Issues in Review

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Theatre and the Reformation of Space in Early Modern Europe

Introduction: Playing with Space in the Early Modern Theatre

What was space in early modern Europe? How did theatre change it? Thirty years ago, these questions would likely have seemed almost nonsensical. Space was simply space — the empty neutral container wherein people lived. Time was far more interesting for historians of culture and ideas since, as scholars then (as now) knew, questions about temporality were hugely important in early modern Europe. Did time move from the A of Creation to the Z of the Last Judgment, did it cycle around and around with no end point in sight, or did it have no discernible shape or pattern whatsoever? Was history a matter of divine providence, human agency, or some mix of the two?[1] If scholars wrote about space in early modern Europe at all, they focused on a very large-scale matter indeed — how European exploration and trade expanded the geopolitical horizons of the world and changed the space of the globe itself, at least from the point of view of the Europeans. Until fairly recently, scholarship simply did not possess the theoretical means to consider space more closely. Indeed, spatiality seemed a non-question, a matter of study only in mathematics or the physical sciences, and not a question for the humanities. '[T]he general feeling', wrote Henri Lefebvre, 'was that the concept of space was ultimately a mathematical one. To speak of "social space", therefore, would have sounded strange'.[2]

The situation changed with the advent of theories of spatiality by thinkers such as Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Gaston Bachelard, and a number of 'human geographers', who argued that space was not simply something given, but was rather something made by human collectivities, the

built environment, forms of discourse, and social relations and practices.[3] '[C]ultural theorists and critical geographers have stressed the need to view space as socially produced', says Andrew Hiscock in a recent book on spatiality and theatre in early modern England '–as the consequence of a vibrant and changing encounter between the forces of human perception, ideological pressures and the experience of the material environment'.[4] In the advent of work by Lefebvre and the others, it is possible no longer to think of space as merely a feature of the physical world or an area of study for mathematicians; we understand now that the changing configurations of spatiality belong formatively to the social and historical world and are therefore properly situated within the scope of humanities research.

The past several decades have seen a number of influential studies of how theatre changed the meaning, use, and experience of space for early modern English people. These studies include work by Steven Mullaney, Jean Howard, Janette Dillon, John Gillies, Adam Zucker, and others.[5] The work has been various in its approaches and conclusions, with Mullaney rethinking the ideological situation of the theatre by rethinking *where* the playhouse was in relation to the centres of authority and power in London and just what kind of 'where' that was, Howard studying how the theatre allowed Londoners to re-imagine a city that was changing at an unprecedented and dizzying rate, or Gillies considering Shakespeare's global spatial imagination in relation to the geographical practices of his time, especially the cultural politics of early modern cartography. Although his argument is not about theatre, Richard Helgerson's provocative work on cartography, nationhood, and the emergence of a proto-democratic political culture in early modern England demands a mention.[6] His essay, 'The Land Speaks: Cartography, Chorography, and Subversion in Renaissance England', allowed us to see writing and mapping as interrelated and ideologically creative practices that, on Helgerson's account, shifted authority and political agency from the rulers who sponsored new technologies of ownership and sovereignty to those artists and artisans who developed actual new ways of describing, measuring, and mapping the English nation.

We understand now that spatiality is both an almost invisible instrument of power (invisible, of course, because it envelops those it subjects) and also a changeable, contested, and creative property of social life broadly considered. The five essays in this Issues in Review section build upon this insight into the social life of space, and they bring to the discussion a set of interests that makes them particularly worth our attention. They connect theatrical space

with the spatial dimensions of law, religion, history, dance, the senses, and of course, the social world. Helga Duncan, for example, looks at Reformation controversies about sacred space and how those controversies are played out in Thomas Middleton's comedy, *The Family of Love.* An understanding of courtly dance makes possible a reconsideration of the social politics of Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna* in Laura Vidler's essay, allowing us to see how the play 'structures dramatic space by dislocating the *habitus* of Early Modern dance' (208).

The essays also attend to how movement in the represented world, in theatrical performance, and in the professional lives of touring players creates particular kinds of space as well as critical understandings of spatiality. Andrew Brown keeps a keen eye trained on the rapid movement of characters and properties in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* in order to illuminate how that complex mobility creates a space of judgment for those in the play and for the audience as well. Importantly, the essays consider theatrical representations of social space in relation to the actual use of stage space. This focus, too little developed in previous work on theatrical spatiality, makes very good sense since there is no space on the bare stage of the early modern playhouse until the players make it by speaking and moving. The players are able to turn the near blankness of the stage space into a city street, a fairground, an embattled castle, a bedroom, a throne room, a prison, a night or a daytime scene, a space ripe for ironic judgment, or one that fosters identification and empathy with the characters and the action. Jennifer Roberts-Smith challenges the standard view of the Queen's Men's play, *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third,* by showing how the child actors could transform the playing space and the heterogeneous playgoers into a communal gathering for heartfelt nationalism and royalism.

Finally, the essays are about theatre and space in Spain and Italy as well as in England. Marlene Eberhart focuses on the sensuous spaces of Pietro Aretino's city plays in ways that illuminate Aretino's comic art and that also suggest the degree to which what we are calling the theatrical reformation of space was an international rather than exclusively an English phenomenon.

The comparatist study of theatrical spatiality, the attention to performed and represented space, the interest in different forms of movement, and the analyses of multiple intersecting modalities of spatiality are elements shared among the five essays. Not that the essays are at all uniform in approach, focus, or argument. That is the case even though four of the five essays (all except Andrew Brown's, which the present editor solicited) took their starting point

at a symposium at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Fall 2009. The symposium, 'Theater and the Reformation of Space in Early Modern Europe', was co-organized by the Folger Institute and the Making Publics (MaPs) Project (see http://project.makingpublics.org/conferences.php/conferences.php). It featured ten informal presentations by leading scholars on theatricality and space in England, France, Italy, and Spain, and it attracted approximately thirty-five non-presenting participants who also contributed substantially to the work of the meeting. As a follow-up — because there was still so much more to say — the MaPs Project organized five interconnected panels at the 2011 meeting of the Renaissance Society of America; at the RSA, ten participants from the Folger meeting had the opportunity to present their research, work that connected well with the goals of the Folger symposium, which were to consider a range of theatrical forms and practices, to include Continental as well as English cases, to connect theatre to domains such as law, religion, and politics, to undertake thinking that was both theoretical and historical, and to maintain a focus on 'how playhouses and playing practices affected the actual environment of early modern Europe as well as with how theatre and theatricality were able to reconfigure the lived experience of space'.[7] Four of the five essays published here are revised versions of papers presented at the RSA. They, as well as the fifth essay by Andrew Brown, represent a valuable critical enlargement of the work begun in Washington in 2009.

While the five essays share a number of critical interests and while they are all involved in a larger collaborative project dedicated to rethinking how theatre reconfigured space and created new forms of public association in early modern Europe (what we have come to call 'publics'), each of them has also its own agenda and argument, and each is well worth considering on its own terms. Andrew Brown's essay, 'Theatre of Judgment: Space, Spectators, and the Epistemologies of Law in *Bartholomew Fair*', provides an account of how Ben Jonson's play rehearses the emerging public sphere of modernity by staging a 'theatre of judgment', a space filled with people performing, buying, selling, and cheating, competing and collaborating, eating and drinking, making love, seeking their own fortunes, and undertaking to use their powers of discernment to judge others and the social world as well. This is altogether a far busier, less intelligible, more playful, and more realistic space than the 'rational-critical' public sphere described by Jürgen Habermas. Brown also argues compellingly that Jonson elaborates his theatrical public sphere in a kind of critical dialogue with controversies ongoing in the legal community. That means that the play not only represents a space

of judgment, but also takes part in a public-making discussion about the law and the capacities of ordinary people to consider evidence and to render judgment about matters of public concern.

Helga Duncan's essay, '"The Hole in the Wall": Sacred Space and "Third Space" in *The Family of Love*', also focuses on a London comedy, but shifts the ground from law to religion. The essay focuses on Reformation controversies about sacred space. Is the sacred to be found only in places consecrated by the established Church ('locative' sacrality), or is the presence of the divine available anywhere ('utopian' sacrality)? Duncan recruits Lefebvre's idea of 'third space' to describe how theatrical performance can enter imaginatively and critically into this momentous controversy. At stake in Middleton's play is not only the character and location of sacred space, but also the relationship between private and public space and the question of gender and spatial sovereignty: do men or women control the newly configured private space of worship that is created in the inn called the Hole in the Wall? The play's final scene, Duncan tells us, opens the private space of the inn to public view in a staged trial scene and places the newly created sacred space under masculine control. Middleton's play thus rethinks spatiality in early modern London in the different, interconnected terms of religion, privacy and publicity, and gender.

Gender and private and public space are equally important in Marlene Eberhart's essay, 'Performance, Print, and the Senses: Aretino and the Spaces of the City', but Eberhart is concerned with a different national dramatic literature, a different city, and a set of issues very dissimilar from those in Duncan's essay. Central in Eberhart's discussion is how sense-based knowledge and social capital can or cannot be achieved in a dazzlingly complicated urban space and especially in relationship to threshold spaces (windows, doorways, balconies) that are themselves public-private hybrids — hard to fathom, penetrate, or control. Aretino, Eberhart explains, calls into question the capacity of the traditionally highest senses of seeing and hearing to act as conveyors of knowledge about the world. In the absence of what she playfully calls 'common sense', social knowledge and high standing are simply impossible to attain. Those with common sense — commoners and women — do better in the urban environment and are better able to negotiate the thresholds between private and public space. Eberhart's argument also connects intriguingly with Brown's since both suggest how the theatre allowed playwrights such as Jonson and Aretino to achieve social know-how

and prestige in their own right and even to share those valuable commodities with their paying customers.

Jennifer Roberts-Smith brings us back to England with her provocative study, 'Child Actors, Royalist Publicity, and the Space of the Nation in the Queen's Men's *True Tragedy of Richard the Third*', an essay that moves the discussion from social and religious space to the space of the nation. State politics are central here. Roberts-Smith develops an argument critical of Brian Walsh's reading of the play as proto-democratic and critical also of my characterization of theatrical performance as a public-making practice. The play, she argues, was able to conjure a royalist rather than a proto-democratic English nation in the very many towns where it was performed. It did this in part simply because it was a play performed in local communities. Because they travelled the length and breadth of England with the play, the actors were able to embody the space of the nation in the very act of performing. They are able to displace the local history and sense of place in each town and village they visited with the far grander history and spatiality of the monarchy of England. The play, the essay argues, is also royalist because it charges the playgoers with the loving care of the royal children whose lives are put in danger in the dramatic action and whose sacred, dear bodies hold in themselves the vast space of the English nation.

Embodiment is also central in the fifth and final essay, '"The Great Choreographer": Embodying Space in *Fuenteovejuna*', by Laura Vidler. Just as the actors create particular imaginary spaces on stage by the ways they move, so actual social space is in part a product of how people hold themselves, regard each other, walk and talk and stand. Space is itself embodied, we might say. By drawing on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and by way of an analysis of early modern Spanish courtly dance and conduct as these space-making practices are recorded in manuals of the time, Vidler is able to reconsider the social politics of the implied acting directions in Lope's great play. How might commoners literally stand up to aristocrats who have grievously abused their power? The body held erect can put in question the social space that makes relations of power seem merely natural. Theatre, on this account, becomes a practice able to make visible the normally invisible spatial practices, the bodily *habitus,* that maintain relations of domination in a deference culture. *Fuenteovejuna* is a socially creative work, Vidler's argument suggests, both because of its thematic political content and also because of the ways it re-imagines social space itself. As with the other plays discussed in the essays that follow, what mattered most in early modernity was not the ideological

content of the plays themselves, but rather the ideological content of the practices that the plays fostered, which had primarily to do with how early modern Europeans were able to rethink and thereby reshape the manifold spaces in which they lived.

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Notes

1 For good overviews of these questions about early modern temporality and historiography, see Ricardo J. Quinones, *The Renaissance Discovery of Time* (Cambridge, ms,1972); Herschel Baker, *The Race of Time: Three Lectures on Renaissance Historiography* (Toronto, 1967); David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time* (Hanover NH, 1982).

2 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991), 1.

3 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977,* ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York, 1980); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, 1969). Other notable work includes David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York, 2009); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984); and Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York, 1989).

4 Andrew Hiscock, *The Uses of this World: Thinking Space in Shakespeare, Marlowe, Cary and Jonson* (Cardiff, 2004), 1.

5 Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago, 1988); Jean Howard, *Theater of a City: The Places of London Comedy, 1598–1642* (Philadelphia, 2007); Janette Dillon, *Theatre, Court and City, 1595–1610: Drama and Social Space in London* (Cambridge, 2000); John Gillies, *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, 1994); Adam Zucker, *The Places of Wit in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge, 2011).

6 Richard Helgerson, 'The Land Speaks: Cartography, Chorography, and Subversion in Renaissance England', *Representations* 16 (1986): 50–85. The essay, which has influenced many researchers, including John Gillies, was reprinted in Helgerson's book, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago, 1992).

7 Description, 'Theatre and the Reformation of Space in Early Modern Europe', Folger Symposium, 29–31 October 2009.