Richard Preiss. *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre.* **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp x, 287.**

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How funny was the Elizabethan stage clown? Reading what we have left to judge that question does leave one wondering. As I write this review a cartoon in the current *New Yorker* shows a jester being dragged out of a throne room by a hooded executioner; he shouts back towards the king 'What about the writers? Nobody ever blames the writers!' This both is and isn't Richard Preiss's subject in this lively book, which pays serious and telling attention to early modern comic performance and how it altered, or was modulated, in the late Elizabethan period. His version of what the clown did is intimately related to what the audience did, and what we have left to decide *that* question is disproportionately antagonistic, so that it is hard to strike a balance in speaking or writing about early modern audiences today. This is particularly the case as the folk assumption has been that they were normally noisy, unruly, and interventionist, an assumption played up by both actors and some audience members at the modern rebuilt Globe, as if historical duty obliged them to. Preiss, then, immediately confronts two problems of evidence. In his introduction he writes that his book 'has two axes of enquiry, an archival and a theoretical one' (7), and that the first two chapters deal with the evidence. On the strength of my own reading of his book I would say that the division is not quite that sharp: the examination of the evidence begins with a strong hypothesis, and a theoretical approach is there from the beginning, while Preiss gives certain theoretical received wisdom a refreshing roughing up quite late in the book. I found myself wishing that other theoretical frameworks had been given a similarly cold eye, but Preiss advances his own arguments strongly, and for the most part clearly.

    We begin with two clear claims, the first of which is unlikely to be contentious: 'A playbook is not a performance: it is the retrospective fantasy of one, abstracted from the play's synchronic and diachronic stage lives' (6). Yes, certainly, but. The but I'll return to, yet it is absolutely central to recognize that early printed dramatic books are not an easy key for unlocking early stage performances. For Preiss it is the emergence of the printed play as a common by-product of show business in the 1590s and thereafter that marks the important cultural movement in what he calls authorship, concretizing the shifting forms of theatre in authoritative black and white. As for the theatre itself, it was an agonistic space: 'the playhouse

environment was one of authorial competition, wherein spectators vied aggressively with both players and each other for possession of the stage' (7). This is a more startling claim, but it is a refreshing idea, and gets at an important ingredient of what clowns probably did, and perhaps still do. So the contention over authorship might be taken as a war of the theatres which the book won and the audience lost: I over simplify drastically, but the cultural change that the arrival of published dramatic literature in English effected is a matter Preiss keeps in view.

The book, of course, — and here comes my but — was a thing very important to actors. Playing companies assembled two valuable commodities as the basis of their common stock, into which sharers bought: apparel, or costumes, and books, manuscripts of the texts they put on stage. For actors, books were prospective rather than retrospective and private rather than public. As 'allowed books', signed by an officer of the Revels, they were a passport to public performance, and possible profit. Given the enormous number of performances as against the relatively small number of plays printed between 1580 and 1640, there were once a great many more of such books than dramatic texts in print, and they were there from early on. In the early 1570s a (failed) writer called Rowland Broughton was contracted to write and deliver eighteen plays over thirty months — an average of a new play every six to seven weeks — to the Dutton brothers, actors with a variety of companies: he didn't deliver. How actors saw the book, or what became the book, is nicely caught in a 1601 letter from the actor (and author) Samuel Rowley to Philip Henslowe; note the fascinating variety of language used: 'Mr. Henslowe, I have heard five sheets of the play of the Conquest of the Indies and I do not doubt it will be a very good play ... take the papers into your own hands and on Easter eve they promise to make an end of all the rest'.[1] Whatever the theory about parts, without the book the play was not available for production, hence the rest of Queen Anne's Men sued their former colleague Robert Lee in 1619 to get their playbooks back. The work of most players most of the time was circumscribed by text, in books that, mostly, were handwritten rather than printed.

Thus Preiss's theory about books needs some verbal adjustment, based on contemporary evidence. As regards clowning I feel he is not quite sceptical enough regarding the hypothetical histories of David Wiles, but he is very good on the energies and tensions of comic performance, particularly the unscripted parts of it. (It might of course be argued how far improvisation, either in comedy or in music, is actually thought up in the moment.) For Preiss, the clown was a lightning rod, drawing down the excited surplus energy of an exuberant audience who might otherwise attack other parts of the entertainment, fracturing the fictional

containment of the play. The antagonistic audience is also in itself funny: witness Statler and Waldorf vs. Fozzie Bear. In that case the would-be comic bear is, in his incompetence, both an object of derision and, in failure, pathos and resulting affection: affected incompetence, then, might be a performative tactic. Aggression, at any rate, is always an important spice in the comic soup, and Preiss has its measure, particularly in the case of Richard Tarlton. The posthumous stories about Tarlton feature frequent attacks from the direction of the audience: yelled remarks, missiles, even horses. But was such behaviour part of the game that comedians like Tarlton encouraged? Stand-up comedy is still a battle for dominance; the audience waits for the comedian to stall, then to drown him or her out with booing, and the comedian, who in the language of the profession is there hoping to 'kill' or 'destroy' the audience, attempts to keep up the energy and prevail through wit, not infrequently directing insults or mockery at chosen individuals among the spectators, diverting the collective energy. In this instance of performance and reception, noisiness and interruption are part of the etiquette. Audiences in comedy clubs may not have changed so very much from those responding to Tarlton's solo numbers.

Theatre audiences, naturally, have changed a lot over the last century and a half. No longer do we hiss, boo, whistle, hum, thunder (*Henry VIII*), or clap and shout before the house lights come up for the interval, although the mere entry of star actors cast in a play can still produce an outburst of (inappropriate) applause. If less challenging, we are undoubtedly more boring save in comedy, where actors expect or hope to be interrupted by the noise of laughter. The evidence for early audiences actually derailing plays, however, I find to be fairly limited. It is quite likely that Shrove Tuesday shows were particularly lively, and equally likely that actors prepared a program to suit, more like a variety show than *King Lear.* The theatre stories retailed after 1642 belong precisely to that genre: aside from his often cited tale of the unruly and capricious audience, Gayton, for example, also tells a story of a theatre audience at a bad play intimidated into silence by a band of heavies planted among them: *caveat lector.* The limitations of what we might agree on as reliable evidence — Rowley's letter, for example — lead us all into storytelling in giving accounts of early theatre. Although he might be challenged in some particulars, Richard Preiss tells his own story, much of it original, with conviction and sophistication; this book is necessary reading for anyone attempting to make sense of the extra-dramatic parts of Elizabethan and Stuart entertainments, and of the clown's role within the contemporary acting companies.

Notes

1   Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry, and William Ingram (eds), *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660* (Cambridge, 2000), 238.