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4

Undocumented Improvisation, Rehearsal, and the Clown

*Richard Preiss**

When a clown enters, we immediately recognize that he does not belong. The meter shifts to prose; his name is English, regardless of setting; he is not a lover, merchant, or king, but a servant, tradesman, or bumpkin; he is ignorant of the plot into which he has wandered, and unsure of what to do in it; his scenes go nowhere, degenerating into pratfall, patter, or miscarriage; he fails, at some level, to grasp the rules of being in a play – and he recognizes us, the audience, in turn. This chapter too does not belong; stage clowns have no place in a volume about documents. Clowning resists documentation: more than any other performer, clowns improvised, rendering the full scope of their contribution to early modern playing either invisible or lost. Lack of evidence, and the prejudice that clowns do not merit serious attention, has long been a methodological barrier to their study. This has given rise to certain distortions in theatre history.

Printed playbooks conceal as well as reveal. They appear to us organic, unified texts, composed at a single moment by a single, governing hand. That appearance has shaped our theories of how companies managed their repertoires, assigned roles, distributed parts for study, rehearsed, revised, and overcame the cognitive challenge of remembering their lines.¹ Such theories posit a top-down model, in which the script, even understood as a composite of actors' scrolls, exerts total control over the play, and in which performance is a site merely of textual reproduction. The advantages of part-based composition, rehearsal, and revision are calibrated to that model. Distributing plays into parts maximized efficiency, encoding information into the text that allowed the disparate elements of performance to cohere at just the right moment.² As James J. Marino showed in the previous chapter, the coordinated cue-structure of those parts also had to be scrupulously maintained to minimize the greatest risk to performance: the disruption of actors' crossing their cues, or forgetting them, or forgetting to give them, thereby grinding the play to a halt.³ Yet the frequency of complaints about the clown's infidelity to the script underscores the problem improvisation poses to this acting system – and at the same time suggests it may have been equally systemic, tolerated, and even encouraged. How did theatre compartmentalize these two seemingly incompatible modes of activity? How can we locate improvisation in printed playbooks, when they make no effort to distinguish it? How do we reconcile a system that prioritized economy with a technique seemingly destined to provoke error, confusion, and miscue?

If improvisation is the dark matter of early modern theatre, hidden below the surface of our texts, it may also be what held their performances together. Rather than stress the conflict between clowning and theatrical economy – and thus perpetuate the dichotomy of clown vs. author, performance vs. text – this chapter tries to integrate them, by analysing extemporality not as a glitch but as a feature, a generative principle of dramatic organization. As we will see, improvisation

only pushes the distributive, decentralized logic of part-based acting further, interrogating fundamental categories in our histories of early modern theatre. What was a play? How did it get made, and when was it done? What was a playing company, and how did it function? If in our search for the undocumentable, finally, we find it everywhere traced, reflected, restaged – in a word, documented – what then is a ‘document’?

The term ‘clown’ refers both to a stock character type – rustic, naïve, obtuse, lazy, clumsy, prosaic, appetitive, impertinent – and to the actor assigned those parts, a specialized member of company personnel. Despite their marginality, clown parts are a staple of early modern plays, irrespective of genre. Speech prefixes and stage directions will indicate simply ‘clown’ or ‘the clown’ as often as give their characters proper names, or will slip indiscriminately between these appellations; where playbooks survive with casting prescriptions, clown parts are always for one actor, never doubled. And despite the typical brevity of those parts, clown actors were the celebrities of early modern theatre, their names – Richard Tarlton, Will Kemp, John Singer, Robert Armin, John Shank, Thomas Greene, Tim Read, Andrew Cane – appearing in popular literature more often than those of dramatic leads like Alleyn and Burbage. The Queen Anne’s Men’s *Greenes Tu Quoque* (1614) by Cooke, indeed, took its very title from the name of their clown, a feat no other actor in the period could boast. Their personal styles (even their body types) defined the fare of their respective playhouses, and organized the commodity landscape of theatrical London: ‘that’s the fat foole of the Curtin’, observes one balladeer, ‘and the lean foole of the Bull’.⁴

The reason for this salience was simple: clowns were not confined to the play, and neither was theatre. Playbooks let us imagine that plays were the entirety of theatrical events, but what audiences saw was closer to a variety show, a medley of entertainments over which the clown presided as emcee.⁵ There might be a pre-show pantomime, wherein he ‘peeped’ his nose from behind the arras, let the crowd tease him out, and pulled

grotesque faces on demand; Tarlton was beloved for his bulbous, homely features, and two generations later Read kept a similar routine. There might be mid-play ‘merriments’, a broad class of interlude ranging from slapstick to lampoon. After the play there were jigs, farce afterpieces of song, dance, and sexual innuendo. These remained in high demand throughout the period, and occasioned such disorder in the audience that in 1612 they were briefly outlawed. Or there might be a concluding game of ‘themes’, in which the clown spontaneously versified on prompts yelled out by individual playgoers. Tarlton again pioneered this pastime, his zingers preserved in volumes like *Tarltons Jests*; Armin thoroughly specialized in it. Though clowns must have had reliable bits to which they repaired, most of this crowd-work had to be unscripted, which explains why performances ran four to five hours, far beyond the length of most plays.⁶ Early modern theatre was heterogeneous, an amalgam of two antithetical modes of performance: the textual and the extemporal, the mimetic and the non-mimetic, ‘play’ and game. The clown belonged to the latter paradigm – the periphery our playbooks crop – and his dramatic roles were barely disguised extensions of his extradramatic persona. Generic vessels, they let him play himself.

To companies hastily mounting plays before impatient audiences, the clown was a safeguard against catastrophe: he could fill dead air. A 1633 jestbook relates how ‘hee that presented the Clown’ was ‘called to enter (for the Stage was emptie)’; no lines are provided, and the player must create *ex nihilo*.⁷ Edmund Gayton similarly recalls Prince Charles’ Men sending out Cane, their ‘most mimicall man’, to ‘pacify’ a restless crowd.⁸ In Goffe’s *Careless Shepherdess* (1629), two fictional playgoers praise Read, whose diversions were largely gestural:

LANDLORD

... I’ve laughed

Until I cry’d again, to see what Faces

The Rogue would make . . .

To see him hold out's Chin, hang down his hands,

And twirle his Bawble . . .

THRIFT And so would I, his part has all the wit,
For none speaks Carps and Quibbles besides him:
I'd rather see him leap, or laughe, or cry,
Then hear the gravest Speech in all the *Play*.

(B2v–B3r)

Parodying this formula, the Cambridge satire *Pilgrimage to Parnassus* (c. 1598) hauls its clown out by a rope, ignorant even that he is a clown. 'What the devil should I doe here?' he asks. 'Dost thou not knowe a play cannot be without a clowne?' he is told. 'If thou canst but draw thy mouth awrye, laye thy legge ouer thy staffe, sawe a peece of cheese with thy dagger, lape vp drinke on the earth . . . theile laugh mightily'.⁹ His professional counterpart is the clown whose 'cinkapace of jests' Hamlet scorns in Q1 (1603), featuring catchphrases like 'Cannot you stay until I eat my porridge?' 'You owe me a quarters wages', 'My coat wants a cullison', 'Your beer is sour', and 'blabbering with his lips'.¹⁰

The antics Hamlet derides – 'speak[ing] more then is set down' – fall not outside the play, but in it.¹¹ Here too clowns were afforded extraordinary latitude, not only permitted but expected to embellish their parts. The safest vehicles were their monologues, typically found at the top or end of a scene, where the cleared stage reverted to a non-mimetic space. Here the clown could comment on the action, develop his character, or simply make sport, with minimal impact on cue-structure. These rants might be semi-scripted, or not; suggestions, or invitations; explored one way today, and differently the next. Thus Launce in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* can fight with his dog as long as he likes; the imprisoned Jeffrey in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1600) can bewail his misery ('O hunger, how thou dominer'st in my guts! O, for a fat leg of ewe mutton in stewde broth . . . I could belch rarely, for I am all winde. O colde, colde, colde, colde, colde . . .'); *Lear's* Fool can add to his

prophecy, or subtract.¹² Usually, he adds: these scene-edges are a play's expansion joints, where comic material accretes. In 1606, *Mucedorus* begins with two lovers in the forest pursued by a bear; by 1610, it begins with Mouse – in the same forest, for no reason – tripping over that bear. Clowns get a disproportionate share of open-ended stage directions in early printed playbooks – '*speak anything, and exit*'; '*he playes or sings any odde toy*'; '*Jockie is led to whipping over the stage, speaking some words, but of no importance*' – as well as enigmatic dashes ('I shall, I shall–') and *et ceteras* ('Whoop, whow, &c.').¹³ These are cues for limited improvisation, but how they affected others' cues is less certain. How long does an '&c.' last? When Tarlton's Derrick in *The Famous Victories* enters chasing his runaway horse, calling out 'whoa there, whoa there, whoa there', the cue he gives is 'whoa there'.¹⁴ Yet how many times does he give it? Three? More? Will his opposites come in early? Does he make a joke of pre-empting them? How much time was this meant to fill? Was the entire manic entrance unplanned to begin with, since the text has him re-enter one line later?

Recovering improvisation is tricky: beyond the few clear-cut examples, we run into nebulous questions of copy. If a text derives from performance, we cannot tell scripted from *ad lib*; if it doesn't, we cannot know if or where liberty was taken – and neither textual state is ever determinable or absolute. Scholars have tried to decode the signals playwrights used to license and restrain their clowns – assuming it was imperative to do both at once. A repeated cue, for example, might trigger misinterpretation: when the lovesick Valentine in *Two Gentlemen* sighs 'Silvia, Silvia', Speed calls out 'Madam Silvia! Madam Silvia!', and begins looking for her. Thus, it has been suggested, Shakespeare 'lengthened the leash' of his clowns, creating opportunities for self-contained stage business.¹⁵ This is an optimistically short leash, however, presupposing the subservience of actor to dramatist. Improvisation did not always ask permission, as the clown from *The Tryall of Chevalrie* (1605) conveniently implies:

BOW

So, what's your name?

CLOW

My name, sir, is Bow wow.

(E1v)

'What's your name?' is the antithesis of a generous cue: his character's name is the one thing an actor does not get to invent.¹⁶ A one-off joke, never revisited, it may have sprung from the clown's cue itself, the shorthand for his interlocutor as written on his part-scroll – Dick Bowyer, or 'Bow'.

Whatever its origin, someone thought this amusing enough to write down; of all the replies he may have tried out, perhaps this got the best response. But such transcription was idiosyncratic. At one point in Wilson's *Three Ladies of London* (c. 1587), Tarlton breaks character to jibe at an enrapt spectator, whose mouth 'gapes to bite me'; later, he returns to the target, asking 'now sirra hast eaten vp my song? Ye shall eat no more today, / For euerybody may see your belly is grown bigger with eating vp our play'.¹⁷ Despite clearly originating onstage, specific to a single performance, these lines end up in the book. The opposite is true of an incident in *The Famous Victories*, in which Tarlton once played the Chief Justice 'besides his owne part of the Clowne'. Having, as Justice, taken a punch from the Prince, Tarlton next appears 'in his Clownes cloathes', and 'askes the Actors what newes'; told of the assault, he admits 'the report so terrifies me, that me thinkes the blow remaines still on my cheeke'.¹⁸ Specific to a single performance, this does *not* end up in the book; it survives only as anecdote. And there are ambiguous cases, which both include and omit. The title page of *A Knack to Know a Knave* (1594) advertises 'Kemps applauded merriments, of the men of Gotham'. Yet whatever transpired onstage does not persist on the page, amounting to twenty-eight lines in which some artisans dispute who should read their petition to the King, and never appear again.¹⁹ Perhaps similar title page terminology – 'humours', 'veins', 'conceits' – denoted performed material only loosely

tied to the text, something one bought not to read but to remember.

The most fascinating example may be the manuscript play of *Sir Thomas More*, in the margins of which Hand B, thought to be that of Thomas Heywood, has added fourteen speeches for a clown (see Figure 4.1).

The speeches are not very good: feeble wordplay, non-sequiturs, failed gags. Facing execution, the clown addresses the hangman: 'I haue a suite to you ... that as you haue hangd

FIGURE 4.1 *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, B.L. MS Harleian 7368, fol. 7r. Showing two lines for the clown and 'Manett Clowne' in right-hand margin. Used by permission of the British Library.

Lincoln first & will hange hir nexte so you will nott hang me at all' / 'naye . . . you must hang' / 'well then so much for y^e' – hardly a professional-grade revision.²⁰ This led Eric Rasmussen to suggest that Hand B was *not* creating a new part, but transcribing lines spoken onstage – by Rafe Betts, brother of George Betts, named in the stage directions but never given any lines.²¹ If this is correct, here an entire *part* had been left blank for the clown to fill in. We can pity the actors whose cues he stepped on: how ragged must those scenes have been? Though *Sir Thomas More* seems an extreme case, it is also a play-in-process, arrested in transition between performance and re-performance. Might this level of unscriptedness have been widespread?

Clowns, then, could save a performance, but once onstage, they could endanger it as well. Literally: improvisation circumvented state censorship, whose licence was predicated on a play's being acted as written. Yet objections to clowning rarely stress the legal or technical complications it created. *Sir Thomas More* itself stages a scene of improvisation, and depicts it as effortless. In the play-within-the-play, More walks on for Luggins the clown; 'would not my lord make a rare player?', the actors remark, . . . how extemplically he fell to the matter, and spake Lugginses part almost as it is in the very booke set downe'.²² For Letoy in Brome's *Antipodes* (1638), this adaptiveness makes his clown Byplay the best actor in his company:

. . . my actors

Are all in readinesse; and I think all perfect,
But one, that never will be perfect in a thing
He studies; yet he makes such shifts extempore,
(Knowing the purpose what he is to speak to)
That he moves mirth in me 'bove all the rest . . .
If he can frible through, and move delight
In others, I am pleas'd.

(D2v)

Byplay does not degrade the performance; he elevates it. He is prepared, just not 'perfect': some actors memorize, some don't.

It is enough to have the gist of a scene, and ‘fribble’ – a term that seems to combine frivolity and labour, grace and skill. What ‘move[s] delight’ is the realization *that* improvisation is occurring, the thrill of watching it teeter between success and failure. Letoy can appreciate it, of course, because he knows the text. But how was this knowledge communicated to audiences?

So far, we have been considering *solo* improvisations, whose guiding principle we assume to be damage control. In group scenes, with their greater complexity, we seem to see the damage that motivated this policy – the chaos clowns introduced. Yet all they motivate is our own assumption: that plays could be ‘damaged’, and that part-based acting was intended to prevent it. In the 1604 A-text of 1.4 of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, for example, though Wagner’s cues for the Clown remain constant, seven cues the Clown gives Wagner differ from those in the 1616 B-text, and the rest arrive late; if the 1604 *Faustus* is a reported text, the Clown’s dilatory digressions should have thrown the scene into disarray.²³ But this reading presupposes that the 1616 text represents the scripted version of the scene, and that Wagner is listening for its cues. What if it had no ‘scripted version’ – just an outline, a plan, a series of keywords and prompts? In this arrangement, as Stephen Purcell notes, Wagner’s job is to steer the clown from one joke to the next; he is waiting not for a cue, but for a chance to interrupt.²⁴ The non-improvising actor must also improvise, that is, provide a framework for the clown’s improvisation: in a crucial sense, he runs the scene. Where there is no ‘lead’ actor, as in 2.2 (featuring two clowns, Rafe and Robin), we find far more variation between 1604 and 1616. So it is not that the A-text documents a performance, and the B-text doesn’t. *Both* document performance – of *these* particular scenes, which may have existed fully only in performance.

Like playgoing, plays were not homogeneous substances. They were a patchwork of performance styles, some premeditated and some not – a continuum that allowed the clown to move freely between the play and its satellite forms, and that helps explain the fluctuating, random positions of his scenes in the

play itself.²⁵ Neither was improvisation of a single type: as we have seen, the clown's repertoire depended on the quality of his straight men. Kemp joins the Chamberlain's Men as a solo artist, but by *Romeo and Juliet* there is a visible effort to find him partners; the play shuttles Kemp's Peter to and fro, pairing him with no less than twelve speakers. His scene with the musicians illustrates the urgency. In both Q1 (1597) and Q2 (1599), they merely echo Peter's lines, and he must create all the forward momentum.²⁶ Yet by *Much Ado About Nothing*, we see a different dynamic: Kemp's Dogberry has dedicated sidekicks, the members of the watch. Dogberry still takes the lead, launching their scenes and capping them, but scenes like 3.3 demonstrate a collaborative process akin to modern improv. Verges makes the opening offer – 'giue them their charge' – and the watch act as collective straight men, priming each joke:

DOGBERY

... You are to bidde any man stand ...

WATCH

How if a will not stand?

DOGBERY

Why then take no note of him ...

DOGBERY

... bid those that are drunke get them to bed.

WATCH

How if they will not?

DOGBERY

Why then let them alone til they are sober ...

DOGBERY

If you meete a thiefe ...

WATCH

... shall we not lay hands on him?

DOGBERY

... let him shew himself what he is, and steale out of your companie.²⁷

This could grow stale. But instead, it evolves: on the fourth pass, Verges takes over, adding that 'If you heare a child crie in the night you must call to the nurse and bid her still it.'²⁸ He addresses the men, but he is talking to Dogberry through them: we know they will reply with 'How if the nurse be asleepe', so he is challenging Kemp to craft the next punchline. And now a complex affective interplay opens up: Verges's pride at helping his superior, when in reality the Verges *actor* has burdened him; a slow burn from Dogberry at being so put upon, before he finds the solution ('Why then . . . let the child wake her with crying'); suddenly, we are in a game of 'themes', into whose retaliatory format we have imperceptibly slipped.²⁹ We cannot know how much was planned, or how many permutations the actors produced before this version was committed to print. But it is clearly an improvisational 'pocket' in the play: Dogberry's exit line 'one word more . . . watch about signior Leonatoes door' signals our return to the script. Its payoff, indeed, *relies* on our knowing that the actors are improvising, on the delicate wobble between player and role. They needed no script, only a shared sense of timing, and a willingness to experiment. Scenes like this give them options for variation ('if you hear a dog bark', 'if you meet a fair maid'): the actors could do it differently each day.

Doing it differently may have been the point. A company dependent on playwrights was vulnerable: scripts often arrived late, or in fragments. But if the company were many companies, subdivided into semi-autonomous groups responsible for their own set-pieces, it more efficiently distributed labour and resources. Group rehearsal time was scarce, and its coordination difficult; lead actors met privately to 'instruct' their apprentices – with whom they shared scenes – and clowns may have done so too. The benefit of such a 'pod' system was to delegate phases of composition to performance. Playwrights did not have to deliver whole plays: if there were gaps, they worked themselves out onstage. Scripts could be shorter – and could flex over time, relieving the toll on leads. And as this surplus material grew, the play offered audiences continuous novelty, prolonging its stage life. The Quarto of Greene's *Orlando Furioso* (1594), for

instance, may appear ‘corrupt’ beside Alleyn’s manuscript part – the sole extant actor’s roll from the Elizabethan stage – but only if our models of playhouse practice do not account for textual drift: comparing the two, we can peel back the layers of growth in a scene. Orlando raves, mad for Angelica; his man Orgalio, desperate to soothe him, vows to fetch her. Alleyn’s part suggests Orlando is brought a dummy, for whose silence Orgalio interprets. By the time the full text was printed, however, a live actor has been substituted – a clown in a dress. That change begat another: there is now no need to hurry this ‘Angelica’ over the stage, because she can talk. The scene thus expands in reverse, adding preliminary jokes to redouble the succeeding ones: the clown’s boast of his beauty becomes even funnier if he mentions, at the outset, that he has not shaved his beard.³⁰ Orlando, meanwhile, is afforded time to breathe after the ten-line speech that closed the previous scene – a speech he can now drop, if he wishes, because it was itself a delay for a mute Angelica. In this way, the clowns incrementally shift labour onto themselves, until an equilibrium is reached. Reinforcing Holger Syme’s argument earlier in this volume for the importance of role-length in repertory planning, clowning may have served to mitigate that problem internally, rendering the dramatic ecosystem around them more plastic, dynamic, and adaptable.³¹ Clowns were a play’s living, connective tissue, fitting texts to the exigencies of performance – and in the process stretching them further, each day giving audiences a little more. Or, sometimes, they simply spawned their own play. The manuscript play *John of Bordeaux* (c. 1591), a sequel to Greene’s *Friar Bacon* (c. 1589), does not even bother grafting its clowns to the plot: as in *Doctor Faustus*, they seem to occupy a parallel universe. Pierce, Friar Bacon’s assistant, shares only one scene with him; otherwise, he is swindling students, teaching them to dine for free at alehouses, and being chased by the irate proprietors of those alehouses. When he is thrown in jail, we get the direction ‘*Enter the Iailor and Perce [for] the seane of the whiper*’, followed by a rule across the page.³² We have no clue what ‘the scene of the whisper/whipper/wiper’ was. The clowns knew, and evidently that was

enough. Hamlet's advice to the players to 'let . . . your clowns speak no more than is set down' may very well have been a laugh-line: audiences would have understood that little, if anything, was 'set down'.

That improvisation was integrated into theatrical practice has profound implications for the nature of early modern performance. If, as Tiffany Stern suggests, 'partial rehearsals of group 'moments' – songs, dances, swordfights, slapstick – were all that it was absolutely *necessary* to rehearse', and if such moments were rehearsed independently, there would have been significant chunks of the play that the company never saw until they were doing it, at the premiere.³³ The premiere was really the first full rehearsal, acted before a paying public; there was no crucial distinction between 'rehearsal' and 'performance'. This partly explains the culture of first performances, always referred to as the play's 'trial', or, indeed, 'rehearsal' – terms that imply the players' test of the play as much as the audience's. Even if approved, plays were understood still to be malleable. Epilogues often invite audiences to 'polish these rude Sceanes', and for this privilege – passing judgement on the play, and participating in its composition – they paid twice the standard admission fee; a premiere, as one of Middleton's gallants puts it, was 'the first cut'.³⁴ Yet if a set-piece were *intrinsically* improvisational, neither was the second 'cut' final. For these sections of the play, every day was a fresh 'trial'.

If clowning was perpetual rehearsal, rehearsal is the perpetual theme of clowning. We have already seen this pattern without recognizing it – in the anticlimactic 'merriment' of *A Knack to Know a Knave*, for instance, where the clowns spend far longer quarrelling over their petition than actually delivering it. In *Orlando Furioso*, Orlando obsessively repeats the phrase 'Angelica is dead', never satisfied with Orgalio's response:

ORL. Orgalio.

ORG.

My Lord.

ORL.

Angelica is dead.

Orgalio cries.

Ah poor slaue, so crie no more now.

ORG.

Nay, I haue quickly done.

ORL.

Orgalio.

ORG.

My Lord.

ORL.

Medors Angelica is dead.

Orgalio cries, and Orlando beats him againe.

ORG.

Why doo ye beate me my Lord?

ORL.

Why slaue, wilt thou weep for Medors Angelica, thou must laugh for her.

ORG.

Laugh? Yes, Ile laugh all day and you will.

ORL.

Orgalio.

ORG.

My Lord.

ORL.

Medors Angelica is dead.

ORG.

Ha ha ha ha.

ORL.

So, tis well now.

ORG.

Nay, this is easier than the other was.³⁵

The same illogic drives 3.3 of *Much Ado*, in which the exhaustive elaboration of the Watches' duties replaces their enactment. We are always, it seems, watching the clown *prepare*, or be

prepared: he is prompted, drilled, rehearsed – for information, for education, for action – yet always manages an incorrect result. In the absence of a script, paradoxically, the template of improvisation becomes rigid adherence to an imaginary one, which can never be completed; interrogating his suspects, Dogberry insists on compiling a transcript that misrepresents their statements as facts, literally producing a script for the very scene he is in and bungling it at the same time.³⁶ Deferral and involution are ideal extemporal devices: if comedy spans the gap between theory and execution, improvisation lives in that gap. That gap is also the space of rehearsal – what likewise happens always on the way to something else.

We think of rehearsal and improvisation as mutually exclusive domains, but they are fundamentally intertwined. Yet where we see them most explicitly fused – in depictions of theatrical performance itself – they seem diametrically opposed. Representations of rehearsal invariably devolve into improvisation, simulating the most violent, incendiary forms of it. In Day's *Travels of the Three English Brothers* (1607), Kemp is resurrected to engage some Italian comedians in an 'extemporal meriment'.³⁷ He (or the actor impersonating him) squanders their rehearsal quibbling over his part, insulting Harlequin's manhood, impugning his wife's virtue, fondling her, and mocking Italians, before following them onstage – whereupon the scene ends, never showing us the play. We have just seen it, in the obnoxious delay tactics that were Kemp's trademark, here memorialized as frustrating even *commedia*. In 2 *Return from Parnassus* (c. 1601), two actors audition for Burbage and Kemp; Kemp tells his pupil to 'mark me', spews twenty lines of free-associative nonsense, and then, impossibly, demands that he repeat it *verbatim*.³⁸ T.W.'s *Thorny-Abbey* (c. 1615) stages a more complex improvisation-effect: a fool delivers its prologue, immediately forgets his lines, and forces the prompter to hiss them; he misspeaks even those, and the prompter chases him off.³⁹ In these highly scripted exchanges, the familiar picture of improvisation starts to emerge: as a skill inimical to theatre, or as lack of skill altogether. The clown's

unreadiness becomes a destructive condition, exasperating his fellows and heaping ruin on the performance. Even Letoy in *Antipodes*, who reserved for his clown the highest praise, rebukes him once the play is underway:

... you sir are incorrigible, and
 Take license to yourself, to add unto
 Your parts, your own free fancy; and sometimes
 To alter or diminish what the writer
 With care and skill compos'd: and when you are
 To speak to your co-actors in the Scene,
 You hold interloquutions with the Audients.

(D3v)

In Marston's *Histriomastix* (1599), Sir Oliver Owlet's Men are disrupted by their clown's incessant sex jokes: 'this cuckoldly coyle hinders our rehearsal'.⁴⁰ In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the clown joins the audience before the play-within-the-play is finished, and starts a fight; the play's performance is its only rehearsal. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, even the rehearsal is abandoned.

Whenever theatre documented its own operation, in other words, those documents contradict our inferential evidence of how theatre actually worked. In practice, as we have seen, improvisation happened so rehearsal did not have to; in *representations* of that practice, not only does rehearsal appear centralized, comprehensive, and mandatory, but its purpose is to *prevent* improvisation – failing spectacularly every time. This returns us to where we began: how did the role of improvisation end up marginalized and obscured? Why does theatre give a false account of itself? We have traditionally taken these metatheatrical scenes at face value, when the fact that they dramatize systemic *failure* for comic effect should argue against doing so. Precisely *because* they are scripted, indeed, they exemplify better than anything the appeal of unscriptedness. Despite the extemporality that plays *already* contained, they synthesized *more*, foregrounding it, exaggerating it, sensationalizing it – giving clowns *extra* business, beyond what they assigned themselves.

These scenes form much of the evidence for a hostility to clowning, corroborating the perennial charges against it: the clown is vulgar, self-indulgent, unprofessional, a liability. Yet they are fictional evidence, as may be the narratives they subtend. For dramatists to have enriched and spotlighted improvisation solely to repudiate it suggests that repudiation may not have been the goal. It has looked that way, because to us – heirs of fixed, static texts – theatre is about getting a play ‘right’. But these scenes of disorder are not scenes of discipline; there are no consequences to the clown’s deviance, except the delight of its onstage and offstage audiences. The *frisson* they generate between performer and script seems an end in itself, not a means to its resolution – and if theatre ever intended to banish clowns, it was remarkably slow to do so, since they – clowns, jigs, ‘themes’, and the other genres we have surveyed – endured until its closure. If anything, what these scenes document is not the reality of rehearsal, but its invention – what audiences were not supposed to see, a discrete, anxious phase of performance in whose artificial image we have reconstructed a parts system to compensate. Rendering the entire play contingent, accidental, happening always on the way to something else, they instead reiterate the hybridity of early modern theatre, an effort to infuse the drama with the pleasure of the ludic forms around it – a pleasure consisting not in finished products but in process, in watching a thing go wrong and right at once.

Documents regiment theatre into distinct phases and iterable forms, as if we could recover the whole from its parts. At once the most instantaneous mode of performance and the most historically embedded, the most elusive and the most durable, improvisation leaves no trace and yet scatters those traces everywhere, confounding documentation as much by exploding it as resisting it. There is no document to which the clown’s activity reduced, so it proliferates into every document: commonplace books, verses, memoirs, eulogies, woodcuts, shop-signs, ballads, jestbooks, drolls, printed ‘themes’, printed jigs and dances.⁴¹ These too are documents of rehearsal, insofar as they are documents of performance, *and* documents after performance,

which become the basis of new performance. Even Hamlet's clown is not quite improvising, for 'gentlemen quotes his jests down / In their tables, before they come to the play': they already know, from prior attendance, what to expect.⁴² Now he has lines 'set down' for him: do they call for innovation, or repetition? Is he performing, or rehearsing? Are the 'gentlemen' his spectators, his readers, or his prompters? What's the difference? In the radical concentration of his practice to the moment of performance, the clown straddles its infinite elasticity – as well as its circularity, the futility of segmenting theatrical experience into 'before', 'during', or 'after'. So much, then, for feeling out of place: in this book, the clown belongs in every chapter.

Notes

- * This chapter revises some of the positions I held in my book, *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). I am grateful to Tiffany Stern, to my fellow Folger symposium participants, and to Arden for the opportunity to rethink this material.
- 1 See among many important studies Roslyn Lander Knutson, *The Repertory of Shakespeare's Company, 1594–1613* (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 1991); Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); Evelyn B. Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe: Attention and Memory in Shakespeare's Theatre* (London: Palgrave, 2011).
- 2 See Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 3 See James J. Marino, 'Parts and the Playscript: Seven Questions', in the present volume.
- 4 William Turner, *Turners Dish of Lentten Stoffe* (1612), A1r.
- 5 For an expanded survey, see Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship*, Ch.2.
- 6 See Michael J. Hirrel, 'Duration of Performances and Lengths of Plays: How Shall We Beguile the Lazy Time?' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.2 (Summer 2010), 159–182.

- 7 Archie Armstrong, *A Banquet of Jests* (1633), E5r–v.
- 8 Edmund Gayton, *Pleasant Notes upon Don Quixot* (1654), 271.
- 9 Anon., *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, in J. B. Leishman, ed. *The Three Parnassus Plays (1598–1601)* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1949), 129–130, ll. 662–677.
- 10 William Shakespeare, *The tragicall historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke* (1603), F2r–v.
- 11 William Shakespeare, *The tragicall historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke* (1604), G4r.
- 12 William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in *Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies* (1623), B8v–C1r; J.[ohn] M.[arston], *Antonio's Revenge* (1602), I2v–I3r; William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *Comedies* (1623), 2r2v–2r3r. (The 'Fool's prophecy' is notoriously absent from the 1608 Quarto.)
- 13 On *ceterae* in printed playbooks, see Laurie Maguire, 'Typographical Embodiment: The Case of *etcetera*', in Valerie Traub, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 527–548.
- 14 Anon., *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (1598), C4r.
- 15 Palfrey and Stern, *Parts*, 172–175.
- 16 Then again, the clown here *has* no name, yet is asked to supply one, which may make this an exception.
- 17 R.[obert?] W.[ilson?], *The Three Ladies of London* (1592), D3v.
- 18 Anon., *Tarltons Jests* (1612), C2v–C3r.
- 19 *A Knack to Knowe a Knave* (1594), F1r–v.
- 20 W. W. Greg, ed., *The Book of Sir Thomas More* (Oxford University Press / Malone Society Reprints, 1911), 23 fol. 11^a, opposite ll. 647ff.
- 21 Eric Rasmussen, 'Setting Down what the Clown Spoke: Improvisation, Hand B, and *The Book of Sir Thomas More*', *The Library* s.6-13, issue 2 (1991), 126–136.
- 22 *Sir Thomas More*, 38–39, fol. 17^a, ll. 1150–1153.
- 23 See Ch.[ristopher] Mar.[lowe], *The Tragicall History of D. Faustus* (1604), B3r–B4r, and Ch.[ristopher] Mar. [Marlowe],

The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus (1616), B2v–B3r.

- 24 Stephen Purcell, 'Editing for Performance or Documenting Performance? Exploring the Relationship Between Early Modern Text and Clowning', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34.1 (2016), 5–27.
- 25 There is little difference between 2.2 *Faustus*, which can fall anywhere in the play – after 3.1 in the A-text, after 2.3 in the B-text – and one of Kemp's 'merriments', which might likewise erupt anywhere during the play.
- 26 See William Shakespeare, *An Excellent Conceited Tragedie of Romeo and Iuliet* (1597), I2v–I3r; *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedie, of Romeo and Iuliet* (1599), K3v–K4r.
- 27 William Shakespeare, *Much Adoe About Nothing* (1600), E3r–v.
- 28 *Ibid.*, E3v.
- 29 *Ibid.*, E4r.
- 30 Robert Greene, *The Historie of Orlando Furioso* (1594), F1r–v.
- 31 See Holger Syme, 'A Sharers' Repertory', in the present volume.
- 32 *John of Bordeaux, or the Second Part of Friar Bacon*, ed. William Renwick (Oxford University Press / Malone Society Reprints, 1935), 43 / fol. 11(34)^a, l. 1059. Fol. 5(27)^a also offers the in-text stage direction, 'Exent Bacon to bring in the shows as you knowe'.
- 33 Stern, *Rehearsal*, 79.
- 34 See Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 89.
- 35 *Orlando Furioso*, E2v.
- 36 Shakespeare, *Much Adoe*, G3v–G4v.
- 37 John Day, *The Travailes of the Three English Brothers* (1607), E4r; the episode runs to F1r.
- 38 Anon., *The Return From Parnassus, or the Scourge of Simony*, in Leishman, ed., *Parnassus Plays*, 341–342, ll. 1809–1831.
- 39 T.W., *Thorny-Abbey, or the London Maid*, in R. D., *Gratiae Theatrales, or a choice ternary of English plays* (London: 1662), B2r–v.
- 40 John Marston, *Histrion-mastix or, the Player Whipt* (1610), E4v.
- 41 See Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship*, Ch.3.
- 42 Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1603), F2r–v.