to

prompt a widespread witch-hunt. Witch-hunts, and subsequent witch-trials, were typically large-

scale events and rarely featured a single defendant. Instead, torturous confession techniques,

coupled with a locality's anxiety about the possible existence of numerous offenders, led to

plentiful accusations and multiple-defendant trials in an attempt to target the entire collection of

witches. For instance, if we return to Essex outside London, the site where witches Joan Cunny

and her ilk were tried and hanged as detailed in this chapter's introduction, it is important to note

that there were four witches tried at that hearing and not just Cunny. For this 1589 witch-trail,

the group nature of the witchcraft becomes immediately evident through the pamphlet's

frontispiece (Figure 10). Rather than focusing on a single witch, the image clearly identifies a

group of witches; one witch is seated in the foreground with three additional witches sentenced

and hanged in the background. In addition to showing a cause-and-effect relationship in which

demonic acts produce execution, the frontispiece reminds viewers that wherever one witch is

uncovered, still others are surely behind. Furthermore, reflecting the belief in witchcraft as both

widespread and collective, this trial was just one of many as magistrates in the county

continually worked to eradicate what was believed to be the entire coven that existed within their

jurisdiction. Indeed, Elizabethan Essex identified 61 witches and noted that "no one lived more

than ten miles from a known cunning man."[59] Similarly, a "terrible and previously unheard of

---

[58] Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1987), 147-152.
[59] Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 294.

Figure 10. Frontispiece of *The Apprehension and confession of three notorious Witches. Arreigned and by Justice condemned and executed at Chelmes-forde, in the Countye of Essex.* London, 1589.

news report" in the western German town of Jülich identified more than 300 women in 1591 who made a pact with the devil, transformed themselves into wolves, and killed men, children, and cattle; of these, 85 were punished with death by fire in a sweeping execution.[60] Again, a similar attempt to root out groups of witches occurred in Italy, albeit slightly earlier as the heyday of Italian witch-hunts occurred in the early sixteenth century before the Counter Reformation shifted inquisitional strategies and targets away from witchcraft and towards anything considered in line with Protestantism. Reflecting on the mass witch-hunts in the northern Italian city of

---

[60] Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft*, 185.

Como, the inquisitor Bartolomeo Spina noted the vast presence of large groups of witches across

Italy. Spina explained how "in only the one diocese of Como, every year the number of witches

processed by the Inquisition…reached one thousand and those condemned to death surpassed

one hundred."[61] While this final example might seem to feature a fair degree of exaggeration,

these examples from Essex, Jülich, and Como all indicate a growing and wider belief in the

formulation of witches as existing in a group context. Images like Baldung's *A Group of Female*

Witches taught spectators that witches not only organized as a group but that their threatening

power came from their collectivity. These examples of large-scale witch-hunts and trials also

indicate how magistrates and villagers alike could not be satisfied with identifying a single witch

when their accomplices were certainly nearby as well.

If it was widely believed that witches operated as a group, then both a pleasure and risk

existed on the Early Modern stage by positioning audience members as temporary collaborators

for performances of witchcraft. This framing of spectators as collaborators occurred via a two-

step process. First, the play enacted on stage presented a single witch, or even a small group of

magic users, involved in some portrayal of witchcraft. Then, the spectators, directing their gaze

to the locus of communal activity and engaging with both the narrative and theatricality on stage,

are reframed from passive observers to participatory members of the rest of the witches' cohort.

Through being physically near to forbidden actions, audiences are asked not only to witness what

is in front of them but participate in its enaction through comprising the remainder of the

organization of witchcraft. This participation is realized through both an understanding of

witchcraft and the staged narrative. As witchcraft relied on collectivity to become efficacious,

---

[61] "*nella sola diocesi di Como ogni anno il numero delle streghe processate dall'inquisitore e dai suoi vicari, i quali erano otto o dieci e anche più, raggiungeva il migliaio, e le condanne a morte erano oltre un centinaio.*" Giuseppe Bonomo, *Caccia alle streghe: la credenza nelle streghe dal secolo XIII al XIX con particolare riferimento all'Italia* (Palermo: Palumbo, 1959), 143.

and as many tragic narratives frame witchcraft as real, tangible, and destructive, audiences are left with the knowledge that the witches' effectiveness might have partly been due to their engagement as part of the wicked group.

This move from passive onlooker to engaged, but indirect, participant is not a large jump for Early Modern spectatorship. Analyzing the increased use of staged games such as cards and backgammon during this period, Gina Bloom explores how ludic theatricality led audiences to becoming skilled theatre-goers. In both a game of cards and theatrical action, Bloom argues that passive observation was steadily replaced with the notion that entertainment was "an interactive medium that demands cognitive, emotional, and embodied engagement from its participants."[62] The attentiveness with which an interlocutor commits their mind, body, and emotions when their livelihood is up in the air while gambling is the same that one brings to the theatre as both experiences lead to "an epistemological stake in the action."[63] Theatre, then, engaged audiences with the same tenacity as a game in which one has wagered money. Bloom's analytical connection between ludic activities and the theatre indicate that Early Modern audiences certainly had the practice for spectatorial engagement. When it comes to performances of witchcraft, one should not only recognize this development of a spectator's responsibility to cognitively, emotionally, and physically engage, but also account for *increased* engagement as the material on stage reflected widespread social anxieties. As witches operated as a group, the assemblage of audience members comprised an active collection of participants whose anxieties and curiosities played out before them.

---

[62] Gina Bloom, "Games," in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 192.
[63] Bloom, "Games," 192.

Spectators did not only focus their attention onto the stage, offering themselves as engaged participants; they also operated in conjunction with the performance space to orient their bodies to the service of witchcraft's *maleficium*. Both through sharing a physical location and orienting their bodies towards the on-stage action, audiences took part in the collective stage image that was constituted through the assemblage of disparate components—set, actors, audience, dialogue, costumes, music. While these spectators did not wear costumes nor speak lines, their energy focused on a single product on stage. Spectators added to the overall power and effect of staged representations as they became not just onlookers but cast as extras in the given performance. Jacalyn Royce, investigating the development of naturalistic acting during this period, explores how staging techniques helped actors interact with spectators and led audiences to function as part of the performance. Especially focused on the common thrust stage design of Elizabethan and Jacobean London, Royce notes how audiences literally surrounded the action and were often called upon directly to contribute to narrative action, "becoming Richmond's troops when he exhorted them to overthrow Richard III, and Roman citizens when Mark Antony addressed them at Julius Caesar's memorial."[64] Especially noteworthy for our purposes here, Royce briefly discusses how this blurring of audience and participant could have dangerous consequences as exemplified in *Macbeth* when the Weird Sisters implicated the audience in their binding spell. As binding spells were traditionally understood to be enacted in a circle, spectators watched as the Weird Sisters joined hands and danced around in a circle reciting their spell and finally concluding that "the charm's wound up" (1.3.38)[65] before encountering Macbeth in the forest. The audience did not simply watch as the witches laid their

---

[64] Jacalyn Royce, "Early Modern Naturalistic Acting: The Role of the Globe in the Development of Personation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, ed. Richard Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 492.
[65] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992).

trap for Macbeth but, as they created a second circle of engaged participants around the witches, they were guided into being part of the spell's creation. Indeed, if you include the additional circle fashioned from the architectural design of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, that makes "three concentric circles—the one drawn on stage, the audience itself, and the walls of the building— [that] physically reinforce the words of the spell."[66] The audience's physical placement, then, works to implicate spectators by positioning them as additional members of the witches' group. While this certainly produces pleasure at the opportunity to witness these nefarious acts up close, spectators also experience a risk to themselves through their culpability in staged *maleficium*. Their presence and directional gaze supported the performance of witchcraft on stage.

In addition to being physically complicit in performances of witchcraft—their corporeal presence associating themselves as members of the witches' collective—, spectators were also implicated as part of the social network of witchcraft by being asked to enjoy the demonstration of magic and spells framed as remarkable entertainment. While social norms might prescribe witnesses of witchcraft to shun or condemn these practices as dangerous or sacrilegious, audiences become incriminated by performances of these same actions as they spark a sense of pleasure from their viewing and reorient witchcraft from anti-religious perversion to a satisfaction of curiosity and entertainment. Rather than permitting the audience to remain disapproving outsiders, the invitation to enjoy witchcraft as entertainment connects the interlocutor to the larger group of witches. For instance, while Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is rife with witchcraft, its magical wedding ceremony masque is perhaps the most direct appeal for spectators to positively engage with representations of magic. Eliciting help from his spirits, Prospero sets out to "bestow upon the eyes" of the newlyweds—and all spectators—an enticing

---

[66] Royce, "Early Modern Naturalistic Acting," 492.

display of his "art" (4.1.43).[67] Audience members are asked to fully turn their attention to the stage to enjoy the spectacle put on before them as Prospero commands: "No tongue. All eyes. Be silent" (4.1.66). For spectators, there could be no hesitation to the appropriateness of this witchcraft. If an individual was uncertain as to whether this elaborate spectacle of witchcraft should be censured or praised, Fernando breaks up the magical performance with his judgement that "this is a most majestic vision, and harmonious charmingly" (4.1.131-132). *The Tempest*'s wedding masque, then, leaves no room to waver on its appropriateness as it intentionally urges audiences to view the spectacle with pleasure.

If *The Tempest* asked audiences to view the use of magic positively, Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* asked them to cheer on the magic-users themselves by reframing them not as nefarious practitioners of the occult but as dedicated and talented Englishmen. In Greene's play, a history set in the early thirteenth century, a magical contest is staged between the English court wizards Friar Bungay and Friar Bacon and the court wizard of the Holy Roman Empire, Jaques Vandermast. Portrayed as disrespectful and arrogant, Vandermast fosters scorn with audience members by belittling the state of English learning; when asked about his tour of Oxford, Vandermast responds that the buildings are wonderous "but for the doctors, how that they be learnèd, It may be meanly, for aught I can hear" (9.11-12).[68] After defeating Friar Bungay in a magic contest by summoning the spirit of Hercules, Vandermast's magic is overpowered by Friar Bacon. Vandermast's spirit refuses to obey orders and attack Bacon, countering Vandermast's command with "See'st thou not great Bacon here, whose frown doth act more than thy magic can?" (9.136-7). A sense of nationalism comes into play here. Through

---

[67] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1994).

[68] Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington et. al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

framing Vandermast as an antagonistic outsider, spectators are asked to rally behind Friar Bacon

whose use of witchcraft is reframed as both English and skilled. Although witchcraft posed a

large social threat, it is reframed here into a skill set that is used to defend a national identity. In

addition, Bacon's magic is distanced from demonic intervention and reinterpreted as a trade or

craft that requires dedication and training. In this way, Richard Levin has even argued that

skilled demonstrations of magic corresponded to the rise of mercantilism that promoted the

ideals of rugged individualism and the self-made man that framed the Early Modern period.[69]

Through constructing the magic contest in nationalist and individualist terms, Greene asks

audiences to rally behind his magic-user, effectively allying spectators with the larger

organization of witchcraft.

Audiences were also implicated in the demonic powers of witchcraft through their

collective participation in the witch's fabled "Wild Ride." In its most elemental sense, the Wild

Ride describes an event in which witches ride through the sky on an enchanted object, usually a

domestic instrument such as a cooking fork or broom, or a demonic animal (Figure 9). As a

discursive tool for communicating the power of witchcraft harnessed through a relationship with

the Devil, it was believed that witches could cover great distances to meet up with one another or

to reach a designated meeting place appointed by Satan. These Wild Rides were not simply

imagined as a testament of power but as a group activity, recalling the folkloric Furious Hordes

and night battles, as members rode together to accomplish some malicious end.[70] Indeed, the

communal nature of these events was an essential characteristic that disregarded any debate as to

the actual possibility of flight. While the *Malleus Maleficarum* dismissed doubts about the reality

of Wild Rides as heresy as it "leaves out of account the Divine permission with regard to the

---

[69] Richard Levin, "My Magic Can Beat Your Magic," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 22 (2009): 205.
[70] Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft,* 106-115.

177

devil's power,"[71] clergy and skeptics alike casted doubt on the practice. The preacher Johann

Geiler von Kaisersberg, who published a variety of sermons on witchcraft, assessed that

individuals who thought they had taken part in the witches' Wild Ride simply suffered from a

rich imagination.[72] Similarly, the English skeptic Reginald Scot concluded that "in these matters

they do but dreame, and do not those things indeed, which they confesse through their

distemperature" as the events are "but meer illusions."[73] Regardless, however, of the plausibility

or particular style of ride, traveling to distant destinations via flying quickly became a hallmark

of witches' activity and a steady topic of the period's witch trials. This capacity for real or

imagined flight, furthermore, was characterized as a group activity; witches were thought to

either fly together as a group or separately in order to join a larger meeting for collective

practice.

Through the stage, spectators are implicated in the group nature of witchcraft by joining

the brigade and riding along with witches on their Wild Ride. For instance, in Marlowe's *Doctor

Faustus*, the audience accompanies the protagonist as he travels and sightsees across Europe.

Although Faustus enters in Act 3 and reflects on his journey that already occurred, his detailed

descriptions of flying through the sky offer audiences a phenomenological ride as Faustus'

language conjures images and experiences in spectators' eyes. Retroactively joining the

ensemble of witchcraft, audience members traverse the continent with Faustus, *remembering*

how they "passed with delight the stately town of Trier, environed round with airy

mountaintops," and saw "rich Campania, whose buildings, fair and gorgeous to the eye" (3.1.2-3,

9-10). Faustus even works to include every member of the audience by recalling how "*we* saw

---

[71] Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 104.
[72] Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft*, 105.
[73] Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft*, 44.

178

the river Maine fall into Rhine" as they skirted over France (3.1.7; emphasis added). Although

Faustus is speaking to Mephistopheles in this moment, the utilization of "we" works to include

all present interlocutors. Furthermore, audiences accompany Faustus on his trip to Italy to see

"the monuments and situation of bright splendent Rome" (3.1.47-48). Once again, Faustus

includes spectators in his entourage to the Vatican by commanding all in attendance, "Come,

therefore, let's away!" (3.1.46-49). As the witches' Wild Ride was thought by many to exist only

in the imagination—but perceived as equally dangerous to corporeal flight—, Marlowe's play

uses rich, descriptive language alongside first-person plural pronouns to bring audiences along to

experience the Wild Ride. Spectators are implicated in the illicit action onstage as their own

identity merges with the notions of witchcraft as a collective identity; audiences are, after all,

participating in activities that define witchcraft.

When analyzing how staged witchcraft incriminated spectators as members of a larger

group of witches, it is important always to remember the deadly consequences of that

involvement. Looming over that association was not only the perverse threat that witches posed

to society but the fatal punishment and eternal damnation that awaited those convicted of such

association. While it is difficult to ascertain an accurate total of cases and executions due to

witchcraft, most contemporary scholars estimate that around one hundred thousand women and

men were not only tried for witchcraft but likely tortured as a confession was the surest form of

conviction. Of these cases around half were put to death.[74] Witch-hunts, along with subsequent

trials, were public events that drew massive crowds for the spectacle of an execution. Even if an

individual missed these public trials, broadsheets and pamphlets disseminated images of the

events. For instance, the frontispiece of the 1589 witch-trials in Essex features the accused witch,

---

[74] Duni, *Under the Devil's Spell*, 3.

Joan Prentice, and her familiar, Bidd (Figure 14). The image is noteworthy not only for illustrating the Chelmsford witch-trial visually but for linking representations of witchcraft to their eventual, fatal outcome. The observer notes Prentice in the foreground of the image allowing her familiar to suck the blood from her cheek; in the background, the lifeless bodies of the three other witches on trial are already hanged. A clear cause and effect are elucidated wherein participation in the communal nature of witchcraft leads to death. Equally grave consequences could befall even those who did not give their lives to witchcraft but were simply curious or interested in exploring benevolent magic. The Puritan cleric William Perkins argued that not just witches who kill and torment, but any that practice magic or "doe any thing (knowing what they doe) which cannot be effected by nature or art" should still be sentenced to death.[75] Thus, becoming implicated with witchcraft, even through staged performances, could certainly have serious consequences as those affiliated with witches were routinely hunted and executed.

Importantly, the dangers of being affiliated with the communal notion of witchcraft were not divided evenly amongst spectators. Performances of witchcraft on the Early Modern stage, which endeavored to include audience members as potential collaborators in the act of witchcraft, presented unequal risks to spectators based on gender. While all spectators were discursively included in the communal performance of witchcraft through embodied proximity, intimate attention and enjoyment, and inclusive language, the palpable threat of being mistaken as an actual member of a witch's coven fell more seriously on women in the audience. Just as Early Modern audiences should not be perceived as homogenous or uniform in what they found pleasing, funny, or tragic on stage, we should remember that not all audience members would

---

[75] Perkins, *A discourse of the damned art of witchcraft*, 255.

experience the pleasures and risks of witchcraft on stage in an identical manner. Indeed, men and women would have likely had different responses to being implicated in witchcraft under the watchful eyes of fellow spectators at the theatre.

Witchcraft itself was highly gendered. Again, while the lack of extant records makes specific data impossible, scholars estimate that women were tried in court and convicted at rates much higher than men; women comprised around 75% of all accusations and executions.[76] This imbalance can be read in a couple of distinct ways. First, as the term "witch" itself appears gendered and separated from the masculine "wizard" and "sorcerer," and popular images of witchcraft featured the presence of women, it is easy to forget about the presence of men in league with witchcraft. However, male witches existed. Lara Apps and Andrew Gow attempt to remind contemporary scholars of this fact in *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* as they assert the presence of a male witch subjectivity within historiography. Arguing that male witches effectively fit into Early Modern concepts of witchcraft through their implicit feminization and that their presence has been excluded from witchcraft historiography, Apps and Gow note that these men were "necessary components of a complex phenomenon."[77] As witchcraft was defined through a connection with Satan, the practice itself was theoretically ungendered and capable of being exercised by men and women alike. Francesco Maria Guazzo's *Compendium maleficarum*, a popular witch-hunting manual published at the beginning of the seventeenth century, demonstrates this equal capacity for witchcraft through incorporating a large number of illustrations depicting both men and women (Figures 11-12). In these woodcuts, men and women seem on equal footing in their subservience and fraternity with demonic forces. One of Guazzo's

---

[76] Duni, *Under the Devil's Spell*, 4.
[77] Lara Apps and Andrew Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 6.

Figure 11. Male and female witches; male witch gives a piece of his clothing to a devil as a sign of homage, in Francesco Maria Guazzo, *Compendium maleficarum*, Milan, 1608.

Figure 12. Male and female witches dining at the witches' Sabbath, in Francesco Maria Guazzo, *Compendium maleficarum*, Milan, 1608.

images shows a man offering a piece of his clothing to a devil to pledge his loyalty. Another shows a Sabbath feast in which men, women, and devils are dining together. The visual symmetry of this image is reinforced by the equal presence of demons close behind both the man and woman, emphasizing the notion that Satan could infect the hearts and minds of both genders.

However, while male witches were certainly part of Early Modern witchcraft, the unequal charges and executions of women can also be read as a reflection of increased anxieties between men and women during the period. We should recall our previous discussion of Federici's convincing argument; women during this people were increasingly controlled and contained in the home due to the threat that they might exhibit sexual and reproductive independence. If witchcraft reflected a threat to social order, the preponderance of accusations, executions, references, and images that centered on the body and domain of women reflected, as Charles Zika notes, a fear of women taking power. In a shifting socio-economic landscape, Zika observes that the common refrains in demonological practices and visual motifs—such as a cooking cauldron, the cooking fork, disheveled hair, effective incantations, and the backwards riding of animals—all suggest "the collapse of the gender order upon which the powers of church and society rest" as women were viewed to appropriate "not only the ritual power of priests, but also the sexual power of men."[78] Women here are feared for repurposing domestic instruments and functions for nefarious ends; their unbridled power could also read as a challenge to male hegemony. The threat of women performing witchcraft, therefore, embodied the double threat to social order in its ability to invert religious authority but also foundational principles of patriarchy. On a more practical side, the preponderance of female witch accusations also reflected a larger social distinction between the sexes; women were ubiquitously viewed as

---

[78] Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft,* 15, 13.

weaker in will compared to their male counterparts. The temptations, then, which Satan used to lure new members of his cohort were viewed as more effective on women than men. Whether reminding scholars to the presence of male witches or observing the increased dangers to women, the unequal figures of accusation and execution rates demonstrate that the threat of witchcraft did not always impact men and women equally.

While the crowds attending the theatre in Early Modern London certainly would not have reflected this same majority of women over men, the presence of women at the theatre was noteworthy. Again, while historians have lamented the absence of accurate records, scholars such as Andrew Gurr and Richard Levin have worked to demonstrate the significant number of women who populated the galleries and pits. Gurr argues that not only was there a "high proportion of women at the playhouses," but, pushing back against anti-theatrical rhetoric, these women were not solely harlots nor "light women," but came from "every section of society."[79] Levin, pushing Gurr's investigation, explores the ways in which playwrights and acting companies understood women as a "constituency whose interests and feelings should be considered."[80] Levin argues that women were indeed viewed as a substantial and distinct audience group but were often identified as a monolithic group compared to men, who were divided into more distinct, class-based subgroups. Levin's argument is somewhat challenged by Ben Jonson's prologue to *Epicene* in which he substantiates the presence of women in the theatre while noting their diverse composition. Jonson's prologue reflects the playwright's hope that his play will have something in it that can please all spectators; it hopes that some aspect of the play will "be fit for ladies; some for lords, knight, squires,/ Some for your waiting-wench, and city-

---

[79] Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London, Third Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 65, 67.
[80] Richard Levin, "Women in the Renaissance Theatre Audience," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1989), 165.

wires,/ Some for your men and daughters of Whitefriars" (Prologue 22-24).[81] Although not

strictly based in class, Jonson's prologue reminded audiences of the disparate presence of women

in the theatre. Antitheatrical writers also took notice of the growing attendance of women in the

theatre. Stephen Gosson's 1579 antitheatrical tract *The Schoole of Abuse*, found the presence of

female spectators so significant that it warranted its own conversation as evidence in the

treatise's concluding epilogue "To Gentlewomen Citizens of London." Concerned over the

safety and sexual purity of female spectators, Gosson argued that the theatre was a corrupting

institution that threatened a woman's chastity and reputation; women, Gosson concluded, should

simply stay home and tend to the domestic sphere. He argued that the real danger of the public

theatre was the reframing of female spectators into spectacles themselves. Noting that "Thought

is free: you can forbidd no man, that vieweth you, to noate you, and that noateth you, to judge

you, for entring to places of suspition," Gosson recommended women to abstain from the theatre

completely lest they fall suspect to the judgmental gaze of others.[82]

    While some modern scholars have pushed back against Gosson's warnings and re-

envisioned the public theatre space as one of both egalitarianism and potential,[83] his patriarchal

advice should be reconsidered in regard to the risks of watching witchcraft. As the threat of

---

[81] Ben Jonson, *Epicene, or The Silent Woman*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington et. al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

[82] Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (London: for Thomas Woodcocke, 1579; Ann Arbor: Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A01953.0001.001.

[83] Jean E. Howard, for instance, flips Gosson's argument. While she notes that, certainly, women *could* be "symbolically whored by the gaze of many men," she argues that female spectators could have equal access to the power of the gaze within the egalitarian nature of the theatre. When paying equal prices for tickets compared with men, Howard argues the theatrical economy becomes ungendered and offers all interlocutors equal access to look and to judge. Later, Laurie E. Osborne works from Howard's theoretical thesis to consider the range of practical performances of presence by women in English audiences. Drawing from the rather conservative female playgoers that appear in Shakespeare's plays, Osborne argues that variations in class and social status prescribe the breadth of potential responses by women in the theatre, which "can negotiate her double position as spectator and spectacle." See Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 78, and Laurie E. Osborne, "Staging the Female Playgoer: Gender in Shakespeare's Onstage Audiences," in *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*, eds. By Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 203.

witchcraft seemed to be unequally placed on women, their attendance at the theatre likely garnered a different degree of pleasures and risks from being implicated as a member of the witches' collective. While male spectators had both the thin line between stage and auditorium that separated representation from reality as well as a greatly diminished possibility of being included in conversations concerning witchcraft, women had only the artificiality of the stage to protect them. As Gosson notes, the theatre was a place to not only see but to judge others. Although the performances of witchcraft took place on stage, it is important to remember—as female spectators likely did—that the women in the audience were also being watched. Our examples of being included into the group behavior of witchcraft and, importantly, being asked to *enjoy* these performances, garnered risky consequences for women. If female spectators were being scrutinized by others in the theatre, what might the repercussions have been for enjoying a performance *too much*? To the watchful eyes that simultaneously viewed the stage and balconies, what meaning might be construed from an engaged posture, the lifting of an eyebrow, or the opening of a mouth? Pushing Jean E. Howard's argument that these female audience members occupied the double position of both spectator and spectacle and were therefore empowered as equal agents to their male counterparts, it is important to remember the additional threats that surrounded women, especially visible in performances of witchcraft.[84] Gosson's advice to potential female playgoers is particularly pertinent to explorations of witchcraft on stage as women certainly would have had to be watchful for the advances of men but also for their critical gaze as an excess of emotion or the simple socially incorrect response might produce the suspicions of neighbors.

---

[84] See note 72.

While the spectatorial risk to self was likely more intense for women watching performances of witchcraft, it is important not to dismiss the real risks for men as well as Apps and Gow remind us above. While dramatic figures such as Prospero and Friar Bacon command respect and awe at the magnitude of their art, they still reflect a social environment in which accusations to *maleficium* produce prosecution and execution. For instance, while Prospero showcases his "art" within the pastoral setting of the play—framed as outside the purview of social norms—, one of his final actions is to abjure his own art as he discusses breaking his own staff and drowning his magical book (5.1.59-66). His actions imply the knowledge that these enactments of witchcraft, while displays of power in the pastoral setting, position him as wider member of the occult elsewhere. Marlowe's protagonist Dr. Faustus, too, while originally positioned as skilled and knowledgeable, ends the play pitifully begging for his soul. The play's didactic epilogue reinforces the production as a cautionary tale: "Faustus is gone. Regard his hellish fall,/ Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise/ Only to wonder at unlawful things" (Epilogue 4-6). Practicing witchcraft, Marlowe's play reminds us, will surely lead to hell. These plays, then, remind male spectators that they are certainly not excused from the looming threats of witchcraft and the repercussions, both in the form of execution and eternal damnation, of being complicit in those unholy activities. While female spectators certainly faced a larger risk to themselves through society's heavier emphasis on the prosecution of female witches, the spectatorial risk that performances of witchcraft produced could be felt by all audience members.

Regardless of an audience member's sex, in all of our previous examples of witnessing witchcraft as positively-framed entertainment, cheering for the use of skilled, nation-based magic, and journeying along for a Wild Ride, the spectator is constantly positioned and reaffirmed as a participating member of the witches' collective. This formulation into part of a

collective body presented both pleasure and risk for the audience member. Spectatorial risk

occurs here as pleasure is derived from the intimate experiencing of magical events as a

provisional member of the witches' group. Audiences are invited into the assemblage to

experience witchcraft as a participating insider; performances of magic become encounters far

more real and immediate than simply hearing or reading about them elsewhere. However, the

audience members also experience a risk to their own safety by becoming associated with

witchcraft through their enjoyment. Spectators become implicated in socially and religiously

nonnormative wrongdoing by appeasing their curiosities in the theatre and being temporarily

invited into the witches' secret society. This association produces not only tangible and fatal

risks in the form of public executions but also more severe spiritual risks framed as losing one's

soul and eternal damnation.

In addition to encountering risk through being implicated as part of the witches'

collective, audience members engaged with this personal, spectatorial risk to self due to the

theatrical blurring of efficacy and entertainment on the Early Modern stage. As performances of

witchcraft invited audiences to the razor's edge of what was allowed in society, the gestures and

incantations of witchcraft often sat at that same threshold between actual spell craft and theatrical

representation. This entwined nature between embodied and representational factors corresponds

to different but analogous epistemologies—that of the ontic and mimetic. Ontically, spectators

get to learn and experience witchcraft as tangible and efficacious rituals, patterns, and routines

comprised of gestures, incantations, and symbol making. While these real enactments might

threaten demonic results and social punishment, they are continually tempered by a second layer

of knowing based on mimesis in which the rituals take form but are also nullified through its

representational lens. In other words, spectators recognize that the physical and aural codes

before them enact the reality of witchcraft while they simultaneously perceive the actions before them as representations within theatrical entertainment. These realms of actual and representational, efficacious and entertainment, were hardly steady. Instead, the slippages between moments of reality and representation were numerous and produced a theatre defined by indeterminacy where "real" witchcraft could easily slip out from its staged portrayals. These slippages can best be seen through looking at examples of unexplained "magic" tricks, the adoption of verbal and gestural lexicons from treatises on demonology, and records of accidental conjurings. Spectators, then, in addition to being implicated as a member of the witches' group, engaged with a mode of spectatorial risk in which they placed themselves in a precarious environment where anything *could* happen in front of their eyes or be accidently done to their very person.

It is this slippage into possible efficacy that made performances of witchcraft both a heightened pleasure and risk to witness. The potential that a performance framed as entertainment *could* slip into efficacious practice became the lure by which spectators gathered to watch various performances in the Early Modern period. Investigating the cultural practice of conjurers, jugglers, and legerdemain, Michael Mangan succinctly captures this appeal of the risky unknown, noting that "one aspect of the pleasure that an audience takes in magic is its impulse to believe—on some level, however temporarily and however provisionally—that something extraordinary, impossible, or marvelous has been witnessed."[85] So while spectators know that the witchcraft on stage or magic trick on the street is a product of skilled entertainment, an anticipatory thrill of frisson exists as there is always the possibility that this entertainment might get too close to the real thing or accidently slip into "real" conjuring. A

---

[85] Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts*, xxvi.

potential danger comes to both performer and audience, however, when acts framed as entertainment creep too close to perceived efficacy. For example, the skeptic Reginald Scot details such an instance when a conjurer named Brandon performed a trick that *appeared* dangerously close to witchcraft. Brandon, in a trick designed to look like real sorcery, made it appear as if he had killed a pigeon by black magic. In the performance, Brandon stabbed a picture of a pigeon on his wall and, almost immediately following, a real pigeon, sitting in its nest on the adjacent roof, fell over dead. His guests were at a lost in unraveling the illusion and, as a result, Brandon was forbidden from ever performing it again.[86] Scot goes on to explain the trick in his larger attempt to counter popular belief in witchcraft; he reveals how Brandon had fed the pigeon a poison and meticulously timed his performance so that the stabbing of the image and death of the bird fell in sync. Noting this dangerous slippage between entertainment and actual witchcraft, Scot concludes how such a trick is entirely dependent on context and personage, noting how "if this or the like feat should be done by an old woman, everybody would cry out for fire and faggot to burn the witch."[87] The frame of entertainment, then, offers performers and audiences alike a thin layer of safety by reinforcing notions of representation and artificiality. This safety, however, is tenuous and, if the imitation of action becomes interpreted as actual action, can lead to dangerous suspicions. Furthermore, as Scot's observation implies, the threat of suspicion falls disproportionally on women. While Brandon received a small blow to his repertoire, a similar performance by someone identified as more prone to witchcraft tendencies might have proven fatal; indeed, the line between playing at witchcraft and doing witchcraft was thin and often unstable.

---

[86] Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts*, 35.
[87] Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft*, 309.

Although it was risky—or perhaps *because* it was risky—these blurred lines between efficacy and entertainment were reinforced by occurring at the confluence of demonological treatises and the stage. Studies into the practice and identification of demonology as well as the multitude of published witch-trials provided audiences with a steady supply of specific material that categorized witchcraft. From the spoken language of incantations to the shapes of symbols drawn to the physical gestures rendered, the period's texts offered interlocutors detailed written documentation of "actual" witchcraft. Those same specifics were incorporated into performances of witchcraft to add a layer of realism and potential efficacy. For instance, Samuel Rid's *The Art of Jugling or Legerdemaine*, a handbook for amateur conjurors or anyone looking to convincingly incorporate magic into their performance, reasons that convincing illusions must steep themselves in the context of actual witchcraft. Adding to the actual trick, or piece of entertainment being performed, Rid argues that one must "also have your words of Art, certain strange words" that are borrowed from actual testimonies of witchcraft.[88] The addition of this language is used on spectators to "induce the mind, to conceive, and suppose that you deal with Spirits."[89] In other words, while the illusion by itself is portrayed as an entertaining slight-of-hand, the addition of magical language repositions the responsible agent to something more magical, ethereal, or demonic. Similar to modern magicians incorporating magical refrains such as "abracadabra" or "hocus pocus" to negate the artificiality of their performance and suggest some assistance from a mystical other, Rid recommends intricate and cryptic language to suggest that more is at play than a simple individual performing a trick. In order to gain the level of authenticity that Rid describes to convince spectators that "you deal with Spirits," verbal and gestural cues were integrated into the period's entertainment straight from the various published

---

[88] Samuel Rid, *The Art of Jugling or Legerdemaine* (London: 1612).
[89] Rid, *The Art of Jugling.*

texts on witchcraft. Rid, for instance, recommends to his amateur magicians that they draw from diverse sentences and speeches that audiences would recognize. As an example, Rid endorses the archaic, cosmological phrase "*Ailif, Casil, zaze, Hit, metmeltat, Saturnus, Iupiter, Mars, Sol, Venus, Mercurie, Luna?*"[90] The phrase is copied straight out of a passage in Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* in which the skeptic explains and then disproves how the sentence had been used by witches through their presumed practice of creating wax dolls in order to do harm to others.[91] In this case, the elevated language borrowed not only *sounds* legitimate but is reproduced outright to blur the lines between efficacy and entertainment.

While Christopher Marlowe, too, used lofty Latin sentences in *Doctor Faustus* to produce an extra layer of authenticity to his conjuring scene, he and other theatre makers drew as well from a physical and semiotic lexicon described in various witchcraft tracts. Repeatedly, demonologists and witch-trial adjudicators explained the importance of drawing circles to summon Satan as well as his demons and familiars. For instance, King James' 1597 *Daemonologie* posited that there were as many manners of creating circular conjuring portals as there were spirits themselves. Witches would customize these circles by adding the "many words of God, confusedly wrapped in" as well as "innumerable characters and crosses" both inside and out "according to the form of apparition that they crave."[92] Adding support to King James' claim, the Chelmsford witch trial of Joan Cunny revealed to the public that the tracing of circles for the purpose of conjuring was indeed an efficacious practice; although she had forgotten the specific language used, Cunny explained how she conjured her familiar by drawing a particular

---

[90] Rid, *The Art of Jugling.*
[91] Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft*, 257.
[92] King James I of England, *Daemonologie, in forme of a Dialogue, Divided into three Bookes* (Edinburgh: Robert Walde-grave, 1597), 10, 17.

circle "as she was taught."[93] Circles then, built consciously of well-chosen symbols and gestures, became identified as a canonical practice integral to actual witchcraft.

This practice of circle-making was integrated into the theatre not only as a means of entertainment but as a method to suggest efficacious acts and potential slippages between the two. For example, Marlowe's Faustus spends several on-stage minutes meticulously crafting his conjuring circle to summon Mephistopheles. He draws a circle on the ground and, within it, spells out anagrams of Jehovah's name, abbreviated names of saints, heavenly figures, and "characters of signs and erring stars by which the spirits are enforced to rise" (1.3.12-13). Indeed, his careful work is rewarded as the demon arrives moments later. Within the narrative, Faustus demonstrates that meticulous research drawn from books on demonology can produce efficacious results. While Faustus drew on precise and esoteric study, Basilio Locatelli's "Il Gran Mago" illustrated that conjuring circles were equally effective for general practitioners of witchcraft. Locatelli, described by Anna Evangelista as an "academic enthusiast" due to his likely membership in a number of Roman academies in the early seventeenth century, produced a remarkable number of commedia dell'arte scenarios in the decade following Scala's *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative* (discussed in Chapter 2).[94] Published within his 1622 *Della scena de Soggetti comici et tragici*, Locatelli's pastoral comedy "Il Gran Mago" features a recluse sorcerer who employs magical spells and the conjuration of spirits to solve the various problems faced by the intruding cast of characters. Effective conjuring revolves around il Mago's circle-creation: "to remedy everything, he casts spells, making circles and other ceremonies; he makes the first enchantment for the union of blood and then invokes the infernal spirits, that they do as much as

---

[93] *The Apprehension and confession of three notorious Witches.*
[94] "*accademico dilettante.*" *I canovacci della Commedia dell'arte,* ed. Anna Maria Testaverde, transcription of tests and notes Anna Evangelista, preface Roberto De Simone (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 2007), 179.

he commands them to do, by beating his staff."[95] Just as Faustus's use of conjuring circles produces Mephistopheles, il Mago's labor immediately produces obedient spirits. Although the audience might have recognized the artificiality of the theatre, the work of both Marlowe and Locatelli blurred the lines between efficacy and entertainment through staging reenactments of real material.

While Faustus and il Mago worked precisely to summon their targeted devil(s), demonologists like King James explained, and in doing so also warned, that summoning circles *in general* were efficacious as there were a litany of devils waiting to be called upon. Given this, less precise circle creation could also be equally effective. Creating any conjuring circle—combining gesture, shape, and language—ran the risk of invoking a random demon. In some capacity, therefore, the arbitrary creation of summoning circles could actually be viewed as *more* dangerous through its potential of arousing an indeterminate entity. Comic performances took advantage of this phenomenon by quickly casting conjuring circles for comedic (and provocative) effect. For instance, in Flaminio Scala's commedia dell'arte scenario, "The Fake Magician," the commedia masks don the costumes of magicians and spirits to perform a "fake" conjuring scene. Arlecchino, as the magician, traces circles on opposite sides of the stage and then places the play's two old men into each. Then, Arlecchino "conjures and calls out to the spirits," played by the young lovers, who arrive to scare their fathers.[96] Although Scala's conjuring is framed as comedic and—as the narrative, genre, and personification suggest—artificial, the use of conjuring circles on stage link the performance to more serious reenactments

---

[95] "*per rimediare al tutto, fa incantesimi, facendo circoli et alter cirimonie; fa il primo incanto per il congiungimento del sangue, invoca li dei infernali, che faccino quell tanto che lui li comanda, batte la verga*." *I canovacci della Commedia dell'arte*, 377.

[96] Flaminio Scala, *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, trans. Henry F. Salerno (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 155.

such as *Doctor Faustus* and "Il Gran Mago" as well as the constant cataloging of witchcraft

practices by demonologists and trial proceedings. While the narratives of these examples are

very different—Marlowe and Locatelli's imitations breed efficacious results while the commedia

troupe's efforts are only in jest—, they all point to the possibility that through the correct series

of actions, real effects could happen. Similar to Rid's use of archaic phrases, the use of conjuring

circles works to "dress the entertainment in the garments of efficacy" and blur the lines between

real and imaginary.[97] It is here that spectatorial risk occurs as audience members watch and listen

to the literal practices of witchcraft occurring before them and confuse the lines between efficacy

and entertainment.

For spectators, the risk remains that at any moment the precarious balance between

efficacy and entertainment could slip towards real witchcraft, which, in fact, seems to have

happened. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, while full of small bits of playful incantations and

conjurations, the play's main conjuring scene described in the previous paragraph seems to have

actually been successful on at least one occasion. E. K. Chambers describes the event in his

seminal work on the Elizabethan stage:

> Certain Players at Exeter, acting upon the stage the tragical story of Dr. Faustus
> the Conjurer; as a certain number of Devils kept every one his circle there, and as
> Faustus was busy in his magical invocations, on a sudden they were all dashed,
> every one harkening other in the ear, for they were all persuaded, there was one
> devil too many amongst them…the people also understanding the thing as it was,
> every man hastened to be first out of doors.[98]

It seems as if the entertainment nature of the production, centered on reproducing practices well-

known of contemporary witches, slipped into an act of efficacious witchcraft as the

representation of conjuring accidentally produced real results. Similarly, in his anti-theatrical

---

[97] Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts*, 51.
[98] E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage,* vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 424.

lambast, the Puritan William Prynne argued that players were guilty of "communicating with the Devil at Stage-plays" and "have fallen quite away from God."[99] He cites a similar example to Chambers' in which an apparition appeared at the Bel Savage playhouse during a production of *Doctor Faustus* "to the great amazement both of the Actors and Spectators" that caused many to be "distracted with that fearful sight."[100] These examples parallel another anecdote in which the actor Edward Alleyn was "surpriz'd by an apparition of the Devil, which so work'd on his Fancy."[101] Although this example concerning Alleyn points to the possibility that not even the performers themselves could differentiate between representation and actual conjuring, the large-scale disarray and panic of performer and spectator alike in the earlier two examples hint at a frightening event that was communal in nature. While the accounts by Chambers and Prynne certainly do not provide any historic, concrete evidence of efficacious demonic conjuring nor any evidence that the apparition was witnessed by all parties, they describe an event in which panic ensued due to the likely possibility that actual witchcraft *might* occur. For every spectator to hasten to be "first out of doors," signifies a larger belief among spectators that the conjuration of an actual demon was not only possible but had in fact happened.

This belief among audience members that entertainment *might* slip into efficacious practice—and thereby implicating them and endangering their very bodies and souls—reaffirms the theatre as a site of indeterminacy. Investigating this razor's edge between representing (mimesis) and doing (kinesis), Andrew Sofer explores theatrical indeterminacy through speech-act theory in his article "How to Do Things with Demons." Complicating J. L. Austin's distinction between the successful "efficacious" performative and the unsuccessful "hollow"

---

[99] William Prynne, *The Players Scourge, or, actors tragaedie, divided into two parts* (London: 1633), 556.
[100] Prynne, *The Players Scourge*, 556.
[101] Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage,* vol. 3, 424.

theatrical quotation of those performatives, Sofer layers the argument between performatives and performance with the Early Modern notion of "conjuring." As Sofer observes, Elizabethan audiences understood the notion of conjuring—the principle action around which *Doctor Faustus* revolves—as calling upon something with solemnity and earnestness. The danger, he continues, "is to risk calling that thing into existence, just as to perform any act onstage—a laugh, a belch, a curse, a consecration—is to risk actually doing it."[102] Enjoying the slipperiness of performativity both on and off the stage, Sofer links the dangers of witchcraft and black magic to performativity itself; he concludes by drawing a contrast "between the *imagined* potency of black magic and the *actual* potency of performative speech acts—which, in the wrong mouths, possess a dangerous, real-life magic of their own."[103] The stage, then, is where the real magic happens.

Sofer's article is essential here as it helps us to understand the risks experienced by spectators. For Elizabethan audiences, the on-stage performances of conjuring toed the line between efficacious and hollow performance. Faustus' focus and solemnity seemed to fulfill the larger notion of serious conjuring albeit occurring on stage. If theatre produced hollow quotations of performatives—threats, pronouncements, decrees—but conjurings were enacted with earnest, the separation of entertainment and efficacy became increasingly blurred for spectators; their respective discursive and semiotic cues begin to entangle. When performed sincerely, on-stage enactments of conjuring challenged audience's understanding of how actions produce (or do not produce) real results. While artificial, for Faustus to enact his spell threatened to actually produce that which it named.

---

[102] Andrew Sofer, "How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in Doctor Faustus," *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 1 (2009): 9-10.
[103] Sofer, "How to Do Things with Demons," 17.

This can be further complicated by thinking of the acting troupe's capacity to represent a

play (engage in mimesis) versus conjure a play (engage in kinesis). For Elizabethan audiences,

the existence of a prologue—and sometimes even an induction—was a standard part of the

theatre going experience. Prologues worked to gather the attention of rowdy spectators, introduce

the material about to be performed, and, often, position the acting company as industrious

servants of the spectators. While obviously artificial and metatheatrical, the inclusion of the

prologue further muddles the distinction between representation and conjuring. While the actors

themselves are representing characters, the prologue reminds audiences that an acting company

has worked to create a theatrical product that is literally being conjured into existence. Even

before Faustus' infamous conjuring scene, Marlowe's prologue features a chorus member—an

actor seemingly not part of the direct representation of the play's narrative—who walks onto the

bare stage and addresses the audience directly: "Only this, gentlemen: we must perform/ The

form of Faustus' fortunes, good or bad" (Prologue 7-8). Although the narrative itself works in a

representational capacity, the prologue remains adjacent to the theatrical labor and reminds

audiences of the power invested in the theatre broadly and actors specifically to conjure products

before their very eyes. This confusion between representing and doing, which was continually

reinforced through theatrical conventions like the prologue, further blurred the lines between

efficacy and entertainment. After all, if an actor could conjure a performance, bringing a product

into the world, could a solemn conjuring, which featured accurate language and semiotic cues,

not do something similar? This mixture of slippage between representation and enaction

combined with the performative power of the stage to conjure images and products helps to

explain our initial example of *Doctor Faustus* conjuring "one devil too many." If theatre always

remained on the muddy edge between mere representing and tangibly doing, then the risk to

audience members was always present during moments of conjuring. It was the inadvertent magic—the chance that entertainment *might* slip into efficacious practice—that both thrilled and alarmed spectators.

The examples of efficacious witchcraft occurring suddenly in the middle of a production point to spectators' sense of anticipation and fear as they engaged in spectatorial risk through performances of witchcraft. On the one hand, audiences collect a certain amount of pleasure from being in the presence of a conjured demon; they experience that which previously was relegated to imagination and representation. On the other hand, the most dangerous risk to spectators is being present for *actual* witchcraft on stage. With the constant reminder of executed witches right outside the theatre's walls, the implicated nature of audience members in the acts of performed witchcraft, and the blurring of lines between efficacy and entertainment through the incorporation of genuine language and gestures of witches, spectators put their own physical, emotional, and spiritual selves at risk. While the threat of actual witchcraft was often just a remote possibility, what Chambers describes as the "curious *mythos*" of *Doctor Faustus* reminds us that it was not impossible.[104]

Finally, spectators implicated themselves within the larger social threat of witchcraft through learning the very demonic practices that produced executions and eternal damnation. In addition to being associated with the communal nature of witchcraft and being present for potential slippages of efficacy and entertainment, performances of witchcraft produced a spectatorial risk to the audience's very body and soul through its instructive capacity. Just as champions of the theatre had long echoed Horace's defense that art had the capacity to instruct and delight, staged enactments of witchcraft threatened to teach spectators tangible practices that

---

[104] Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage,* vol. 3, 423.

might lead them to Satan and/or the gallows. While most dramatic literature of the period ended on a moralizing note that condemned witchcraft—Faustus is literally dragged away to hell at the end of Marlowe's play—, the practices were still demonstrated *and* shown to be efficacious. Here, the risk that spectators might intentionally or accidentally learn demonic practices is heightened by our previous discussions. The communal nature of witch covens combined with the theatre's inherent ability to foster a sense of group collectively can make spectators more invested in the stage acts and more attentive; this sense of inclusion could make audiences want to learn more by feeling invested. Furthermore, the practice of borrowing verbatim from the discursive and semiotic lexicons of witchcraft meant that the language and signs that spectators learned were genuine and borrowed from demonological handbooks. Taken together, the spectatorial risk to self became grave as audiences were made to feel like part of the witches' ensemble and then incited to learn the actual phrases and signs used by this community. Whether intentional or not, spectators risked their own safety by being present at the theatre and witnessing—and therefore learning—the performatives that defined witchcraft.

The threat of audiences being corrupted by stage practices was a well-worn refrain for the period's antitheatrical critics. Critics repeatedly attacked the theatre for being a tool of the Devil. These attacks positioned the stage as a corrupting institution that taught spectators to shirk religious teaching and behave in ways deemed socially immoral. For instance, John Northbrooke, in his early 1577 *Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes*, worked to explain to his reader that the stage was not only connected to hell, but that it was the Devil himself that established playhouses. Northbrooke argued that the "Deuill founde oute Stage playes first, and were invented by his crafte and policie, for that they conteyne the wicked actes and whoredomes of the Goddes, whereby the consciences of godly men are grievously wounded,

and wicked lustes are many wayes stirred up."[105] Not long after, the pamphleteer and cultural

critic Philip Stubbes argued that the stage offered the opposite of the sermon. While sermons in

church were means of salvation, the Devil "hath inferred the other [the stage], as, the ordenarie

meane of our destruction."[106] Perhaps it was William Rankins who offered the most vitriolic

attack on the theatre, working to link the stage as a direct tool of the Devil. Rankins argued that

the playing companies themselves were "sent from their great captaine Sathan (under whose

banner they beare armes) to deceive the world, and to lead the people with intising shewes to the

diuell, to seduce them to sinne."[107] In addition to being read as a conjunction between the stage

and Satan, Rankins' argument is important as it worked to show that the harmful capacity of

devil's tool to "lead the people" away from God and "seduce" them to sin. This instructional

capacity was not a novel move by Rankins but, instead, reflected a pattern of fears that attending

the playhouse would instruct audiences to the ways of vice. Northbrooke argued that the theatre

was "a teacher not of learning, but of destroying children" as they would then practice the

debased behavior they saw on stage.[108] Stubbes, furthermore, arguing against the idea that the

theatre could be used as a place of benevolent learning, sarcastically maintained that one "need

to go to no other schoole" if one simply wanted to "learne falsehood…learn to deceive…learn to

play the vice, to swear, teare, and blaspheme, both Heauen and Earth…[and] learne to

---

[105] John Northbrooke, *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine playes or Enterluds with other idle pastimes [et]c. commonly used on the Sabboth day, are reproved by the Authoritie of the word of God and auntient writiers* (London: H. Bynneman for George Byshop, 1577), 71.

[106] Philip Stubbes, "Of Stage-playes and Enterluds, with their wickedness," in *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London: Richard Jones, 1583; Ann Arbor: Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A13086.0001.001?view=toc.

[107] William Rankins, *A Mirrour of Monsters: Wherein is plainely described the manifold vices &c spotted enormities, that are caused by the infectious sight of Playes, with the description of the subtile slights of Sathan, making them his instruments* (London: Printed by I.C. for T.H., 1587).

[108] Northbrooke, *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine playes or Enterluds*, 75.

comtemne GOD and all his lawes."[109] For these critics, then, theatre was not only a space of immorality but actively spread these wicked practices through the stage's didactic capacity.

While it is easy for modern scholars to dismiss the critiques by antitheatrical critics as just the complaining of uptight pedants, perhaps their acerbic rhetoric was justified in cases of performing witchcraft on stage. Again, it is important to remember the intense fear and anxiety that the looming threat of witchcraft produced throughout the Early Modern period. To the typical playgoer, witchcraft was not a distant or fictional phenomenon but one that threatened their very community. The lingering fear that there was someone creeping in the shadows who belonged to the larger witch coven was reinforced by very public displays of accusations, trials, and executions. Within this milieu, it was necessary to guard your actions—both publicly and privately—as you never know who might spot you recollecting a scene from a play, or mechanically remembering a word or action first witnessed upon the stage and interpreting it as real witchcraft.

As the critics of theatre contended one might learn about the actual practices of witchcraft, their fears can be interpreted as warnings against both intentional and accidental repetitions of what is seen on stage. Although the dramatic literature featuring witches rarely offered a sympathetic tone, spectators still might be interested in repeating enactments of witchcraft due to a variety of reasons from simple curiosity to a more ambitious interest in the sense of power that it potentially offered. I'm again reminded of my own experience growing up and "testing" various conjuring performatives to assess their actual efficacy. Having learned about "Bloody Mary," a process of conjuring and divination in which the name "Bloody Mary" is repeated three times in front of a mirror to produce an apparition, I recall being curious as to

---

[109] Stubbes, "Of Stage-playes and Enterluds, with their wickedness."

whether it was real. However, not having the courage to perform this conjuring spell myself, I waited for an opportunity to enact it with friends. While the fear of accidentally performing an efficacious conjuring spell prevented me from enacting it on my own, my curiosity propelled me to lead my friends in a group venture. This curiosity was perhaps what theatre critics most feared; spectators would learn the performative code for witchcraft and would be curious about its effect. As demonstrated, audiences were already implicitly involved in the action of the witchcraft plays by being phenomenologically grouped with characters and actions performed. Early Modern audiences were also accustomed to engaging an active imagination that could translate into delayed repetition at home or in private. Just as Shakespeare reminded his audiences at the beginning of *Henry V* to "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts" and "'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings" (Prologue 24, 29-30),[110] spectators engaged their imaginations to make better sense of the action on stage. This same work to imagine horses jumping when none exist promotes the exploration of similar actions later. Spectators, having learned witchcraft's performatives from the stage and having witnessed their effectiveness within the narrative, placed themselves in harm's way. They risked their own physical and eternal safety from the creeping curiosity that wondered if they might recreate what they witnessed on stage.

Opponents, though, also feared accidental learning and repetition. Critics' anti-theatrical rhetoric suggested that the stage's didacticism would not only teach practical skills to be performed later due to curiosity or ambition but would seep into an individual's conscious to undermine their moral integrity and burst out in dangerous ways. Indeed, while a spectator might not consciously study and set out to mimic staged behavior, these actions might slip out accidentally. Similar to the way a melody, phrase, or image might "get stuck" in one's head,

---

[110] William Shakespeare, *Henry V,* eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1995).

witnessing performances of witchcraft might seep into a spectator's mind and trickle out unexpectedly. In this way, audience members risked their own safety; having learned demonic practices, the language and physical lexicon of spells might bubble from their lips or mechanically flow through their arms. But once these slippages occurred, critics would note, the actions themselves became manifest.

Accidental slippages could also occur *during* the performance itself. In addition to these accidental performances of witchcraft producing a spectatorial risk to self in both being identified as a practitioner of black magic—or even beginning to self-identify as such—or unintentionally producing efficacious result, accidental slippages might leak out from audience members concurrent to the actions on stage. Especially when engaged and invested in a performance, it was possible that spectators might speak (or simply mouth) along to well-known lines or respond physically to mirror the action taking place before them. In our present day, it is easy to imagine yourself or someone you know softly singing along to music in a Broadway show, mimicking specific or repeated gestural cues seen on tv, or mouthing along to favorite lines from films. Personally, this focus on witches makes me wonder if I have ever unintentionally performed the magical spell from *The Wizard of Oz,* silently chanting along with Dorothy that "There's no place like home" while secretly tapping my heels together. These accidental slippages, therefore, can be read as possible (re)performances of on-stage actions that are both unplanned but still phenomenologically dangerous.

It is not outlandish to imagine audience members learning, mirroring, and performing acts of black magic witnessed on stage in the very moment they occur. The affective qualities of the stage, coupled with engaging material that framed spectators as collective members of the witches' coven, threatened to produce instances of inadvertent co-conspiracy. However, recalling

this project's critical word "might," this is not to imply that these accidental slippages were ubiquitous nor an affective response for every audience member. Echoing the analytical pushback that provides the foundation for John J. McGavin and Greg Walker's *Imagining Spectatorship*, it is worth remembering that spectators should not be homogenized into a single community while witnessing a performance.[111] Instead, as McGavin and Walker argue, a single performance can signify quite differently for different members of an audience based on an individual's cognitive and embodied response.[112] Their interrogation of audience response in Medieval and Early Modern performance works at the triangulation of space, performance, and spectatorship to advocate a more imaginative and nuanced analysis in which spectators experience the live event in different ways depending on both their unique character and visual perspective. In their investigation, McGavin and Walker link the sensorial aspects of a performance created through the physical space—audibility, sight lines, posture, and physical sensations—to the kinaesthetic experience, or physical response, of the spectator in order to theorize the diverse individual responses possible by different audience members. In other words, their interrogation elevates the physical space as a vital component of the affective experience that not only dictates what spectators see, hear, and feel but also influences how individual spectators might physically respond, mirror, or empathize with on-stage actions. Each and every spectator, they argue, "would be to a degree performing their own responses to what they were witnessing" that included a "spontaneous kinaesthetic response."[113]

McGavin and Walker's analytical tools can be especially helpful in imagining accidental slippages of witchcraft performatives during a play. While their work prioritizes theatrical

---

[111] John J. McGavin and Greg Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship: From the Mysteries to the Shakespearean Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19.
[112] McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, 1-7.
[113] McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, 36.

architecture as the principal element in determining audience response, their acknowledgement

of an individual's kinaesthetic response based on what one sees and hears can be especially

productive in imagining responses to witchcraft. Within this analytical framework, it is possible

to conceive of instances in which the incantation of spells—conducted through a mixture of

physical and auditory cues—could be cognitively internalized and processed through the

spectator's own body. Just like my own possible repetition of the spell in *Wizard of Oz* in which

my lips and heels move in sync with on-stage performatives, spectators could physically mimic

the gestures of incantations or subtly speak along with spells. For instance, returning one final

time to Marlowe's *Faustus*, we can imagine occasional spectators echoing the on-stage conjuring

through their own kinaesthetic response. After a lengthy sequence involving the creation of a

conjuring circle and the recitation of a spell in Latin, Marlowe indicates that his leading actor

should sprinkle holy water and make the sign of the cross. Rather than envisioning a quick

conclusion to an elongated process, one can, perhaps, imagine a more ritualistic sprinkling of

holy water that occurs around the conjuring circle itself. Rather than dumping water, the stage

direction evokes a more methodical and systematic sprinkling similar to that within a religious

setting. Applying McGavin and Walker's methodology, we can imagine spectators' kinaesthetic

response to be different depending on the individual and their view of the action on stage. While

many in attendance likely did nothing, some spectators, with a clear view of the deliberate

sprinkling of water on stage, might have processed the on-stage action through the physical

mirroring of that same action; they might have softly moved their fingers in a flicking motion as

they incorporated stage action into their own experience. Similarly, Faustus' sign of the cross, a

common performative that audiences would have been familiar, might have triggered

unintentional mimicry in spectators who had spent their life repeating the semiotic gesture; hands

might have instinctually moved to the forehead to the begin the gesture or simply moved in a cross pattern in front of them or to their side. In addition to these potential slippages of physical mimicry, audiences could also slip into accidental performances of witchcraft through language and intonation. Although Marlowe does not seem to borrow and incorporate the actual language of witchcraft from demonological tracts, his incantations nonetheless work rhythmically to help prepare and aurally integrate spectators. What begins in iambic pentameter and moves into prose, the solemn nature of enacting a conjuration would have likely produced a delivery of Faustus' spell that appeared rhythmic and cadenced. As Faustus begins his work by slowly naming his own deeds with "Within this circle is Jehovah's name, Forward and backward anagrammatized" (1.3.8-9), he likely creates a cadence with which his following sentences will follow. Spectators, enrapt in the stage action, might begin to hum along to Faustus' musicality or even sway or nod along to the tempo created on stage. In this way, some audience members might have produced through their own bodies an internalization of the stage acts before them. Their physical and/or audible responses demonstrated not only theatre's ability to teach demonic practices but to produce accidental slippages of these very practices in the moment of instruction.

The risk of unintentionally reciting the spells of witches became even greater during moments in which the dramatic narrative reinforced this learning through repetition and call-and-response. If the process of kinaesthetic response can occur during any moment of staged action in which the affective quality produces a cognitive and physical response in spectators, then potential corporeal responses can be viewed as even *more* likely when the same affective sequences are repeated, providing additional time for audience members to learn, internalize, and respond. For example, consider the infamous spell-brewing scene performed by Shakespeare's witches in *Macbeth.* Anticipating the arrive of Macbeth, the witches prepare a magical brew to

create a series of visions meant to both appease and antagonize the protagonist. The concoction

of this brew requires not only a litany of magical ingredients but specific language that works to

bind the elements. This refrain, "Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and cauldron

bubble" (4.1.10-11) is repeated after each verse of the brewing process for three times in total.

Importantly, the repetition of this short refrain allows for the quick memorization by audience

members. Indeed, it is likely that readers here could have even recited this line without my

having to write it down! The pattern building presented through repeating this line enabled

spectators to learn, reaffirm, and anticipate the spell as it was being performed on stage. After

occurring twice and establishing its pattern, audience members would have likely awaited its

third iteration but might have also unintentionally performed this refrain alongside the witches.

Just as repeating a chorus in a popular ballad would have invited audience familiarity and

participation, repetition—like *Macbeth*'s witches—welcomed the involvement of the audience to

share in the staged risks of witchcraft performance.

The dramatic trope of call-and-response also encouraged spectators to accidentally learn

and perform the language of witches' spells. Call-and-response routines are a common theatrical

device that feature a pair of interlocutors teaching and learning a specific skill, literary or poetic

passage, or message through a process of repetitive "repeat after me" segments. Within the

narrative, one character—framed as the learner—repeats the teacher's phrases in order to absorb

and memorize the material. While this process could certainly be used for dramatic effect—as

when Macbeth hears, internalizes, and later repeats the witches' prophesies—the pattern of call-

and-response was especially common in comedies of the period. For instance, a comic bit from

Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena's *La calandra* involved a syllable-by-syllable repetition of a magic

spell. Fessenio, servant to Calandro, pulls a lengthy prank on his master in order to distract him

208

from the romantic couplings within his household. Fessenio explains that a certain magic spell would make it possible for Calandro to be transported in a trunk into the house of his beloved through dismembering his own body. All that is needed to dissect one's body and piece it together again, describes the servant, is the recitation of the magic word "Ambracullàc." After three consecutive failed attempts by Calandro to properly pronounce the magical spell, Fessensio breaks it down into syllables for his master to repeat. This comedic call-and-response pattern continues past the work "Ambracullàc" and extends into a gag featuring Calandro echoing an insult instigated by Fessenio.[114] Importantly, this comedic routine not only taught the purpose of a spell but broke down its pronunciation for easy memorization by Calandro and, in turn, the audience. Similarly, Scala's commedia scenario "The Old Twins" featured an extended *lazzi* revolving around the call-and-response of a conjuration spell. Having lost an expensive bolt of linen, Franceschina implores the witch Pasquella for assistance to catch the thief. Using the maid's urgency to enrich her own coffers and protect her reputation, Pasquella slowly goes "through some fake conjuring to find the linen, forcing Franceschina to repeat every word."[115] The back-and-forth repetition of conjuring reveals the situation to Pedrolino and Gratiano who intervene—as if by magic. The gag concludes in typical commedia fashion as Gratiano is beaten for being a thief and runs off. Again, the call-and-response instruction of a witch's conjuration spell enabled the easy memorization, internalization, and repetition for both Franceschina and the performance's spectators. Although these comedic examples utilized magic that was framed as fictitious and unproductive, audiences still risked their very selves through unintentionally learning and performing these spells along with the characters on stage.

---

[114] Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena, *La calandra*, in *Five Comedies from the Italian Renaissance*, trans. and eds. Laura Giannetti and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 24-26.
[115] Scala, *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, 4.

During these instances of magical call-and-response, audiences were positioned as co-learners along with the neophyte on stage. Both spectators and novice characters begin these routines with less information than the on-stage experts, and alongside Calandro and Franceschina, audiences learned various witchcraft practices through the oral back and forth structure. Through listening and responding, their spectatorship willingly placed them as interested interlocutors with the skilled instructor on stage. This interest in rote learning was strengthened through the narrative's presumed promise of a comedic punchline or dramatic reveal. Engagement and repetition, however, especially in more serious or tragic drama, also threatened spectators that they might internalize and repeat the staged incantations in that very moment and become further complicit in the witchcraft presented on stage.

It is very feasible to imagine spectators listening to the staged instruction and unintentionally responding to the lesson through their own body as this practice mirrored that of the Early Modern schoolhouse. Indeed, the theatrical routine of call-and-response blurred the lines between entertainment and education as it mimicked common pedagogical practices that were ubiquitous across schools in Europe during this time. Rather than participating in a system of written epistemology, lessons were typically taught to students through the practice of active listening and repeating back the content previously uttered. This process of listening and internalizing characterized what Edel Lamb has called a "repeated rhetorical reshaping" in which skills were "developed through practice in the daily classroom exercises" to help children properly develop into adulthood[116] These exercises often asked students to repeat or imitate the principles of a given subject through speech, which "required and developed skills in memory

---

[116] Edel Lamb, *Performing Childhood in the Early Modern Theatre: The Children's Playing Companies (1599-1613)* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 93, 98.

and pronunciation."[117] This common mode of oral repetition can be witnessed across diverse schooling environments during the period that ranged from formal grammar schools to less literate and more rural church-sponsored schools. For instance, John Marston used the second act of his roughly structured *What You Will* (1601) to recreate, in great detail, a classroom setting in which a heavy-handed schoolmaster instructs his pupils to "Stand forth [and] repeat your lesson with out booke."[118] Students are then portrayed as reciting by rote the functions of Latin grammar and pronunciations of Latin declensions. Just as Marston portrays the practice of oral listening and memorizing within the formal setting of the Latin grammar school, Alan Ross, in his examination of post-Reformation, church-sponsored schools for girls, similarly illustrates rote learning as the standard pedagogical practice. For instance, archival records from 1578 of a girls' school in Pirna included daily exercises in which the students recited prayers, lessons, and religious tenets from memory. Here, a typical day featured at least one opportunity for the schoolmaster to listen to each girl, one by one, repeat the lesson that they had heard and learned from that day or week. While the archived curriculum at Pirna references the possibility of students memorizing through reading, it constantly reaffirms that rote learning is the default tool for instruction regarding most children.[119] As in Marston's playwrighting and Ross' archival work, the process of listening, internalizing, and repeating, was the common pedagogical practice encountered by most children during this period.

The ubiquitous presence of rote learning is important to keep in mind as we imagine the spectatorial responses—and risks—present for audience members during performances of

---

[117] Lamb, *Performing Childhood in the Early Modern Theatre*, 98.

[118] John Marston, *What You Will*, in *Tragedies and comedies collected into one volume* (London: Printed by A. M for William Sheares, at the Harrow in Britaines Bursse, 1633.

[119] Alan Ross, "Schools and Education," in *Early Modern Childhood: An Introduction*, ed. Anna French (London, Routledge: 2019), 104-105.

witchcraft. The call-and-response pattern of staged spell instruction mimics the same practice used within education. For spectators, then, the back-and-forth performance of on-stage learning could very possibly prompt cognitive and physical responses within individual spectators. Drawing again from McGavin and Walker's methodology of imagining kinaesthetic response, it becomes likely to imagine spectators who positioned themselves alongside the narrative learner and whose body reacted to the familiar practice of rote learning that they experienced previously in school. Commands, such as Pasquella telling Franceschina to repeat every word, or pattern building, such as Fessenio's elongated gag of repeating syllables, both operated in a manner similar to classroom practices and carried the potential that spectators might physically participate with the habitual practice by "mouthing" or even softly speaking along with the apprentice on stage. The combination, therefore, of narrative engagement and familiar teaching practices could induce slippages for spectators as they accidentally responded to the live performance through their body. This process, furthermore, was likely not intentional but an involuntary product based on stimuli that coalesced within individual spectators.

Accidental slippages—viewed broadly here as unintentional reenactments of staged materials both at a later time but also concurrent to their performance due to repetitions and call-and-response routines—threatened a spectatorial risk to self as audiences internalized and echoed forbidden content. While it is normal for audience members to engage cognitively, physically, and orally with performances, these kinaesthetic responses became dangerous to the spectators themselves when the material presented on stage moved away from socially appropriate topics to that of witchcraft. Kinaesthetic responses such as repeating lines and mimicking gestures—once deemed natural and harmless—risked placing spectators in league with the *maleficium* portrayed on stage. These slippages, then, could produce cosmological risks as efficacious spells escaped

from spectators' lips and became manifest in the world. Perhaps more immediately threatening, however, were the social consequences of these accidental slippages. Recalling Stephen Gosson's warning above to female playgoers that the real danger of the public theatre was being watched and judged by others, it is important to remember that spectators themselves were on display just as the actors on stage. As clerics and politicians warned against the creeping collectivity of witchcraft, a kinaesthetic response that mirrored on-stage action could prompt suspicions of active and deliberate collaboration. Suspicions, furthermore, could quickly lead to accusations and executions. Although no records of such an accusation exist to my knowledge, the threat that slippages could produce material consequences still remained. It is likely that spectators were acutely aware of this threat of slippage. Just as Gosson reminds women to be aware of their own performance of spectatorship, all audience members would have had to monitor their own physical and oral response. Indeed, McGavin and Walker acknowledge this self-censorship in their discussion of theatre architecture, noting that "one's reaction to a scene, a line, a gesture, would inevitably have been conditioned by an awareness that one was visible" and that one's kinaesthetic response "always included an acknowledgement of its own visibility."[120] The risk of slippages, then, was an ever-present danger during witchcraft performances. The possibility of unintentional learning and kinaesthetic response positioned audience members on a thin line between enjoying forbidden material and accidentally performing it.

The didactic capacity of the stage produced a spectatorial risk to self when witchcraft was the topic. Its engaging narratives combined with precise spells and incantations facilitated audience investment and the potential that dangerous behaviors would be instilled. For anti-

---

[120] McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, 36.

theatrical critics—such as Northbrooke, Stubbes, and Rankins—who viewed the theatre as

Satan's instructive tool, their diatribes could have spoken specifically to the dangers of

witchcraft performatives to reinforce their general warnings. Critics could easily point to the

specific language and gestures of witchcraft, which the stage framed as entertainment, and

observe that these same actions would produce damnation and execution outside the theatre's

walls. These staged practices, therefore, were exceptionally dangerous as they placed the

spectators themselves in harm's way. Even defenders of the stage who interpreted *Faustus* and

Macbeth in moralizing terms never actually dismissed critics' accusations that theatre can

educate audiences; instead, these supporters asserted the stage as a place of positive moral

edification. Regardless of which side's polemics one agreed with, it was clear that when you

attended the theatre, you were learning. Simply learning the practices of witchcraft should not be

viewed as dangerous in itself as, after all, these practices were commonly reported and

disseminated in treatises, sermons, and court records. Importantly, advocates and detractors

agreed that the stage produced a different kind of learning that was potentially more efficacious

and could easily produce material actions in spectators.[121] This is especially true in

representations of witchcraft where dynamic performances could spark a spectator's curiosity to

personally try these practices later at home or to accidentally mimic these dangerous practices

during the performance itself through their own kinaesthetic response to viewing. The dangers to

spectators of learning and repeating were, therefore, especially evident in performances of

---

[121] Recall John Northbrooke's antitheatrical rhetoric above that links *seeing* to doing; more than simply knowing about or listening to illicit behaviors, the optics of watching bodies on the stage are perceived as particularly effective teaching tools. The stage's efficacy is reiterated by Philip Sidney in his defense of the theatre. Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*, elevates the stage over sermons and books as a beacon of virtue. He affirms that "no learning is so good as that which teacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none can both teach and move thereto so much as poesy." See Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, in *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook*, ed. Tanya Pollard (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 152.

witchcraft as repeating what was shown on stage could lead not only to being associated with the witches' collective but also to eternal damnation.

In this section, we have slowly explored the pleasures and risks of watching performances of witchcraft on stage. The threat of witches was a ubiquitous subject in Early Modern Europe and constantly reaffirmed through a litany of published demonologies, dynamic witch-trials, and foreboding sermons that warned against the creeping presence of numerous witches into one community. While ever-present, the specific rituals and acts of witchcrafts lived primarily in the imaginations of community members. The theatre, then, offered pleasure through satisfying spectators' imaginations; it relied on the thin veil of its artificiality to enact the very same performatives deemed sacrilegious and socially threatening outside of its walls. Audiences were able to *see, hear,* and *experience* the practices of witchcraft that had previously only been available in their mind's eye. They could be present for the conjurations of demons and spirits, the Wild Ride through the night's sky, and the casting of spells and curses. The stage, then, allowed audiences to get as close to the edge of what was socially permissible as they sat between practices deemed only marginally acceptable and perhaps already dangerously corrupting (going to the theatre) and strictly and expressly forbidden (engaging in witchcraft).

This section also emphasized the risks to audiences themselves when witnessing performances of witchcraft. As a unique mode of spectatorial risk, audience members placed *themselves* at risk through engaging with the acts of *maleficium* on stage. Unlike the spectatorial risk to form created through the unpredictable nature of English boy actors or the risk to morality generated through the indecent activities of the commedia dell'arte, performances of witchcraft produced a spectatorial risk to self as audiences became *implicated* in the on-stage action. This implication occurred in three distinct but overlapping ways. First, the narrative worked alongside

215

the theatre's architecture to position spectators as collaborators within the larger collective of the witches' coven. A second means of implication was fostered as playwrights used authentic witchcraft performatives to blur the lines between entertainment and efficacy. Finally, spectators could be implicated in the sacrilegious practice of witchcraft through learning and repeating specific stage practices. Taken together, these factors caused audience members to become intertwined with the wider world of witchcraft and complicit in its practices. As these demonic acts were seen to prompt both social and religious consequences—witch-trials and eternal damnation—, becoming intertwined and complicit with staged representations of witchcraft placed the body and soul of spectators at risk. Performances of witchcraft, therefore, offered audience members the thrilling chance to satisfy their curiosities but threatened to make them complicit in those very same intriguing and terrifying acts.

Marketing Witchcraft—Presenting a Spectatorial Risk to Self

As demonstrated in Chapters 1 and 2, Early Modern theatre-makers intentionally produced, marketed, and sold experiences of spectatorial risk to theatregoers. Performances of witchcraft were no exception. The experience of a spectatorial risk to self was purposefully managed to place audience members on the thin line between acceptable social activities and anarchic and damnable encounters. In fact, we have already seen many of these conscious attempts to implicate audiences into the radical and chaotic existence of witchcraft. Both Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* challenged spectators to enjoy and even root for magic users instead of condemning magical practices. Marlowe, Locatelli, and Scala all incorporated specific practices of demonological practice, such as the conjuring circle, to toe the line between entertainment and efficacy. And diverse

productions, from *Macbeth* to *La calandra,* incorporated routines that could teach spells to those in attendance or even impel audiences to participate. These theatre-makers all illustrate attempts, even if minor within their larger productions, of producing a spectatorial risk to self for audiences.

Allow us to close our exploration of witchcraft with a striking example of how a group of playwrights made a major effort to offer audience members intentionally a unique spectatorial risk to their very selves. In this final section, we will interrogate Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton* as a prime example of dramatic performance that consciously attempted to implicate the audience into the larger world of witchcraft. In particular, I argue that this play worked to construct audience empathy for its protagonist. This empathy, moreover, is employed to demonstrate that similar seductions into sin and witchcraft could happen to anyone and, thus, intertwined the audience into the plight of the witch. To support my reading of the play, I draw from Nathan Johnstone's analysis of the period's changing portrayal of the Devil to an internalized and ever-present force of evil within all people.

The Witch of Edmonton explores the presence of witchcraft in a small town outside of London and the ways interactions with the Devil can ripple into tangible consequences for its residents. The play itself is structured as three overlapping subplots that reinforce or contrast based on their characters' responses to Satan's presence. Providing its namesake, the first plot revolves around Mother Sawyer, a poor and isolated spinster, who is systemically mistreated by the other townsfolk. Her anger and cursing directed at Old Banks for his abuse prompts the appearance of the Devil, in the form of a dog, who promises vengeance in exchange for her soul. Sawyer acquiesces only after he threatens her with violence and begins a relationship with the Devil-Dog that eventually produces her trial and death after he abandons her. Frank Thorney has

a similarly horrific encounter with the Devil. Son of a poor gentleman, Frank submits to his

father's request to marry Susan, the daughter of their rich yeoman neighbor, despite the fact that

he has already married and impregnated a local maid and is attempting to run away with her.

While Frank is trying to placate all parties, the Dog's presence produces murderous

consequences as Frank kills Susan, falsely blames others, and is eventually sent off to be killed.

Finally, a comedic plot counterbalances the stories of Sawyer and Frank as Cuddy Banks, the

production's clown, encounters the Dog. Rather than vengeance or solutions to previous sins,

Cuddy Banks enlists the Devil's assistance for joviality and comfort as he invites the Dog to the

local Morris Dance and tries to find love. These innocent requests provide audiences with

contrasts to Sawyer and Frank and produce a series of comic moments including a quick

"ducking" into the lake. Importantly, Cuddy Banks is spared from the play's tragic endings as he

banishes the Devil-Dog for only wanting to cause pain to others.

Collaboratively written by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, *The Witch

of Edmonton* premiered sometime in late 1621.[122] The play offered spectators a dramatic retelling

of the year's most sensational witch-trial: the arrest and execution of Mother Elizabeth Sawyer.

The accusation and trial of Sawyer, a poor wife and mother, took the area by storm due to the

detailed confession and documentation of her long-standing relationship with Satan but also its

proximity to the urban center of London; indeed, many viewed the events as having occurred in

their own backyard. On 19 April 1621, Sawyer was publicly executed; her confession—extorted

from her with "great labour"—was read in its entirely to the crowds that had gather and she

---

[122] While E. K. Chambers records the first performance at Court by the Prince's men on 29 Dec 1621, Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge argue for an earlier but unknown date as "Prince Charles' Company would have wished to capitalize on the current sensation" of Elizabeth Sawyer's trial from earlier that year. See Corbin and Sedge's Introduction to *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 20-21.

acknowledged its truth before praying that God "forgiue me my greeuous sinnes."[123]

Importantly, this public performance of misconduct, repentance, and capital punishment was recorded and widely disseminated by the jurist Henry Goodcole in a pamphlet that brought the juicy details of Sawyer's crimes into the homes of Londoners. The booklet offered readers a detailed "Question and Answer" portion in which Sawyer elaborates on the particulars of her witchcraft and is punctuated with moralizing commentary from Goodcole as he warns readers of falling into Satan's trap by repeating Sawyer's dangerous behaviors.

Rowley, Dekker, and Ford relied heavily on Goodcole's report. While the playwrights took small liberties with Sawyer's story, such as erasing her family in order to further frame her as an isolated and vulnerable widow and juxtaposing her offenses alongside two fictitious but parallel subplots, *The Witch of Edmonton* endeavored to present on stage what was recorded in the witch-trial. The playwrights labored to include both the quotidian interactions of village life and the supernatural presence of Satan as Sawyer had described. This effort to accurately combine both pieces of Goodcole's testimony have even led scholars such as Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge to refer to the play as an early production of the more modern genre of docudrama "for almost all the events of the Eilzabeth Sawyer action are drawn from Goodcole's report."[124] Audiences, then, who had seen or read Sawyer's witch-trial encountered not a fictitious portrayal of events but interpretations of how documented events affected the characters. The playwrights' decision to portray accurately the events recorded in Goodcole's pamphlet demonstrated a conscious attempt to relate the subject material to the lives of audience

---

[123] Henry Goodcole, *The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer a witch late of Edmonton, her conuiction and condemnation and death* (London, 1621; Ann Arbor: Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A01874.0001.001.
[124] Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge, introduction to *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays,* eds. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 22.

members and to allow spectators themselves to judge its cause and the appropriateness of its

punishment.

Through drawing closely from Goodcole's report, the playwrights fostered an experience

of spectatorial risk to self. The play intentionally utilized strategies that intertwined audience

members into the world of witchcraft widely accepted as real and made them complicit in its

practices. Specifically, it was through reproducing Goodcole's recording on the stage that the

playwrights both blurred the lines between entertainment and efficacy in specific witchcraft

performatives and allowed opportunities for spectators to learn and repeat key phrases that led to

Sawyer's demise. For a clear example of these strategies, we can analyze the scene in which

Sawyer initially encounters the Devil-Dog. Having been physically and verbally abused by the

landowner Old Banks, Sawyer, alone, lashes out against Banks and the whole community that

she may be "at hate with prayer" to learn curses, imprecations, blasphemous speeches, and

detested oaths so that she might "work revenge" upon those who have wronged her (2.1.112-

116).[125] No sooner does her speech end that Dog excitedly appears on stage, exclaiming "Ho!

Have I found thee cursing? Now thou art mine own" (2.1.121). These dramatic events closely

mirrored Goodcole's pamphlet. When Goodcole asked Sawyer how she met the Devil, she

responded assuredly that "The first time that the Diuell came vnto me was, when I was cursing,

swearing and blaspheming" and that his first words were "Oh! haue I now found you cursing,

swearing, and blaspheming? now you are mine."[126] Importantly, the stage not only repeated

(roughly) the same correspondence between Sawyer and the Devil, but drew on anxieties

between entertainment and efficacy to tantalize the audience that speaking certain lines on stage

[125] William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton*, in *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays,* eds. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).
[126] Goodcole, *The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer a witch late of Edmonton*.

might produce efficacious results. Just as Faustus' conjuring circles—perceived as an effective ritual—*might* conjure real demons on the stage, so too *might* re-performances of cursing, swearing, and blaspheming. According to Goodcole, Sawyer later uses her story as a "wonderful warning to many whose tongues are too frequent in these abhominable sinnes," further building the strong causal relationship between cursing and summoning devils.[127] The play, then, crafts an experience for spectators by which they can witness dangerous speech acts, simultaneously framed as efficacious in the real world but "hollow" on stage, and place themselves at the edge of possibility where some accidental slippage might occur.

Later in this same scene, the play intentionally employs an instance of call-and-response and repetition in order to teach the language of witchcraft to spectators. After Mother Sawyer agrees to give her soul to Satan, the Dog instructs her in a spell that she can use whenever she wishes someone ill. The Dog tells Sawyer to turn her back to the sun and to mumble this short prayer: "*If thou to death or shame pursue 'em Sanctibicetur nomen tuum*" (2.1.175-6). Again, this particular moment within the dramatic narrative is borrowed from Goodcole's report as Sawyer explains to the Jurist that she was taught this specific phrase from the "Diuell alone" but adds that "neither doe I vnderstand the meaning of these words, nor can speake any more Latine words."[128] Playing off of Sawyer's inability to understand Latin, the play depicts the instruction of this phrase in a comedic manner. After the Dog speaks the prayer and Sawyer repeats it—a clear example of the call-and-response trope—, she echoes the phrase four more times throughout the scene. However, with each iteration her memory and pronunciation increasingly falter, producing "prayers" that make less and less sense. This routine fosters learning and internalization for spectators. Not only does the audience learn the Devil's spell alongside

---

[127] Goodcole, *The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer a witch late of Edmonton*.
[128] Goodcole, *The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer a witch late of Edmonton*.

Sawyer, but their recognition of the joke is also dependent on their ability to correctly articulate the prayer to summon the Devil. While spectators might laugh at Sawyer's inability to remember the proper orison, it is only because they themselves have memorized the very phrase that the *real* Sawyer had learned from the Devil. Similar to Mother Sawyer's cursing and blaspheming, the playwrights' strategy to foster moments of learning produced a spectatorial risk to the audience itself as they learned the very practices for which the real Sawyer was executed just outside of their city walls.

In addition to these strategies, perhaps the most effective way that *The Witch of Edmonton* fostered spectatorial risk was through asking audiences to connect and empathize with Mother Sawyer. The play asked audience members to place themselves as knowledgeable members of Sawyer's jury and potentially implicate themselves in her actions by empathizing with the factors that led to her demise. This empathy is intentionally constructed through building a realistic social environment in which the attraction to witchcraft can be caused through social exclusion and abuse. Furthermore, empathizing with Sawyer might have threatened spectators with a counter-normative way of reading and understanding witchcraft that acknowledged all people's capacity to fall victim to Satan due to internal temptation. This new outlook on witchcraft might produce risks to audiences themselves through resisting the period's dominant ideology that universally labeled witches as dangerous, maleficent figures. Rather than immediately rejecting any indication of witchcraft, the play asked spectators to step to the edge of acceptable ideology and to understand, or even forgive, Mother Sawyer's wrongdoings through critically reevaluating the cause and nature of her witchcraft (and thus potentially of others' as well). Rowley, Dekker, and Fords' play, then, relies on building empathy and community between its witch and audience members in order to foster a spectatorial risk to self.

Building empathy is impossible without spectators being able to identify themselves within the characters or context of a performance. As such, *The Witch of Edmonton* attempted to bring not only the accounts of Goodcole's pamphlet to the stage but the entire town of Edmonton. The play's local and realistic setting pushed back against the pattern of framing *maleficium* as remote and fantastic. While *Macbeth* represented witchcraft within a historically and geographically distanced location and the events of *Doctor Faustus* transpired in an ambiguous, constantly shifting time and place, the story of Mother Sawyer presented authentic details of the social environment that led to her downfall. As Corbin and Sedge note, in addition to frequent references to neighboring villages as well as districts and locations in London that would have appealed to urban theatregoers, the play's "most striking characteristics is its detailed evocation of the life of such a community, its social structure, concerns, and activities," which "adds authenticity" to the audience's perception of witchcraft.[129] Indeed, audiences witnessed how enclosure laws endangered the survival of the community's most vulnerable members; they observed the impacts and challenges caused by a changing class system where gentlemen have lost economic stability and are increasingly threatened by the growing power of commoners; they became part of not only rural village entertainment through a Morris Dance but also the chaos of accusations and testimonies enacted by the community. While these regional specifics constructed what K. M. Briggs called "the soberest and most factual of all the witch plays," they also enabled audiences to relate to the local characters—their hopes, dreams, fears, and anxieties—and better understand their motives and driving forces.[130]

The nuanced, realistic setting of *The Witch of Edmonton* allowed spectators to understand the social factors that might convince an individual to pursue the art of witchcraft and even begin

---

[129] Corbin and Sedge, introduction to *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays*, 21-22.
[130] K. M. Briggs, *Pale Hecate's Team* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 94.

to empathize with their plight. When spectators first meet Mother Sawyer, she is trespassing on Old Banks' land to gather fallen sticks for her meager sustenance and laments to the audience a long history of abuse she has suffered from the townspeople. She laments that "'Cause I am poor, deformed and ignorant… must I for that be made a common sink for all the filth and rubbish of men's tongues to fall and run into?" (2.1.3-8). Furthermore, she recounts how the villagers have begun continuously referring to her as a witch and scorning her presence as such. She notes that "some call me witch, and, being ignorant of myself, they go about to teach me how to be one" (2.1.8-10). Her words prove true as moments later, Old Banks rushes out to end Sawyer's gathering; he refers to her as "witch" and "hag" before striking and beating her. After he leaves, Mother Sawyer is left to reflect on her physical pain and presumed social status: "Abuse me! Beat me! Call me hag and witch! What is the name? Where and by what art learned? What spells, what charms or invocations May the thing called Familiar be purchased?" (2.1.33-36). As detailed above, no sooner does she curse and blaspheme than the Devil-Dog arrives. Spectators, then, witnessed as specific social structures—namely the policy of enclosure and the absence of social safety nets—produced an environment in which systemic rejection and persecution *produced* witchcraft, rather than any innate sacrilegious behavior within Mother Sawyer.

Furthermore, once the Dog arrived, the playwrights emphasize outside factors as a cause for Sawyer's engagement with witchcraft. Although she seems to speak her desire for occult powers into existence since "'Tis all one to be a witch as to be counted one," Mother Sawyer seems to have a change of heart once the Dog demands her soul (2.1.118-9). In fact, audiences watch as she even commands the Dog "Out, alas!" (2.1.134). The Devil-Dog, however, twice threatens her with physical pain; if she disagrees, he menaces that he will "tear thy body in a

thousand pieces" (2.1.137). Left with few alternatives, Sawyer acquiesces, denounces God, and

officially becomes that which she has already been deemed by the community.

The play, then, guides spectators through a realistic inciting incident in order to depict the

social causes and demonic provocations that could entice the poor and wretched to witchcraft. As

the specific attributes of village life enabled audiences to envision their own community, the

playwrights attempt to build empathy between Sawyer and spectators. Her social mistreatment

that already presumed a connection with witchcraft combined with her apparent reluctance to

actually become subservient to the Devil both created for the audience a more complex picture

than Goodcole's pamphlet allowed. The play's complication of events produced both the time

and space for spectators to rethink their negative assumptions regarding Sawyer and begin to

empathize with her plight. In fact, this unique treatment of a witch protagonist is so striking for

the period that it has become the focus of many analyses on the play. Dramaturgically, Corbin

and Sedge have argued that "Sawyer is presented in such a way that the audience is invited to

respond to her with sympathy as a victim both of the devil's wiles and the social prejudices of

the community in which she lives."[131] Similarly, Robert Rentoul Reed Jr. noted that the

collaborative playwrighting produced a dramatic structure that enabled "the reader's heartfelt

sympathy" for Mother Sawyer.[132] Vivianna Comensoli, too, has argued that the play makes the

"radical statement" that Sawyer was "not an agent of supernatural powers but an individual

confronting an entrenched social code that relegates old and poverty-ridden spinsters to the

devil's company."[133] Audiences of *The Witch of Edmonton* might have begun to see Sawyer's

story as a process of social causation or demonic force that relieves her of some of the blame.

---

[131] Corbin and Sedge, introduction to *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays*, 24.

[132] Robert Rentoul Reed Jr., *The Occult on the Tudor and Stuart Stage* (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1965), 183.

[133] Comensoli, *'Household business': Domestic Plays of Early Modern England*, 121.

225

Indeed, Sawyer echoes this sentiment later in the play during her "trial" as she argues that for women who are both old and poor, "Such so abused are the coarse witches, t'other are the fine, spun for the devil's own wearing" (4.1.124-126). In other words, she reminds spectators that the persecution hurled upon society's most vulnerable produced abuses that Satan capitalized on to recruit new witches. In sum, the play consciously attempts to build empathy between spectators and the protagonist.

Building empathy for Mother Sawyer was not an end in itself but a means to emphasize that similar events could happen to *anyone* due to the internal and ever-present temptation by the Devil. Here, it is important to return to the moment when Satan arrives in front of Mother Sawyer after she was caught "cursing, swearing and blaspheming"—that parallel event from both Goodcole's testimony and Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's play. This moment is especially important as it demonstrates not only the power of performative speech acts in regard to witchcraft but the looming process by which interior thoughts can product efficacious results. A component of building empathy for Sawyer meant that spectators not only understood the motivational forces that might spur such curses but also acknowledged that they might have had similar internal thoughts. To have empathy for Sawyer, then, was to reflect again upon one's own dark thoughts.

To better understand the threat of internal thoughts and impulses, we can draw from Nathan Johnstone's *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* in which he explores how perceptions and conceptions of the Devil slyly pervaded Early Modern discursive mediums. He argues that the largest change to the conception of the Devil following the Protestant Revolution was the reconfiguring of the devil as an *internal* agent who was capable of inflicting permanent harm on individuals and community through temptation. No longer perceived as the

226

cloven-hooved, fire-and-brimstone devil, Satan increasingly became an internal force that

tempted individuals to do and say that which was immoral during every moment of the day.

Importantly, this internal reinterpretation did not diminish Satan's strength but drastically

increased its danger through his pervasive power "to invade the consciousness disguised as the

most commonplace thoughts and desires."[134] Having established that mundane desires derive

from the internal temptation of Satan, Johnstone links this "ubiquitous phenomenon" to empathy,

explaining that an internal diabolic presence was best understood "through an empathy with the

experience of its victims (however culpable they might be)."[135] In other words, new modes of

conceptualizing the Devil as an internal force were understandable as every man and woman, at

some point or another, has had internal urges and desires. In this way, when looking at witches

and other criminals from the period, it was not the "otherness" of these sinners that mattered,

"but their ordinariness."[136] As everyone experienced temptation, the gap between witches and

ordinary folk became increasingly small.

Johnstone's argument is important in analyzing the building of empathy in *The Witch of*

Edmonton. Having witnessed the social exclusion and abuses that pushed Mother Sawyer into

making internal desires a tangible reality, audiences were able to see how her interior motives

reflected everyday temptations induced by the Devil and reinforced through the community. In

this way, Sawyer's story is constructed to emphasize the uniting temptations present in all

interlocutors but to which Sawyer, unfortunately, succumbs. Spectators are challenged to see

their own internal temptations and desires through Sawyer and question whether her outcome

was really one of a deranged and hostile witch or of simply an unfortunate and isolated victim.

---

[134] Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 28.
[135] Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*, 17.
[136] Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*, 143.

Spectators are asked to reflect on the social causation of Sawyer's temptation and ponder if the difference between themselves and her was actually very wide. These challenges are reinforced by playwrights at the end of the play as the Dog reminds Cuddy Banks that "Thou never art so distant from an evil spirit but that thy oaths, curses and blasphemies pull him to thine elbow" (5.1.128-130). The play reminds its audience that, as consequences await the performative acts of interior temptations, a similar fate to Mother Sawyer's might be in store for them. They caution spectators, then, not only not to judge the witch too severely but also to be afraid for their own spiritual liability.

In addition to blurring the edges between entertainment and efficacy and teaching the specific spells of witchcraft to be later repeated, *The Witch of Edmonton* consciously created a spectatorial risk to self through asking audiences to empathize with Mother Sawyer and recognize both the social causation of her downfall as well as the similar internal temptations that they likely experienced. This act of empathizing with the experience of the narrative's witch worked to implicate audience into the larger collective of witchcraft. Rather than simply positioning the spectator's body through theatre architecture or including the audience as active participants in a given activity, Rowley, Dekker, and Ford intentionally fold spectators into the dark community of witches by asking them to side with Mother Sawyer, understand her dilemma, and recognize the shared internal desires that bind everyone together. Building empathy, then, invited spectators to the edge of normative behavior where spectators risked their very bodies and souls through this counter-normative experience; their new insights into witchcraft might produce skepticism or real-world empathy that could pose a threat both to their soul but to their body if accusing eyes were to be turned towards them. *The Witch of Edmonton*,

thus, offered audiences not only a dramatic retelling of 1621's most sensational headline but the experiential opportunity to engage with risk.

Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's play exhibits a deliberate attempt to capitalize on the larger social and spiritual anxieties created through witchcraft. As this chapter has shown, black magic obtained through demonic association was an exceptionally threatening force in Early Modern Europe; it lurked in every shadow and threatened to produce dire consequences to communities, socio-political institutions, and even upset the balance between heaven and hell. The anxieties and curiosities of witchcraft, however, were not buried and hidden but publicly displayed and performed in the theatre. Theatre-makers intentionally incorporated aspects of witchcraft, from specific gestures to efficacious language and from actual stories of real-life witches to imagined portrayals of the witches' covens, in order to entice viewers. The theatre did more, though, than simply represent what was in audiences' imaginations. The subject of witchcraft enabled theatre-makers to craft experiences that offered a unique spectatorial risk to self for audience members. Through engaging with on-stage performatives of witchcraft—often those same performatives that led to accusations and executions outside of theatre walls—, spectators became implicated in these acts and placed their very bodies and souls at risk. Just as engaging with witchcraft was a dangerous activity in the real-world, engaging with its practices in the theatre could prove just as risky.

Conclusion

Applying a New Critical Lens:

Lil Nas X, "Montero," and Dangerous Possibilities

In lieu of a formal conclusion, allow us to linger a moment longer on the pleasures and dangers of spectatorial risk as we return to the present day. As this research project argued, it was my initial objective to develop a usable critical lens through which the triangulation of performance, the spectator, and the experience of risk might be explored; I noted that former attempts to theorize the spectator's engagement with risk had been overly specific and limited analysis to individual performances and theatre-makers. It has been my hope that through the term "spectatorial risk" our lens can expand past simply what might happen to spectators themselves and encompass the broad range of excitements, hopes, anxieties, and fears that are produced *for* and experienced *by* audiences. While the chapters of this project have endeavored to apply this critical lens to patterns of Early Modern European performance—which I have worked to show was a particularly salient spatial and temporal site in the relationship between performance, spectatorship, and risk—, I hope to use these final pages as a reminder that spectatorial risk can be a critical lens applicable more broadly.

Just as the emerging market economy of Early Modern Europe produced innovative work that employed risk as a discernable performance element, the twenty-first century has also seen renewed engagement with the powerful allure of risk. The rapid expansion of performance platforms created through new online modalities has offered audiences a seemingly endless array of entertainment options, and many modern artists have drawn on potentially risky material to entice spectators through combinations of pleasure and danger. Just as spectatorial risk was used as a critical lens to better understand how Early Modern audiences engaged with risk, its

flexibility makes it equally useful in analyzing the spectator's experience of risk today. In this brief final case study, let us turn our attention to an exceptionally recent example of risky performance. Here, we will explore the newest song—and its accompanying music video and retail product—by Grammy award-winning rapper, Lil Nas X. Through employing our critical lens, we can better investigate the diverse array of possible responses that spectators might experience due to the song's simultaneously enticing and threatening nature.

On March 25th, 2021, Lil Nas X premiered his newest single, "Montero (Call Me by Your Name)." Behind the catchy combination of flamenco guitar riffs, syncopated hand claps, and thumping bass, the song reveals an intimate exploration of self-identity and internal desires. The lyrics begins by framing a scenario in which Lil Nas X waits for a phone call from the closeted man with whom he yearns for an intimate connection. A frustration appears as the musician senses his own sexual demons in the object of his affection; the same social pressures that kept Lil Nas X closeted in his own sexuality seem entrenched in his would-be romantic partner as well. The tension between one's true identity and the constraints of social pressures is substantial in the track and aptly summarized by one reviewer who noted how "haunting the track is harmonious humming, as if the unrequited love is being reflected back at him."[1] This tension, furthermore, is left unresolved. The song ends with the rapper imploring his love interest to call him anytime and he will be on his way; all that Lil Nas X asks for is to be told "I love you," even if it is only in private.

While the song itself features sexually suggestive lyrics and an intimate exploration of queer identity and desire, it was the visual addition of its accompanying music video that effectively turned heads and propelled the song to viral status. Edited together to form a triptych

---

[1] Da'Shan Smith, "Don't Let the 'Montero' Controversy Distract from Lil Nas X's Superior Musicality," *MTV News,* published March 31, 2021, http://www.mtv.com/news/3175844/lil-nas-x-montero-controversy-musicality/.

of vignettes, the opening scene begins with a voiceover in which Lil Nas X frames Montero—both the artist's given name and the name of the authentic world he hopes to create—as a place where individuals can express themselves freely with no fear of social restraint: "In life, we hide the parts of ourselves we don't want the world to see. We lock them away. We tell them no. We banish them. But here, we don't. Welcome to Montero."[2] The scene then zooms in on Lil Nas X resting in an idyllic garden before encountering an anthropomorphic snake that attempts to seduce the musician through his penetrating gaze and erotic foreplay. Lil Nas X finally surrenders to his urges as he reaches up to pull the snakes lips to his. The next scene can be read as a direct result to having acted on this desire. Moving from the privacy of the Edenic garden to the public sphere, Lil Nas X is forced to stand trial for his nonnormative identity and behavior. Judgement is rendered through a public stoning in which interlocutors punish the artist for his perceived transgressions. Finally, spectators witness the musician's interpretation of Christianity's heaven and hell duality. While the soul of Lil Nas X seems to initially be floating upwards towards heaven, at the last moment his hand grasps a pole which he uses to slide down to hell. In the music video's most provocative scene, the artist confronts Satan and proceeds to give him a sensual lapdance; it seems as though the carnal pleasures for which he was killed continue to express themselves in the afterlife (Figure 13). In the last moments of the video, Lil Nas X finishes his erotic grinding and steps behind Satan; he twists the Devil's neck to kill him and then proceeds to remove his crown and adorn himself as the new master of hell.

In addition to the provocative music video, Lil Nas X celebrated the release of his single with the simultaneous release of 666 pairs of custom designed "Satan Shoes" (Figure 14).

---

[2] Lil Nas X, "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)," March 25, 2021, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6swmTBVI83k.

Figure 13. In hell, Lil Nas X gives Satan a lapdance before killing him and usurping his throne.

Figure 14. Promotional image of Lil Nas X and MSCHF's "Satan Shoes" collaboration.

Designed in collaboration with Brooklyn-based designer MSCHF, the promotional Satan Shoes were customized Nike trainers that featured Satanic iconography such as a pentagram and inverted cross. Perhaps most striking about the shoes—or intriguing or disturbing depending on one's perspective—was the claim by MSCHF that every pair contained a drop of real human blood in its signature liquid sole.[3] Despite their scandalous appearance, the Satan Shoes sold out within minutes of their release. Perhaps this was due to the rapper's popularity. Or, perhaps this dash to purchase the shoes reflected a suspicion that that "Montero" and its accompanying footwear would immediately become a lightning rod of controversy. For these consumers, the combination of Lil Nas X publicly expressing queer desire, his riding a stripper pole down to hell to give Satan a lapdance, and his release of Satan Shoes certainly promised to make some members of the public very uncomfortable.

These footwear collectors were correct as critics immediately positioned Lil Nas X and his new material as a site of spectatorial risk to morality. From pastors behind the church pulpit to conservative pundits behind the newsroom desk, Lil Nas X's song became a reminder of the power of art to sway the hearts and minds of audiences. The rapper's sexually explicit lyrics combined with homoerotic acts were quickly positioned as dangerous cultural ideas that risked the morality of anyone who engaged with them—especially in circles in which queerness constitutes sinful behavior. Some critics forcefully accused the musician of "destroying society" while others mocked "Montero" as a "desperate and pathetic" attempt to steer society down the wrong path.[4] These attacks returned to the well-worn Platonic critique of art in which spectators would naturally mimic what they see and hear in front of them.

[3] India Block, "Satan Shoes by Lil Nas X and MSCHF are Nikes Containing Human Blood," *De Zeen*, published March 29, 2021, https://www.dezeen.com/2021/03/29/satan-shoes-lil-nas-x-mschf-nike-shoes-blood/.
[4] Glenn Garner, "Lil Nas X Responds to Backlash Over 'Twerking on a CGI Satan' in 'Montero' Music Video," *People,* published March 28, 2021, https://people.com/music/lil-nas-x-responds-to-backlash-over-montero-music-

The attacks on Lil Nas X were especially virulent when looking at the risk to morality concerning the nation's youth. While many critics might have viewed the latest addition to the rapper's oeuvre as a fleeting and self-serving attempt to corrupt others, they still worried that his lyrics and imagery would negatively impact children. In other words, opponents criticized that while adults might have the mental and moral capacity to resist these scandalous suggestions, children do not and are more at risk of endangering their own moral worldview. This attack on Lil Nas X concerning the negative effects on children were even voiced by fellow rappers. For instance, in a since-deleted tweet, socially-active and race-conscious rapper Lucas Joyner condemned Lil Nas X for posting explicit, homoerotic material with no content warning, "So with no disclaimer he just dropped some left field ish & all our kids seen it. Smh."[5] Joyner, among other critics, shakes his head in disappointment that the song's perverting message might contaminate others.

Importantly, Joyner's comment that "all our kids seen it" reflects the massive popularity that Lil Nas X had developed with young audiences following the success of his 2019 hit "Old Town Road," which established him as a household name and launched the young rapper into musical stardom. "Old Town Road" was not only a cross-over hit that combined hip-hop, pop, and country,[6] but its catchy melody and rebellious refrain ("Can't nobody tell me nothing/ You can't tell me nothing") made the song, and the artist, immensely popular with children. Its popularity produced a children's version on the *Kidz Bop* music channel, garnered an invitation

video/; Jewel Wicker, "Lil Nas X has last word as controversy erupts over 'devil-worshipping' video," *The Guardian*, published March 30, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/mar/30/lil-nas-x-montero-call-me-by-your-name-twitter.

[5] Wicker, "Lil Nas X has last word as controversy erupts over 'devil-worshipping' video."

[6] The broad appeal of Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" is especially evident through its 2020 Grammy's performance in which the rapper performs the song alongside a diverse group of fellow musicians representing different genres. Featured alongside Lil Nas X was the famous K-pop group BTS, country music legend, Billy Ray Cyrus, and upcoming prodigy, Mason Ramsey, electronic DJ Diplo, and one of the most esteemed and influential rappers Nas.

to the rapper to sing along with Elmo on Sesame Street's "Not-So-Late-Show," and even

impelled Lil Nas X to write and publish a children's book titled *C is for Country*. Lil Nas X's

popularity with children is perhaps best seen through the surprise May 2019 performance of "Old

Town Road" at Lander Elementary School located outside Cleveland, Ohio. The rapper makes

an appearance at the elementary school to celebrate with the students on their last day before

summer break. In the video recording, viewers can witness the unbridled excitement with which

these students sing along with Lil Nas X; it becomes clear through their screaming and dancing

that they know more than simply the refrain, they sing along to every word.[7] For critics like

Joyner, Lil Nas X's "Montero" produced a spectatorial risk to morality that was particularly

significant for young people. Through engaging with the song's erotic themes, audiences—

including these same impressionable children—were positioned as malleable objects that might

disregard normative social practices and moral decorum and mimic behaviors deemed

transgressive, anarchic, and dangerous.

 "Montero" not only produced a risk to morality but also encouraged its interlocutors to

engage with a spectatorial risk to self. Through the combined imagery of the artist sliding down

to hell and the promotion of his incendiary Satan Shoes, critics attacked Lil Nas X for not only

corrupting society's moral standards but for leading himself and his fans to eternal damnation.

This was especially apparent in critics such as Tennessee pastor Greg Locke, who warned people

to stay away from the self-damning "demonism, devilism, and psychotic wickedness" of the

rapper, and South Dakota conservative governor Kristi Noem, who pushed back against the artist

and argued that America was "in a fight for the soul of our nation" and that people's "God-given

---

[7] "Lil Nas X surprising the kids of Lander Elementary," May 29, 2019, video,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yvxqwlENxU.

eternal soul" was far more valuable and exclusive than a pair of shoes.[8] These critiques highlight the perceived risk to one's own salvation that was placed in jeopardy through engaging with Lil Nas X's song. While listening to "Montero" or watching its video might cause individuals to enact similar behaviors, these opponents framed this immoral behavior as one that not only threatened social morals but the very souls of individuals. Just as the rapper's queer identity and homoerotic desire cast him down to hell—as enacting perceived deviant behavior produces eternal punishments—, detractors cautioned that the same result would await any individuals who followed Lil Nas X's example or who wore the satanic footwear. In this way, "Montero" not only taught behaviors that undermined morality, but the repetition of these acts threatened to diminish one's inner spirit and the possibility for eternal salvation.

If "Montero" threatened the moral fabric of society and the eternal souls of individuals enticed by its transgressive behaviors and message, it also promised certain pleasures and a new way of seeing one's place in the world. Certainly, spectators enjoyed the pleasures of coming into contact with the aforementioned risks; for some fans of Lil Nas X, one of the most enticing aspects of the artist's work was simply the fact that so many opponents existed who cautioned people away from his music. More than just the pleasure of rebellion, however, "Montero" offered its interlocutors a different way of viewing society that privileged an individual's freedom of expression outside the constraints of normative social pressures and regulation. Specifically in regard to sexual orientation and gender identity, "Montero" offered audience members an empowering counter-normative perspective that pushes against the boundaries whereby an individual might exist and carves space in society for other ways of being. Again, Lil Nas X notes from the beginning of the music video that individuals often hide parts of

---

[8] Aja Romano, "Lil Nas X's Evil Gay Satanic Agenda, Explained," *Vox*, published March 29, 2021, https://www.vox.com/22356438/lil-nas-x-satan-shoes-nike-montero-video-gay-agenda-christian-controversy.

themselves that do not fit nicely into social norms, and his project envisions a world in which people can be who they truly are. In this way, the narrative of "Montero's" music video expands past the single reading in which a queer man gives in to his temptations and is sentenced to hell. While this interpretation can be read as both valid and a convenient way of understanding the risks to morality and self espoused by his critics, Lil Nas X's work also offers a counter reading in which individuals reject social constraint and the narrative of fear created by powerful social institutions and, instead, claim agency over their own lives. This dual reading is especially apparent in the video's final moments in which the artist adorns himself with Satan's horns and becomes a devil himself. While critics might read this moment as evidence that immoral behavior leads to condemnation, it can also be interpreted as a message of agency in which the powerful forces of fear and social control are rebuked, and the individual takes control of his own life. The ambiguity of this reading prompts the experience of risk for the viewer as it opens the possibility of both damnation and individual agency; these possible effects sit side-by-side for audiences and frame "Montero" as a text that can both damage and enlighten.

In addition to using social media to answer and refute the attacks of critics, Lil Nas X used his online platforms to heighten the possilibity of eternal damnation as well as encourage an empowering way of reading his controversial work. Concurrent to the release of his music video and promotional Satan Shoes, Lil Nas X posted a short letter to his former fourteen-year-old self in which he asks forgiveness for using his sexuality as a subject for public debate but that it is important because doing so "will open doors for many other queer people to simply exist."[9] He goes on to address how his new song will likely make people angry and accuse him that he is pushing an agenda before firmly declaring, "but the truth is, i am. the agenda to make people stay

---

[9] Lil Nas X (@lilnasx), "dear 14 year old Montero, i wrote a song with our name in it. it's about a guy i met last summer…", Instagram, March 25, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CM3i2RelCkK/.

the fuck out of other people's lives and stop dictating who they should be." Reading "Montero" through the rapper's own argument of what he wants people to take from his work, Lil Nas X suggests that he has not forgotten the young people that comprise much of his fan base but, instead, directly speaks to them to offer a new way of seeing the world; he opens the possibility that "Montero" can allow for a freedom of self-expression as well as the rejection of social norms that create fear through social pressures. Pushing against the homogenizing control of social regulations grounded in fear that "seem to avoid even *imagining* a world of queer thriving," Lil Nas X invites his audience to step to the edge of permitted social order and rethink the social structures that dictate what is and what is not allowed.[10] While approaching the boundaries of normative society poses the threat that one might encounter harmful behaviors that effect an individual's morality and eternal soul, it also offers the possibility for some viewers to imagine existing in society as they truly are instead of how they are told to be.

In sum, spectatorial risk is a useful critical lens through which to inspect not only the production of risky material but also the diverse experiences of individual spectators as they engage with a given cultural product. Through inspecting the different ways that individuals might be drawn to "Montero," it becomes clear that the music video and accompanying retail products frame Lil Nas X as the purveyor of both risky dangers and enticing pleasures. Engaging with his music involved a simultaneous engagement with palpable risks to morality and to individuals' eternal souls; witnessing and potentially repeating the perceived deviant behaviors of Lil Nas X jeopardized both society as well as the individuals within it. Its pleasures, furthermore, extend past simply engaging with the presumed dangers heaped on the work by

---

[10] Ashon Crawley, "I Grew Up Afraid. Lil Nas X's 'Montero' Is the Lesson I Needed," *NPR*, published April 14, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/04/14/986466561/i-grew-up-afraid-lil-nas-xs-montero-is-the-lesson-i-needed. [original emphasis].

critics as it promised a new way of looking at one's place in the world. Similar to our Early

Modern examples of savvy theatre-makers who intentionally used risk as a marketing strategy,

the rapper balances his empowering description of a society free from judgement alongside

counter-normative visuals and products that predictably drew attacks from critics and,

subsequently, enticed curious viewers to experience the dangers for themselves. These dangers

maintained by opponents certainly induced additional spectators to judge for themselves whether

the song would corrupt as promised or enlighten as Lil Nas X had hoped; in short, they were

enticed by the diverse possibility of what they *might* encounter. Whereas for some, the public

display of queer identity and homoerotic desire might have introduced a risk to morality and self,

for others, this same display might have reimagined a more inclusive world in which individuals

are free to be themselves and are no longer forced to hide those innate aspects of themselves that

make them who they are.

Bibliography

Albright, Ann Cooper. "Split Intimacies: Corporeality in Contemporary Theater and Dance." In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theatre,* edited by Nadine George-Graves, 19-34. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Alston, Adam. "'Tell No One': Secret Cinema and the Paradox of Secrecy." In *Performance and Participation: Practices, Audiences, Politics*, edited by Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson, 145-163. New York: Palgrave: 2017.

Alston, Adam. "Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency, and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre." *Performance Research* 18, no. 2 (2013): 128-138.

Andrews, Richard. *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

The Apprehension and confession of three notorious Witches. Arreigned and by Justice condemned and executed at Chelmes-forde, in the Countye of Essex. London, 1589; Ann Arbor: Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011 http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A18586.0001.001.

Apps, Lara and Andrew Gow. *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life.* Translated by Robert Baldick. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962.

Arnoldi, Jakob. *Risk: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

Barbieri, Nicolò. *La Supplica: discorso famigliare a quelli che trattano de' comici.* Edited by Ferdinando Taviani. Milan: Il Polifilo, 1971.

Barker, Francis. *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection*. London: Methuen, 1984.

Barton, Bruce. "Subtle Spectacle: Risking Theatricality with Vertical City." *About Performance* 12 (2014): 103-125.

Baschet, Armand. *Les comédiens italiens a la cour de France sous Charles IX, Henri III, Henri IV et Louis XIII*. Paris: E. Plon, 1882.

Beaumont, Francis. *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. In *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, edited by David Bevington et. al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter. London: Sage Publications, 1992.

Bernstein, Peter L. *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996.

Bevington, David. "Introduction to *Doctor Faustus*." In *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, edited by David Bevington et al. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002. 245-249.

Bial, Henry. "Play." In *The Performance Studies Reader, Second Edition*, edited by Henry Bial, 135-136. London: Routledge, 2007.

Bibbiena, Bernardo Dovizi da. *La calandra*. In *Five Comedies from the Italian Renaissance*. Translated and Edited by Laura Giannetti and Guido Ruggiero. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

Block, India. "Satan Shoes by Lil Nas X and MSCHF are Nikes Containing Human Blood." *De Zeen*, published March 29, 2021. https://www.dezeen.com/2021/03/29/satan-shoes-lil-nas-x-mschf-nike-shoes-blood/.

Bloom, Gina. "Games." In *Early Modern Theatricality*, edited by Henry S. Turner, 189-211. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Bly, Mary. *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Bodin, Jean. *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale.* Translated by Richard Knolles. London: Impensis G. Bishop, 1606.

Bonomo, Giuseppe. *Caccia alle streghe: la credenza nelle streghe dal secolo XIII al XIX con particolare riferimento all'Italia*. Palermo: Palumbo, 1959.

Bowers, Rick. "John Marston at the 'Mart of Woe': the *Antonio* Plays." In *The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-Visions*, edited by T. F. Wharton, 14-26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Briggs, K. M. *Pale Hecate's Team*. New York: Arno Press, 1977.

Broedel, Hans Peter. The Malleus Maleficarum *and The Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

Bulwer, John. *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* [And] *Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974.

Busse, Claire M. "'Pretty Fictions' and 'Little Stories': Child Actors on the Early Modern Stage." In *Childhood and Children's Books in Early Modern Europe, 1550-1800,* edited by Andrea Immel and Michael Witmore, 75-101. New York: Routledge, 2006.

I canovacci della Commedia dell'arte. Edited by Anna Maria Testaverde. Transcription of texts and notes by Anna Evangelista. Preface by Roberto De Simone. Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 2007.

Chambers, E. K. *The Elizabethan Stage,* vol. 3. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923

Chantos, Rachel L. "'These Stories are Not for Children': Misbehaving Children in 'World Upside Down' Prints and the Origins of Folk Tales." In *The Early Modern Child in Art and History.* Edited by Matthew Knox Averett, 67-82. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Crawley, Ashon. "I Grew Up Afraid. Lil Nas X's 'Montero' Is the Lesson I Needed." *NPR*, published April 14, 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/04/14/986466561/i-grew-up-afraid-lil-nas-xs-montero-is-the-lesson-i-needed.

Clepper, Catherine. "'Death by Fright:'" Risk, Consent, and Evidentiary Objects in William Castle's Rigged Houses." *Film History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 54-84.

Comensoli, Viviana. *'Household business': Domestic Plays of Early Modern England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

Comici dell'Arte: Corrispondenze; G. B. Andreini, N. Barbieri, P. M. Cecchini, S. Fiorillo, T. Martinelli, F. Scala. Edizione diretta da Siro Ferrone. A cura di Claudia Burattelli, Domenica Landolfi, Anna Zinanni. Firenze: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 1993.

The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: A Translation and Analysis of 30 Scenarios. Edited and translated Richard Andrews. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008.

Cooper, Thomas. *The Mystery of Witch-Craft: Discouering, the truth, nature, occasions, growth and power thereof.* London: Printed by Nicholas Okes, 1617.

Corbin, Peter and Douglas Sedge. Introduction to *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays, 1-32.* Edited by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.

Courtney, David. "Edgework and the Aesthetic Paradigm: Resonances and High Hopes." In *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by Stephen Lyng, 89-115. New York: Routledge, 2005.

D'Ancona, Alessandro. *Origini del teatro italiano,* 2 volumes. Turin: Ermanno Loescher, 1891.

Dawson, Anthony B. and Paul Yachnin. *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakspeare's England: A Collaborative Debate.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Day, John. *The ile of guls. As it hath been often playd in the blacke Fryars, by the Children of the Reuels.* Printed for John Trundle, 1606.

de Grazia, Margareta. "The Motive for Interiority: Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and *Hamlet*." *Style* 23, no. 3 (1989): 430-444.

de' Sommi, Leone. *Quatto dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*. Edited by Ferruccio Marotti. Milan: Edizioni Il Polifilo, 1968.

Dekker, Thomas. *The Guls Horne-booke*. Imprinted at London for R. S., 1609.

Douglas, Mary and Aaron Wildavsky. *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Dryden, John. *Of Dramatick Poesie, an essay*. London: Printed for Henry Herringman, 1668.

Duchartre, Pierre Louis. *The Italian Comedy: The Improvisation Scenarios Lives Attributes Portraits and Masks of the Illustrious Characters of the Commedia dell'Arte*. Translated by Randolph T. Weaver. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966.

Duni, Matteo. *Under the Devil's Spell: Witches, Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in Renaissance Italy*. Florence: Syracuse University in Florence, 2007.

Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, 2nd Edition*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Ewen, C. L'Estrange. *Witchcraft and Demonianism: A Concise Account Derived from Sworn Depositions and Confessions Obtained in the Courts of England and Wales*. London: Heath Cranton Limited, 1933.

The Examination and confession of certaine wytches at Chensforde in the countie of Essex : before the Quenes Maiesties judges, the xxvi daye of July, anno 1566. London: By Willyam Powell for Wyllyam Pickeringe, 1566.

Fava, Antonio. *The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell'Arte*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. Second, revised edition. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2014.

Ferrari, Pier Francesco and Vittorio Callese. "Mirror Neurons and Intersubjectivity." In *On Being Moved: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy,* edited by Stein Braten, 73-88. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.

Ferrone, Siro. *Attori mercanti corsari: La Commedia dell'arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento*. Turin: Einaudi, 1993.

Fichtelberg, Joseph. *Risk Culture: Performance and Danger in Early America*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Fitzpatrick, Tim. *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes in the Commedia dell'Arte: Beyond the Improvisation/Memorization Divide.* Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995.

Fo, Dario. (*Manuale minimo dell'attore*) *The Tricks of the Trade*. Translated by Joe Farrell. Edited by Stuart Hood. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Foakes, R. A. "John Marston's Fantastical Plays: Antonio and Mellida and Antonio's Revenge." *Philological Quarterly* 41, no.1 (1962): 229-239.

Frost, Anthony and Ralph Yarrow. *Improvisation in Drama, Theatre and Performance: History, Practice, Theory*, 3rd Edition. London: Palgrave, 2016.

Gair, W. Reavley. "Introduction." In *Antonio and Mellida*, edited by W. Reavley Gair, 1-51. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.

García Estévez, Carlos. "Mask Performance for a Contemporary Commedia dell'Arte." In *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte*, Edited by Judith Chaffee and Olly Crick, 130-138. London: Routledge, 2015.

Garland, David. "The Rise of Risk" In *Risk and Morality*, edited by Richard V. Ericson and Aaron Doyle, 48-86. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003.

Garner, Glenn. "Lil Nas X Responds to Backlash Over 'Twerking on a CGI Satan' in 'Montero' Music Video." *People,* published March 28, 2021. https://people.com/music/lil-nas-x-responds-to-backlash-over-montero-music-video/.

Geckle, George L. *John Marston's Drama: Themes, Images, Sources*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980.

Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Goodcole, Henry. *The wonderfull discouerie of Elizabeth Savvyer a witch late of Edmonton, her conuiction and condemnation and death.* London, 1621; Ann Arbor: Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011 https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A01874.0001.001.

Gordon, Mel. *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983.

Gosson, Stephen. *The Schoole of Abuse*. London: for Thomas Woodcocke, 1579; Ann Arbor: Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011 https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A01953.0001.001.

Grant, Stuart. "What If? Performance *is* Risk." *About Performance* 12 (2014): 127-144.

Greene, Robert. *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay.* In *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, edited by David Bevington et. al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Guazzo, Francesco Maria. *Compendium Maleficarum*. Milan: 1608. The Montague Summers Editions, translated by E. A. Ashwin, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1988 [London: John Rodker, 1929].

Gurr, Andrew. *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London.* Third Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Harari, Dror. "Risk in Performance: Facing the Future." *Theatre Research International* 34, no. 2 (2009): 173-79.

Hari, Riitta. "Human Mirroring Systems: On Assessing Mind by Reading Brain and Body During Social Interaction." In *On Being Moved: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy*, edited by Stein Braten, 89-100. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.

Harpin, Anna and Helen Nicholson. "Performance and Participation." In *Performance and Participation: Practices, Audiences, Politics*, edited by Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson, 1-15. New York: Palgrave: 2017.

Hattori, Natsu. "'The Pleasure of Your Bedlam': The Theatre of Madness in the Renaissance." *History of Psychiatry, vi* (1995), 283-308.

Helms, N. R. "'Upon Such Sacrifices': An Ethic of Spectator Risk." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 27, no. 1 (2012): 91-107.

Henke, Robert. *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Inside Shakespeare: Essays on the Blackfriars Stage. Edited by Paul Menzer. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2006.

James I, King of England. *Daemonologie, in forme of a Dialogue, Divided into three Bookes.* Edinburgh: Robert Walde-grave, 1597.

Jonson, Ben. *Cynthia's Revels*. In *Ben Jonson, Volume IV: Cynthia's Revels; Poetaster; Sejanus; Eastward Ho*. Edited by C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.

Jonson, Ben. *Epicene, or The Silent Woman*. In *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, edited by David Bevington et. al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Jonson, Ben. *Epigrams*; and *The Forest*. Edited by Richard Dutton. Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1984.

Katritzky, M A. *The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560-1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records*. Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2006.

Kerr, Rosalind. "'Boying Their Greatness': Transnational Effects of the Italian Divas on the Shakespearean Stage." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Anglo-Italian Renaissance Literature and Culture*, edited by Michele Marrapodi, 342-357. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Kerr, Rosalind. *The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell'Arte Stage.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

Kilgannon, Corey. "'Flying Wallendas' Cross Times Square on High Wire in Death-Defying Stunt." *New York Times*, June 23, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/23/nyregion/flying-wallendas-times-square.html.

Kittredge, George Lyman. *Witchcraft in Old and New England.* New York: Atheneum, 1972.

Korneeva, Tatiana. *The Dramaturgy of the Spectator: Italian Theatre and the Public Sphere, 1600-1800.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019.

Kors, Alan C. and Edward Peters. *Witchcraft in Europe 1100-1700: A Documentary History.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972.

Kramer, Heinrich and James Sprenger. *The Malleus Maleficarum.* Translated and with Introductions, Bibliography, and Notes by The Reverend Montague Summers. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971.

Kyd, Thomas. *The Spanish Tragedy*. In *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, edited by David Bevington et. al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Lamb, Edel. *Performing Childhood in the Early Modern Theatre: The Children's Playing Companies (1599-1613)*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Larner, Christina. "Was Witch-Hunting Woman-Hunting?" In *The Witchcraft Reader*, edited by Darren Oldridge, 273-275. London: Routledge, 2002.

Levack, Brian P. *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*. London: Longman, 1987.

Levin, Richard. "My Magic Can Beat Your Magic." *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 22 (2009): 201-228.

Levin, Richard. "Women in the Renaissance Theatre Audience." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1989): 165-174.

"Lijana Wallenda prepares for high-wire walk." *Good Morning America.* June 21, 2019. Video, 3:39. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvTazT5adaU.

Lil Nas X. "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)." March 25, 2021, video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6swmTBVI83k.

Lil Nas X (@lilnasx), "dear 14 year old Montero, i wrote a song with our name in it. it's about a guy i met last summer…", Instagram, March 25, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CM3i2RelCkK/.

"Lil Nas X surprising the kids of Lander Elementary." May 29, 2019, video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yvxqwlENxU.

Lopez, Jeremy. *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Lyng, Stephen. "Edgework and the Risk-Taking Experience." In *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by Stephen Lyng, 3-14. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Lyng, Stephen. "Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking." *American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 4 (1990): 851-886.

MacNeil, Anne. *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Ltd., 2007.

Marlowe, Christopher. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus.* In *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, edited by David Bevington et. al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Marotti, Ferruccio and Giovanna Romei. *La commedia dell'Arte e la società barocca. La professione del teatro.* Rome: Bulzoni editore, 1991.

Marston, John. *Antonio and Mellida*. Edited by W. Reavley Gair. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.

Marston, John. *Antonio's Revenge*. In *The Malcontent and Other Plays*. Edited with an Introduction by Keith Sturgess. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Marston, John. *Jack Drum's Entertainment: or The Comedie of Pasquill and Katherine.* London: Printed for Richard Olive, dwelling in Long Lane, 1601.

Marston, John. *What You Will*. In *Tragedies and comedies collected into one volume.* London: Printed by A. M for William Sheares, at the Harrow in Britaines Bursse, 1633.

Maus, Katharine Eisaman. *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

McCarthy, Harry R. *Performing Early Modern Drama Beyond Shakespeare: Edward's Boys.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

McConachie, Bruce. *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

McGavin, John J. and Greg Walker. *Imagining Spectatorship: From the Mysteries to the Shakespearean Stage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Miller, Naomi J. and Diane Purkiss. "Introduction: Reading Childhood Through Literature." In *Literary Cultures and Medieval and Early Modern Childhoods*, Edited by Naomi J. Miller and Diane Purkiss, xxiii-xxxviii. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Milovanovic, Dragan. "Edgework: A Subjective and Structural Model of Negotiating Boundaries." In *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by Stephen Lyng, 51-72. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Molière. *The Misanthrope and Other Plays.* Translated with an introduction by John Wood. London: Penguin Books, 1959.

Munro, Lucy. *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Myhill, Nova and Jennifer A. Low. "Introduction: Audience and Audiences." In *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558-1642*, edited by Jennifer A. Low and Nova Myhill, 1-17. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Mythen, Gabe. *Ulrich Beck: A Critical Introduction to the Risk Society*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.

Newes from Scotland, Declaring the Damnable life and death of Doctor Fian, a notable Sorcerer, who was burned at Edenbrough in Ianuary last. 1591. London: for William Wright, 1592.

Northbrooke, John. *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine playes or Enterluds with other idle pastimes [et]c. commonly used on the Sabboth day, are reproved by the Authoritie of the word of God and auntient writiers.* London: H. Bynneman for George Byshop, 1577.

O'Grady, Alice. "Introduction: Risky Aesthetics, Critical Vulnerabilities, and Edgeplay: Tactical Performances of the Unknown." In *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World*, edited by Alice O'Grady, 1-29. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

O'Grady, Alice. Preface to *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World*, vii-xiv. Edited by Alice O'Grady. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Overbury, Sir Thomas. "An Excellent Actor." *New Characters (Drawne to the life) of several personas, in several qualities*. London: Printed for L. Lisle, 1615.

Packard, Bethany. "Inducting Childhood: The Scripted Spontaneity of Self-Referential Child Players." In *Literary Cultures and Medieval and Early Modern Childhoods*, Edited by Naomi J. Miller and Diane Purkiss, 103-118. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Perkins, William. *A discourse of the damned art of witchcraft: so farre forth as it is reuealed in the Scriptures, and manifest by true experience.* Cambridge: Cantrel Legge, 1608.

Pfaff, Donald. *Brain Arousal and Information Theory: Neural and Genetic Mechanisms*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Pietropaolo, Domenico. "Improvisation as a Stochastic Composition Process." In *The Science of Buffoonery: Theory and History of the Commedia dell'Arte*, Edited by Domenico Pietropaolo, 167-175. Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions Inc, 1989.

Preiss, Richard. "Interiority." In *Early Modern Theatricality*, edited by Henry S. Turner, 47-70. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Prosperi, Adriano. *Tribunali della coscienza: Inquisitori, confessori, missionary.* Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1996.

Prynne, William. *The Players Scourge, or, actors tragaedie, divided into two parts.* London: 1633.

Rabinowitch, Tal-Chen, Ian Cross, and Pamela Burnard. "Musical Group Interaction, Intersubjectivity and Merged Subjectivity." In *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, edited by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, 109-120. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012.

Rankins, William. *A Mirrour of Monsters: Wherein is plainely described the manifold vices &c spotted enormities, that are caused by the infectious sight of Playes, with the description of the subtile slights of Sathan, making them his instruments.* London: Printed by I.C. for T.H., 1587.

Reason, Matthew. "Participatory Audiencing and The Committed Return." In *Staging Spectators in Immersive Performances: Commit Yourself!* Edited by Doris Kolesch, Theresa Schütz, and Sophie Nikoleit, 88-101. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Reed, Robert Rentoul Jr. *The Occult on the Tudor and Stuart Stage*. Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1965.

Reynolds, Dee and Matthew Reason. "Introduction." In *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, edited by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, 17-25. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012.

Richards, Kenneth and Laura Richards. *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990.

Rid, Samuel. *The Art of Jugling or Legerdemaine.* London: 1612.

Rietbergen, Peter. *Power and Religion in Baroque Rome: Barberini Cultural Policies*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006.

Risk: Philosophical Perspectives. Edited by Tim Lewens. London: Routledge, 2007.

Roach, Joseph R. *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Roach, Joseph. *It.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007.

Romano, Aja. "Lil Nas X's Evil Gay Satanic Agenda, Explained." *Vox*, published March 29, 2021. https://www.vox.com/22356438/lil-nas-x-satan-shoes-nike-montero-video-gay-agenda-christian-controversy.

Ross, Alan. "Schools and Education." In *Early Modern Childhood: An Introduction*. Edited by Anna French. London, Routledge: 2019.

Rowley, William, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford. *The Witch of Edmonton*. In *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays,* edited by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.

Royce, Jacalyn. "Early Modern Naturalistic Acting: The Role of the Globe in the Development of Personation." In *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, edited by Richard Dutton, 477-495. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Rudlin, John. *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook.* London: Routledge, 1994.

Scala, Flaminio. *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative.* Translated by Henry F. Salerno. New York: New York University Press, 1967.

Schalkwyk, David. *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

251

Schoenfeldt, Michael C. *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Scot, Reginald. *The discoverie of witchcraft, Wherein the lewde dealing of witches and witchmongers is notablie detected…all latelie written by Reginald Scot Esquire*. London, 1584.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks: 1992.

Shakespeare, William. *Henry V.* Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1995.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1993.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1994.

Shapiro, Michael. *Children of the Revels: The Boy Companies of Shakespeare's Time and Their Plays*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

Sidney, Philip. *An Apology for Poetry*, in *Shakespeare's Theater: A Sourcebook*. Edited by Tanya Pollard. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Simon, Jonathan. "Edgework and Insurance in Risk Societies: Some Notes on Victorian Lawyers and Mountaineers." In *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by Stephen Lyng, 203-226. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Smith, Da'Shan. "Don't Let the 'Montero' Controversy Distract from Lil Nas X's Superior Musicality." *MTV News*, published March 31, 2021. http://www.mtv.com/news/3175844/lil-nas-x-montero-controversy-musicality/.

Sparti, Davide. "On the Edge: A Frame of Analysis for Improvisation." In *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies,* Volume 1, Edited by George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, 182-201. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Stevenson, William. *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. In *Representative English Comedies*. Edited by Charles Mills Gayley. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1903.

Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800.* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977.

Stubbes, Philip. *The Anatomie of Abuses.* London: Richard Jones, 1583; Ann Arbor: Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 2011 https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A13086.0001.001?view=toc.

Summers, Claude J. and Ted-Larry Pebworth. *Ben Jonson Revised.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

Summers, Rev. Montague. Introduction to *The Malleus Maleficarum*. Translated and with Introductions, Bibliography, and Notes by The Reverend Montague Summers. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971.

Tarltons jests Drawne into these three parts. 1 His court-witty jests. 2 His sound city jests. 3 His countrey pretty jests. Full of delight, wit, and honest mirth. London: Printed by I. H. for Andrew Crook, 1628.

Taviani, Ferdinando and Mirella Schino. *Il segreto della commedia dell'arte. La memoria delle compagnie italiane del XVI, XVII e XVIII secolo.* Florence: La casa Usher, 1982; 2007.

Thomas, Keith. "Children in Early Modern England." In *Children and Their Books: A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie*, Edited by Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs, 45-77. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England.* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971. Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1991.

Trimpop, Rüdiger M. *The Psychology of Risk Taking Behavior*. Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1994.

Wicker, Jewel. "Lil Nas X has last word as controversy erupts over 'devil-worshipping' video." *The Guardian*, published March 30, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/mar/30/lil-nas-x-montero-call-me-by-your-name-twitter.

Willis, Deborah. "Magic and Witchcraft." In *A New Companion to Renaissance Drama*, First Edition, eds. Arthur F. Kinney and Thomas Warren Hopper, 170-181. Hoboken, NJ : Wiley-Blackwell, 2017.

Wright, Thomas. *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*. With an Introduction by Thomas O. Sloan. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971.

Zampelli, Michael A. "The 'Most Honest and Most Devoted of Women': An Early Modern Defense of the Professional Actress." *Theatre Survey* 42, no. 1 (2001): 1-23.

Zika, Charles. *The Appearance of Witchcraft: Print and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Europe*. London: Routledge, 2007

Zuckerman, Marvin. *Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior*. Washington DC: American
Psychological Association: 2007.