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Much Virtue in *O-Ob*: A Case Study

The ‘O, o, o, o’ that follows Hamlet’s ‘The rest is silence’ in Shakespeare’s first folio has often been derided, but this signal is found in five other Shakespeare plays and in the works of dramatists as varied as Jonson, Middleton, Fletcher, Massinger, and Brome to indicate that a figure is dying, mortally wounded, or sick, or to generate a comic effect. Shakespeare was adept at using the tools at hand, but to understand his distinctive implementation of those tools requires a working knowledge of the theatrical vocabulary shared at that time by playwrights, players, and playgoers.

For a reader of the first folio, Hamlet’s last utterance is not the much discussed and much admired word ‘silence’ but a sound, printed as ‘O, o, o, o’ (TLN 3847),¹ and followed by ‘Dyes’. Those four Os, to put it mildly, have not fared well on the page or on the stage. A notable exception is G.R. Hibbard’s 1987 single volume Oxford edition that replaces them with ‘*He gives a long sigh*’ and adds a note: ‘In thus “translating” Fs “O,o,o,o,” which has been the object of unjustified derision, I follow the suggestion of E.A.J. Honigmann.’² Other editors rarely agree with Hibbard, and, as a result, relatively few theatrical professionals have experimented with the folio signal.³

The citation to Honigmann is to a single page of his overview on stage directions of the period where he invokes the term *crypto-directions*, ‘some of which appear to have served as short-hand directions for a great variety of noises’. In particular, he singles out the ‘ubiquitous “O!--o!”’ which ‘is sometimes described as an “actor’s vulgarisation” — as if no self-respecting dramatist would stoop to write such stuff’ — but he argues instead that ‘the metre confirms that even the greatest dramatists could sometimes write “O!--o!” etc., while the context makes it equally clear that at other times this expletive was nothing more nor less than a familiar signal’ that ‘directed the actor to make whatever noise was locally appropriate. It could tell him to sigh, groan, gasp, roar, weep’.⁴

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To make his point within a few paragraphs Honigmann introduces ten examples that include O, O, Os from *Lady Macbeth* and *Othello* (he does not cite folio *Hamlet*) and single or double Ohs or Oohs from *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, *The Devil's Law-Case*, *The Changeling*, *The Maid's Tragedy*, *If It be not a Good Play the Devil is in It*, and *A Trick to Catch the Old One*.⁵ From such evidence he concludes that 'when the immediate context gives no further explanation, the wide range of possibilities elsewhere suggests that the actor could do as he liked'. As for today's editors, Honigmann argues that they should replace the Os 'with the appropriate equivalent' just as elsewhere 'they remove actors' names and substitute character-names', so that *Lady Macbeth's* exclamation should be followed by '*A long sigh*' and *Othello's* by '*cries out in pain*'. He concludes: 'In short, I assume that quite often what the original audience heard was not "O!-o!", and that it will only mislead a modern reader or audience to print the dramatist's signal in this form'.

My goal in this essay is to cast a wider net in the hope of expanding the options generated by the often used multiple Os. In so doing, I will not invoke single or double Os (as in several of Honigmann's examples) which fit more comfortably into normal scansion but will concentrate upon strings of three, four, or at times even more Os or Ohs.⁶

Shakespeare's Multiple Os

To start with the Shakespeare canon, the commentators who deal with this phenomenon cite three examples: *Hamlet* in the folio; *Lady Macbeth* in her sleepwalking: 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O!' (5.1.50–2, TLN 3142–4); and *Othello* in both quarto and folio in his anguish before he learns about the handkerchief (5.2.198, M3v; TLN 3485). In response to *Lady Macbeth's* Os, the Doctor says: 'What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged' (5.1.53–4); in response to *Othello's*, Emilia provides: 'Nay, lay thee down and roar' (5.2.198). These items therefore suggest that in the Shakespeare canon three Os can be equated with a sigh or a roar.

Those three examples, however, are only part of the story. Later in the final scene, according to the *Riverside Shakespeare*, *Othello* exclaims: 'Whip me, ye devils, / From the possession of this heavenly sight' and concludes the speech: 'O Desdemona! dead, Desdemona! dead! / O, O!' (5.2.276–7, 281–2) as in the folio (TLN 3577–8, 3589–90), but the final line of the speech in the quarto is 'O Desdemona, Desdemona, dead, O, o, o' (N1r) — and this moment seems less likely to yield a roar. In the previous scene, Roderigo's reaction to a fatal wound

from Iago in both texts is ‘O damn’d Iago! O inhuman dog!’ (5.1.62, TLN 3160), but the quarto adds ‘o,o,o’ (L4r). Lear’s final utterance with which we are familiar from the folio lacks any Os, but the quarto, the only version available to readers for roughly fifteen years before the folio, reads: ‘And my poore foole is hangd, no, no life, why should a dog, a horse, a rat of life and thou no breath at all, O thou wilt come no more, neuer, neuer, neuer, pray you vndo this button, thanke you sir, O, o, o, o’ — and his final quarto utterance is then the line we associate with Kent: ‘Breake hart, I prethe breake’ (L4r).

The Shakespeare multiple Os, moreover, are not limited to end-of-play utterances. In a folio-only scene in *Titus Andronicus*, Titus rebukes Marcus for killing a fly, and his brother answers: ‘Pardon me, sir, it was a black ill-favor’d fly, / Like to the Empress’ Moor, therefore I kill’d him’. Titus’ response is: ‘O, O, O, / Then pardon me for reprehending thee, / For thou hast done a charitable deed. / Give me thy knife, I will insult on him’ (3.2.66–71, TLN 1520–6). Here, as Honigsmann suggests, the tone of the delivery is left up to the actor (rage? madness? sardonic humour? playfulness?). More clearly comic though still painful is Falstaff’s ‘O, O, O!’ when, as Herne the Hunter, he is tormented ‘With trial-fire’ by supposed fairies (5.5.89, 84; TLN 2574, 2568) where the pain or anguish is located in a very different register. The variation among examples is typical of the larger picture.

Dying, Mortally Wounded, and Sick Os

Other playwrights provide examples of multiple Os for dying or otherwise distressed figures, with the sound sometimes identified in dialogue as a roar or groan. In Massinger’s *Maid of Honor* (1621), Sylli’s lament to Camiola on losing her to the king climaxes with ‘Oh, oh, oh’ to which she responds: ‘Do not rore so’ (4.5.12).⁷ In *1 Hieronimo* (1604) an assassin kills Alcario by mistake, and he dies with ‘Oh, oh, oh!’ to which another figure responds: ‘Whose groan was that?’ (4.82–3).⁸ Not linked to dying is the conning of Justice Algripe in Fletcher and Shirley’s *The Night Walker* (1611) where a figure tormented by two supposed Furies responds first with three Ohs, then with two more, with a Fury in between lecturing ‘Groans are too late’ (7.364–5).⁹

Other situations are less specific. In *The Atheist’s Tragedy* the dying Montferrers first says ‘My soul’s oppress’d with grief. ‘T lies heavy at / My heart. O my departed son, ere long / I shall be with thee’ and his final sound is ‘O, O, O’ (2.4.11–14).¹⁰ In Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling* (1622) the dying Alonso first asks De Flores ‘Whose malice hast thou put on?’ and dies with ‘O, O,

O!' (3.2.16, 18); in the final scene a mortally wounded Beatrice Joanna *within* is given 'O, O, O!' and then 'O, O!' with her father onstage responding 'What horrid sounds are these?' (5.3.138–40).¹¹ For a sending up of a dying speech, in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607) Beaumont has Rafe enter with a forked arrow through his head and conclude his dying words with: 'I die, flie, flie my soul to Grocers Hall. oh, oh, oh, &c' (6.230)¹² — and the scripted '&c' can enhance the comic effect by signaling either a longer sound or a spoken 'et cetera'.

Multiple Os are also linked to sickness, pain, and sadness-melancholy. For sickness, a pursuivant in *Look About You* (1599) afflicted by a potion enters saying 'O O O not too fast; O I am sicke, O very sicke' and comments at his exit: 'O o o my Lord' (1619, 1719);¹³ in William Rowley's *A Shoemaker a Gentleman* (1608) a sick Barnaby enters '*with a Kercher on*' saying 'Oh, oh, oh,' adding 'I have such a singing in my head, my toes are cramped too' (3.2.10–11, 14–15).¹⁴ Fletcher's *A Wife for a Month* (1624) presents a more serious condition when Alphonso, burning with fever, says 'Oh, Oh, Oh' *within* and at his entrance says 'I am all fire, fire, fire, the raging dog star / Reigns in my blood' (5.53). As to pain, in *The Two Merry Milkmaids* (1619) a Spirit seizes a magical ring from the finger of Smirke, the clown, then departs, so the victim reacts 'O, O, O' (03r).¹⁵ In *The Honest Lawyer* (1615) figures disguised as fairies torment Gripe by pinching, gagging, and then robbing him, with his response 'Oh---Oh---Oh' (G3r).¹⁶ A more elaborate torment occurs in *Swetnam the Woman-Hater* (1618): a group of women arraign and assault Misogynos (Swetnam) in a long sequence wherein he responds with three Ohs, then two, then four, then two, then one three times, then five, and finally three for a total of nine separate exclamations (I3r–I3v).¹⁷

Os in Comedy

Os are also plentiful in comedies, as can be seen in a sampling from three playwrights. First, Jonson makes adept use of Os in five of his comedies to signal either delight or discomfort. For examples of the latter, in a climactic sequence in *Poetaster* (1601) Crispinus vomits chunks of Marston's vocabulary to the accompaniment of multiple Os — first four, then two, then three more (5.3.500–5),¹⁸ in *Epicoene* (1609) first Morose, with his aversion to noise, twice reacts to the sound of drum and trumpets with 'O, o, o', and later LaFoole reacts to the tweaking of his nose with 'Oh, o-o-o-o-o-Oh' (3.7.46, 49; 4.5.29–30). In *Volpone* (1606) Corbaccio expresses his disappointment that Volpone has yet to make his will with three Ohs (1.4.59), and Volpone himself conveys his distress at the continuing

presence of Lady Would-be with ‘O, o, o, o, o,’ followed by ‘Some power, some fate, some fortune rescue me!’ (3.4.124, 126).¹⁹

Middleton provides comparable reactions in six plays. Examples include *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (1615) where a dancing master’s complaint about a page’s performance includes ‘O, O, O, O! (etc.)’ (5.1.190); *The Widow* (1616) where the pulling of a tooth generates three Os (4.2.208); and *The Old Law* (1618) where the clown tells his old wife that according to the law she is doomed to die so that her response is ‘O, O, O, my heart!’ before she swoons (3.1.321). In *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1611) a barren Lady Kix responds to her husband’s ‘we are rich enough’ with ‘All but in blessings, / And there the beggar goes beyond us. O, O, O! / To be seven years a wife and not a child, / O, not a Child!’ (2.1.134–7).²⁰

In the Caroline period Brome makes much use of multiple Os. Examples include *The City Wit* (1630) where Sneakups responds to a beating by his wife with ‘Oh, oh, oh’;²¹ *The Damoiselle* (1638) where a drunken Magdalen weeps ‘in her Mawdlin fit’ twice with three ohs (1.459); and *The English Moor* (1637) where Edmund reacts to *Quicksands*’ ‘Oh---oh---oh---o’ with ‘Why roar you so?’ and gets Nathaniel’s response: ‘It is the Cuckolds howle. A common cry about the City’ (2.71). Brome also uses Os for laments as in *The Queen and Concubine* (1635) where Andrea begins a scene with:

Oh---Oh---and Oh-ho---O and alas! O and alack for O---O---O---that ever a true Neapolitan born, should live to see this day in *Sicily!* there O-again, O Queen---O me---what wilt thou do? O---O---what shall I do? O---thou maist work and starve; O---and I may beg and live: O---but from thee I cannot live: O---I cannot, nor I wonnot, so I wonnot. (2.31–2)²²

Revisiting Hamlet’s Os

Although by no means complete, my sampling demonstrates that multiple O-Ohs can serve as the equivalent to an open or permissive stage direction in which the dramatist leaves the implementation of a given effect to the actor.²³ That suggestion in turn highlights the danger of treating any problematic moment in Shakespeare in splendid isolation from the rest of the period, as when Falstaff’s Os of anguish in *Merry Wives* correspond neatly to Morose’s comparable pained response in *Epicoene* and other moments in Jonson, Middleton, and Brome. When such a wider context (what I think of as the original *theatrical vocabulary*)²⁴ is invoked, what emerges is a tool of the trade available for a variety of uses in many different contexts.²⁵

My tour of Os does not resolve the problem of what to do with those four letters that follow ‘The rest is silence’ but does lend support to Terence Hawkes’s use of the Os to begin his critique of the editorial tradition. For Hawkes, Hamlet’s last utterance ‘is certainly not silence, but whatever range of noises and movements an actor might summon in response to these disturbing printer’s signs’. He notes that editors ‘almost unanimously suppress these moments’ by stigmatizing them ‘as an “actor’s interpolation”’ so that ‘the Prince’s terminal O’s find themselves sternly banished from the text: an odd verdict, it might be concluded, on what could otherwise rank as a perceptive gloss on the part by its first and rather astute critic, the actor Richard Burbage’. He concludes:

That we should witness speech itself finally and violently vanquished in him, hear that probing voice reduced at last to groaning, recognize in those O’s the fearful linguistic and therefore cultural consequences of Claudius’s poison, could become powerful aspects of the play’s statement. If this is interpolation, we might be tempted to say, give us excess of it.²⁶

Other readers or actors react differently. Martin Coyle argues ‘that Hamlet does indeed say “O, o, o, o”, and that this signals not a “long sigh” or groan but rather the breaking of the “noble heart” that Horatio sees before him and that Hamlet wishes for at the end of his first soliloquy’ — and therein lies the special appeal of such a signal.²⁷ In his 2001 *Hamlet* for the RSC, Samuel West ended ‘the rest is silence’ with a smile.²⁸ When I queried him about that choice he replied that Hamlet begins (‘A little more than kin, and less than kind,’ 1.2.65) and ends with a pun (so ‘rest’ can denote both ‘remainder’ and ‘repose,’ 5.2.358). More important, his Hamlet in his final moment had a glimpse that what lies ahead in that ‘undiscovered country’ (‘the rub’ in ‘to be, or not to be’) is not bad dreams but ‘silence’ — hence the laugh at the transcending of ‘the dread of something after death’ (3.1.64, 77-8).

Most distinctive was the staging in director David Farr’s 2013 RSC production in which Ophelia (Pippa Nixon) in 5.1 was buried in a shallow downstage grave and stayed there for the remainder of the show. A dying Hamlet (Jonathan Slinger) barely able to stand delivered ‘The rest is silence’ while moving downstage towards her and directed the Os in her direction with the first three audible and the final one whispered. The combination of the Os as delivered by Slinger with the visible presence of Ophelia set up a powerful climactic image that conveyed Hamlet’s realization of what he had done to the woman he loved and his sense of the loss of what might have been. Keeping Ophelia onstage may not have

been HC (historically correct) but generated the most creative use of the Os I have encountered.²⁹

I, for one, find appealing the notion of a Hamlet (the most talkative of protagonists) who seeks to script his own ending (as generations of editors and readers would prefer) to climax with the word 'silence' but in fact dies with an expression of pain or shock or disappointment. But that reading, although supported by many comparable O-groans, is no more valid than any other.

The moral of this tale? At the least editors and other scholars should stop faulting Richard Burbage for his supposed interpolations of such abominations into otherwise pristine Shakespeare texts. Moreover, today's theatrical professionals should have the same freedom with scripted O-Ohs as had their early modern counterparts. Judi Dench's rendition of Lady Macbeth's three Os in the sleep-walking scene, perhaps the most powerful (and unsettling) moment in my fifty years of playgoing, provides a good example. Her director (Trevor Nunn) cut the doctor's immediate response ('What a sigh is there'), so that the actress could deliver a scream (building on three breaths or stages) that emerged as a truly remarkable display of a tortured, perhaps damned soul in a production with many such moments.³⁰

My thesis has been and remains: as a dramatist Shakespeare was adept at using the tools at hand, but to understand both those tools and his distinctive implementation of them requires a working knowledge of the theatrical vocabulary shared at that time by playwrights and playgoers. Ay, there's the rub. The rest is silence — with any further Os the province of the reader.

Notes

- 1 Citations from the folio are from *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile*, ed. Charlton Hinman (New York, 1968) and are accompanied by through-line numbers (TLN). For the quartos I have used *Shakespeare's Plays in Quarto*, ed. Michael J.B. Allen and Kenneth Muir (Berkeley, 1981). Other citations from Shakespeare are from the revised Riverside edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1997).
- 2 G.R. Hibbard (ed.), *Hamlet* (Oxford, 1987), 352. The 'derision' noted by Hibbard can be seen by looking at the annotations to TLN 3847 in Hamlet Works <http://triggs.djuv.org/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/index.php>.
- 3 Sam Dale, who played Hamlet in Fall 1993 in the five-actor ACTER (now AFTLS) tour of the U.S., was aware of my interest in the Os and, when he knew I was in the audience, played it as a final expiration of breath. I suspect I was the only person in the theatre who caught it.
- 4 E.A.J. Honigmann, 'Re-enter the Stage Direction: Shakespeare and Some Contemporaries', *Shakespeare Survey* 29 (1976), 123.
- 5 In *Trick* he also notes 'Ha, ha, ha ... Oh-o-o ... True, true, true' but does not mention 'I, I, I, I'.
- 6 I have found no practical distinction in the original texts between the variant spellings or punctuation. Today's editors prefer O to Oh and often include an exclamation point at the end of a series, whereas in the early texts capitalization, spelling, and punctuation vary widely with no rationale that I can discern. For convenience I have therefore used many modern spelling texts (eg, the Revels Plays, the Oxford Middleton) but have also retained the original spelling in other instances. In an appendix Gary Taylor provides documentation 'that Shakespeare strongly preferred the spelling "o" without "h"'. See *Shakespeare Reshaped 1606–1623* (Oxford, 1993), 248.
- 7 Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson (eds), *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, 5 vols (Oxford, 1976). Dates attached to non-Shakespeare plays are from the third edition of *Annals of English Drama 975–1700*, ed. Alfred Harbage, rev. S. Schoenbaum, and rev. Sylvia Stoler Wagonheim (London, 1989) and are supplied for the convenience of the reader.
- 8 Thomas Kyd, *1 Hieronimo*, in *Thomas Kyd: The First Part of Hieronimo and The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. Andrew S. Cairncross (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1967).
- 9 *The Night Walker*, in Arnold Glover and A.R. Waller (eds), *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher*, 10 vols. (Cambridge, 1905–12). Future citations from the Fletcher canon are from this edition.

- 10 Cyril Tourneur, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, ed. Irving Ribner, Revels Plays (Cambridge, Mass, 1964).
- 11 Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Changeling*, Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (eds), in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (Oxford, 2007). Future citations from Middleton are from this edition.
- 12 Glover and Waller (eds), *Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*.
- 13 *Look About You*, W.W. Greg (ed.), Malone Society (London, 1913).
- 14 William Rowley, *A Shoemaker, a Gentleman*, in *William Rowley: His All's Lost by Lust, and A Shoe-Maker a Gentleman*, ed. Charles Wharton Stork (Philadelphia, 1910).
- 15 *The Two Merry Milkmaids*, ed. John S. Farmer, Tudor Facsimile Texts (Amersham, 1914).
- 16 *The Honest Lawyer*, ed. John S. Farmer, Tudor Facsimile Texts (Amersham, 1914).
- 17 *Swetnam the Woman-Hater*, ed. John S. Farmer, Tudor Facsimile Texts (Amersham, 1914), I3r–v. Other examples include from the Fletcher canon *The Maid's Tragedy* (1610), 1.71 and *Four Plays in One* (1612), 10.306, 353; Gervase Markham and William Sampson, *Herod and Antipater* (London, 1622: stc: 17401), L4r (glossed as 'Whence came that deadly groane'); Sir William Davenant, *The Cruel Brother* (1627), in *The Dramatic Works of William Davenant*, James Maidment and W.H. Logan (eds), 5 vols (Edinburgh, 1872–4), 1.183, 195; John Ford, *Love's Sacrifice* (1632), ed. A.T. Moore, Revels Plays (Manchester, 2002), 3.4.48–9, 54; and William Hemings, *The Fatal Contract* (1639), ed. Anne Hargrove (Kalamazoo, 1978), 5.2.270.
- 18 *Poetaster*, in *Ben Jonson*, C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (eds), 11 vols (Oxford, 1925–52). Future citations from Jonson are from this edition.
- 19 See also *The Case is Altered* (1597), 5.4.1, 10–11 and *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), 1.3.12; 3.1.119.
- 20 See also *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605), 4.1.92–101 and *A Mad World My Masters* (1606), 5.2.123, 128. For other comic discomfort see Henry Chettle and John Day's *The Blind Beggar of Bednal Green (1600)*, ed. John S. Farmer, Tudor Facsimile Texts (Amersham, 1914), E2v; Nathan Field's *Amends for Ladies* (1611), in *The Plays of Nathan Field*, ed. William Peery (Austin, 1950), 5.1; and from the Fletcher canon *The Beggar's Bush* (1622), 2.237 and *The Maid in the Mill* (1623), 7.25.
- 21 Richard Brome, *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brome*, 3 vols (London, 1873), 1.347. Future citations from Brome are from this edition.
- 22 See also *The Queen's Exchange* (1631), 3.470 and *The Weeding of the Covent Garden* (1632), 2.59.

- 23 See the entry for *permissive stage directions* in Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama* (Cambridge, 1999). The largest category of such signals is linked to the number of figures included in an entrance, as when one or more personae enter ‘*and all the rest*’ or ‘*as many as may be*’, but the device is used for many other situations, as when Webster in *The White Devil* signals that speeches of the dying Bracciano ‘*are several kinds of distractions and in the action should appear so*’ (ed. John Russell Brown, *Revels Plays* [Cambridge, Mass., 1960], 5.3.82).
- 24 See Alan C. Dessen, *Recovering Shakespeare’s Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge, 1995), esp. chapters 1 and 2.
- 25 Two comparable situations are worth noting. In the folio at his final entrance carrying the dead Cordelia, Lear’s line is ‘Howle, howle, howle’ followed by ‘O you are men of stones’ (TLN 3217, 5.3.58); the quarto provides the same stage direction and spoken dialogue but includes four *howles* (L3v). The possibility exists that the multiple *howls*, like the multiple O-Ohs, are a signal for the actor to howl rather than to speak the word three (or four) times, but supporting evidence in other plays is scarce. I have found only two examples, both from Caroline plays (Goffe’s *The Courageous Turk* [1630], Davenant’s *The Just Italian* [1632]), and in both a speaker is telling another figure to *howl, howl*. In contrast, a database search reveals more than 850 examples in roughly 220 plays of three or more consecutive uses of *ha* to denote a laugh.
- 26 Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespeareian Rag: Essays on a Critical Process* (London, 1986), 73–4.
- 27 “O, o, o, o”: Hamlet Again’, <http://www2.lingue.unibo.it/acume/acumedvd/zone/research/essays/coyle.htm>.
- 28 Over the years I have called Hamlet’s Os to the attention of a range of actors. One of them responded immediately: ‘That’s a laugh’.
- 29 In the 2017 production directed by Robert Ickes (I saw it when it had transferred from the Almeida to the West End) Andrew Scott did roll on the floor moaning in pain, but that choice may not have been linked to the Os in the folio.
- 30 I saw this show in 1978 at the Young Vic in London near the end of its three-year run and was seated only a few feet away from Dench when she delivered the Os. Here, and in a comparable Ian McKellen choice in the banquet scene, I felt the full impact of this play for the only time in my theatre-going experience. The 1979 Thames Television version available on DVD preserves at least some of the force of these moments.

Issues in Review

LUCY MUNRO (CONTRIBUTING EDITOR), LUCY MUNRO, TRACEY HILL, SIMON SMITH, EOIN PRICE

Beaumont400

Introduction: Beaumont400

LUCY MUNRO

This introduction outlines the essays in the Early Theatre Issues in Review forum 'Beaumont400', placing them in the context of the four hundredth anniversary of Francis Beaumont's death, the performance of his plays in the early twenty-first century, and current developments in scholarship on Beaumont and Fletcher's works.

Francis Beaumont died on 6 March 1616 and was buried three days later in Westminster Abbey. Unlike Shakespeare — himself buried in far-off Stratford-upon-Avon — Beaumont has no statue or monument in the abbey. Instead, he is commemorated only by an inscription with his name and date of death, which were added in the nineteenth century to a slab marking the grave of Abraham Cowley, along with the names of other poets such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Denham, and John Dryden. Beaumont is thus overshadowed by Shakespeare, just as the four hundredth anniversary of his death in 2016 was largely overshadowed by Shakespeare400. Yet the anniversary of Beaumont's death provides us with an opportunity to think in detail about his contribution to what is still often known as the 'Beaumont and Fletcher' canon, despite the contribution of others — notably Philip Massinger — to that oeuvre. The anniversary also prompts us to look again at what we know of the details of Beaumont's life and its relationship to his works. This 'Issues in Review' segment features essays that explore Beaumont's work through a set of overlapping critical frameworks: biography; the cultural

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contexts of early modern London; reception studies; histories of the book; and performance studies.

The first essay, 'Beaumont's Lives', revisits the relationship between Beaumont's life and his works, drawing on new biographical material that opens up fresh ways of reading *The Scornful Lady* and *The Woman Hater* by encouraging us to review our ideas about Beaumont's financial and religious status. In the process, this essay looks again at Beaumont's relationship with institutions such as the inns of court and the Church of England. A similar desire to look afresh at Beaumont's interactions with the structuring authorities of Jacobean England animates Tracey Hill's essay, "'The Grocers Honour': or, Taking the City Seriously in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*", which explores this play's 'complex engagement with the early Jacobean citizen class' and its mediation between civic and theatrical institutions. Hill draws on an annotated copy of *The Knight* in the British Library's collection, inscribed with the intriguing note 'Oh how ye ofended Cittizens did nestle / to be abused with *knight* of burning pestle' and in 'Reading Performance; Reading Gender: Early Encounters with Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady* in Print', Simon Smith draws in greater detail on recent approaches to the history of the book and readerly annotation, exploring the ways in which Beaumont and Fletcher's hugely popular collaboration *The Scornful Lady*, first performed at Whitefriars around 1610, was received by its earliest readers. In these annotations, Smith argues, 'questions of female identity appear intimately entwined with those of performativity'. The final essay in this cluster explores the question of performance from a different angle. Eoin Price's 'The Future Francis Beaumont' looks at performances of his plays in 2016 and the years leading up to this anniversary year, in addition to exploring their place within the early modern theatrical canon. 'What', Price asks, 'does the recent performance and reception history of Beaumont tell us about his potential future?'

These essays have their origins in 'Beaumont400', a celebration of Beaumont's work and achievements at King's College London and the Guildhall Library on 11–12 March 2016. This event took the form of a symposium, a walking tour of 'Beaumont's London' led by Tracey Hill, and a performance of his first play, *The Woman Hater*, by Edward's Boys.¹ Hill's and Smith's essays here were presented in earlier forms at the symposium; the remaining essays have been freshly written but draw on debates at that event and on archival discoveries made during the anniversary year. 'Beaumont400' was among only a few events to mark the anniversary of Beaumont's death, along with staged readings in Globe Education's 'Read Not Dead' series of *The Scornful Lady* at Gray's Inn on 23 October and *The Coxcomb* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse on 13 November. All — ironically — were

promoted under the banner of the Shakespeare400 programme curated by the London Shakespeare Centre at King's College London, in which Shakespeare's Globe was a partner. Calling the event 'Beaumont400' and rebranding its host institution the 'London Beaumont Centre' for the day were therefore ways of both parodying the potential excesses of 'Shakespeare400' and critiquing the comparative lack of interest that Beaumont's anniversary provoked.

This lack of interest would, of course, have surprised Beaumont's contemporaries, whose high opinion of his works is clear in their decision to bury him in Westminster Abbey and in the elegies that accompanied his death. In one of these elegies, John Earle positions his reader by Beaumont's grave at the abbey, lamenting the fact that there is not '[a] *Muse like his to sigh upon his grave*', Beaumont's own elegies on Lady Markham and others having daunted his own would-be elegists: '*We dare not write thy Elegie, whilst each feares / He nere shall match that copy of thy teares*'.² Having argued — somewhat strenuously — for the purity and chastity of Beaumont's works, and having taken detours first through the playhouse to criticize those dramatists who might presume to follow him and then through the page of the printed book to attack the 'scurrill Wits and Buffons' of classical drama, the elegy's closing lines return to the abbey:

But those their owne Times were content t' allow
A thirsty fame, and thine is lowest now.
But thou shalt live, and when thy Name is growne
Six Ages older, shall be better knowne,
When th' art of *Chaucers* standing in the Tombe,
Thou shalt not share, but take up all his roome. (c4r)

Earle imagines literary fame as a multitemporal contest in which Beaumont does battle with Plautus and Aristophanes on one side and Chaucer on the other; in these final lines the temporal struggle evolves into a physical and spatial tussle, as Beaumont's imagined monument crowds out that of Chaucer.

If the anniversary year of 2016 provided us with an opportunity to think about Beaumont's life and its commemoration, it should also provoke us to consider his afterlives in the early twenty-first century. As Price points out, Beaumont's theatrical stock is perhaps higher than it has been at any point since the mid eighteenth century, the joyous festive riot of Adele Thomas's 2014 production of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse having put to rest the lingering preconception that this play is impossible to stage. Other professional productions in recent years include Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* (2012) and *The Maid's Tragedy* (2014) at the American Shakespeare Centre's Blackfriars

Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia, as part of the experimental 'Actors' Renaissance Season', in which actors work without directors, and *The Maid's Tragedy* (2016) and *A King and No King* (2017) by Brave Spirits theatre company in Washington, DC. Beaumont has also been well represented by amateur groups and in staged readings. *The Woman Hater* was produced by Edward's Boys under Perry Mills's direction at King's College London and other venues in 2016, and the Education Department at Shakespeare's Globe have mounted staged readings of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, co-ordinated by Frances Marshall (2013), and *The Scornful Lady*, co-ordinated by James Wallace, and *The Coxcomb*, co-ordinated by Nick Hutchison (both 2016).³

The Woman Hater and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* are, of course, the two plays with the strongest claims to having been authored mainly or solely by Beaumont, and they present a set of interconnected opportunities and challenges for scholars and theatre-makers.⁴ Thomas's production of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* exploited its location in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, using Jacobean-style costumes and music to create a world elsewhere, but also using George, the Citizen-Grocer (Phil Daniels), and his wife, Nell (Pauline McLynn), as a bridge between actor and audience, past and present, through their frequent movement into the pit and their interaction with the spectators seated there. In contrast, Marshall's staged reading of *The Knight* used eclectic, mainly modern-day costumes, casting George (Matt Adis) and Nell (Rebecca Todd) as amiable nouveau riches in flashy suit and glittery frock, taking selfies with the cast and munching snacks. Modern dress enabled Marshall to cast the Prologue (Martin Hodgson) as a stand-in co-ordinator of the production, a whirl of frustrated energy as he corralled actors, gathered props, reluctantly took on the role of Pompiona, and engaged in a sustained battle of wills with George and, especially, Nell. Much of the Prologue's hostility centred on the consumption and circulation of food in the Sackler Studios, where the reading was performed; as Peter Kirwan describes, in one improvised sequence, 'the Wife sent a bag of chocolates rustling loudly down the rows of the audience. In high dudgeon, the Prologue came and removed the bag, prompting a stand-off as the Wife took to her feet and quietly told him to give them back. The audience delightedly persisted in rustling the bag as loudly as possible for the remainder of the scene'.⁵ The production thus pulled *The Knight* into the present moment of its performance, encouraging spectators to enjoy its self-conscious play with theatrical convention within the relaxed and improvisatory framework of the staged reading.

Mills's production of *The Woman Hater* was more complex still in its temporal interactions. Edward's Boys are a company composed of pupils from the

King Edward VI School, aged between around twelve and eighteen, and their productions are in some respects the closest that modern playgoers may ever get to seeing a highly trained boys' company of the early seventeenth century. Yet they have generally eschewed period costume, and *The Woman Hater* was no exception, being set in 1950s Milan, complete, as Gordon McMullan puts it, 'with snappy suits, priests, paparazzi and women of style finding their way in a male-dominated society, something that is neatly underlined by the production's opening tune, "The Lady is a Tramp"'.⁶ Within this milieu, the dual plotlines of the play — one focusing on the anti-social misogyny of Gondarino (Daniel Wilkinson), the titular 'woman hater', and his interactions with the bold and witty Oriana (Jack Hawkins), the other on the outrageous desire of the voluptuous Lazarillo (Daniel Power) to consume a rare fish, the umbrana — intersected nearly with British cultural stereotypes about both Italy and the 1950s. Thus, the production simultaneously brought to the fore the play's potent combination of gender politics, political manoeuvring and gourmandizing desires — all highlighted by the chosen historical and cultural setting — and its self-conscious negotiation with the theatrical conventions of the past.

In a penetrating recent account of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and its relationships with its audiences, provocatively titled 'Beaumont our Contemporary', Jeremy Lopez notes that criticism of the play often concerns itself with 'a question of historical, demographic difference: who went to which theaters, who liked what kinds of plays?' 'But', he writes, 'the answer to this question always reinscribes a larger distinction between two imaginary forms of dramaturgy — one trans-historical, popular, "Shakespearean," and the other historically circumscribed, elitist, and "non-Shakespearean"'.⁷ These questions and distinctions pertain both to theatrical and critical approaches to Beaumont's work. Staging early modern plays is always in part an act of historical imagination: every revival performs a kind of 'what if?' experiment, in which a play's outmoded linguistic and narrative structures prompt spectators to consider whether this play can stake a claim to our attention in the present moment. When the chosen play is by Beaumont and not by Shakespeare, whose place in contemporary theatrical culture is still far more assured, we are also invited to ponder what our theatrical landscape might look like if Beaumont's plays were the dominant ones, and not Shakespeare's.

The remaining essays in this 'Issues in Review' forum encourage us to perform the same manoeuvre critically: to ask not only what contextual analysis, book and reception history, and performance studies might do for Beaumont, but what Beaumont might do for our understanding of these approaches. Price's essay not only draws attention to productive demands that Beaumont's plays make on

twenty-first theatre-makers, but also suggests the potential gains that might be made by bringing contemporary performances into dialogue with the plays' early modern stage histories and establishing a viable history for Beaumont in performance. Moreover, the early modern performance of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays encompasses a wider range of theatrical modes and locations than those of Shakespeare, covering not only professional and amateur performance, but also child and adult companies; the inns of court; the royal court; several records of surreptitious performances during the civil wars; and almost every playhouse in seventeenth-century London.

My own exploration of Beaumont's religious background and the legal entanglements in which he became entwined, in the essay entitled 'Beaumont's Lives', similarly points to the gains that might be made by re-centring our study of early modern drama. Previous studies of Beaumont have drawn on early modern biographies of the writer such as those of Thomas Pestell and John Aubrey, or on our knowledge of Beaumont's family and patronage networks.⁸ In contrast, Shakespearean biographies have often looked to the dramatist's life to explain the emotional heft of plays such as *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*; Stephen Greenblatt, for example, writes that 'the death of his son and the impending death of his father — a crisis of mourning and memory — constitute a psychic disturbance that may help to explain the explosive power and inwardness of *Hamlet*'.⁹ This essay offers a third approach, exploring the ways in which Beaumont and Fletcher blur the boundaries between real-life experience and fictional representation. The miniature 'lives' of Beaumont presented in *The Scornful Lady* and *The Woman Hater* mediate playfully between (auto)biography and convention, perhaps suggesting links between drama and the satires and lyrics of poets such as John Marston and John Donne.

A different form of contextualization appears in Hill's essay. *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* remains one of the period's most intriguing examples of a play's failure to please its initial spectators, and attempting to account for it has led generations of scholars into productive explorations of audience response, theatrical politics, and the social structures of early modern London.¹⁰ Hill breaks new ground, however, in reminding us of the insistent connections between the professional and civic stages, and the extent to which dramatists necessarily worked with one eye on the city. 'Rather than positing a hostile polarity between the play's civic and theatrical dimensions', she argues, 'perhaps Beaumont's most radical experimentation was actually in the way he *conflated* these ... *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* sits at the centre of an intricate series of mutually beneficial relationships'.

It matters, as Smith reminds us, that *The Scornful Lady* appears to have been overwhelmingly popular on stage and in print, and that copies of this play are annotated in ways that present both interrogations of gender identity and its representation and performance-orientated modes of reading. As such, this essay complements Claire M.L. Bourne's recent account of the bespoke title-pages of quarto editions of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619), *A King and No King* (1619), and *Philaster* (1620), which, she argues, 'are indicative of a publishing strategy aimed at adapting into print a new kind of suspenseful, plot-driven drama that seventeenth-century commentators strongly associated with Beaumont and Fletcher's collaborative dramaturgy and with these three plays in particular'.¹¹ Like Bourne, Smith brings together book history and formal analysis, pushing these approaches into areas that they cannot touch solely through the study of Shakespearean books.

As the comparative lack of fanfare for Beaumont400 suggests, John Earle may have been over-optimistic in his claim that Beaumont would see off Plautus and Aristophanes, and eventually oust Chaucer from his central position in the history of English literature. Beaumont has often flown under the critical and theatrical radar, and the performance and scholarship on his plays has seen a number of false starts and promising beginnings that did not develop into sustained traditions. As Jeffrey Masten argues in his landmark book *Textual Intercourse*, published twenty years ago, the collaboration of Beaumont and Fletcher is one of the period's most potent reminders both that 'two heads are different than one' and that questions of authorship should not be divided from those of sexuality.¹² For a brief period in the 1980s and 90s, the works of Beaumont and Fletcher were prominent in both areas of scholarship. Masten and Gordon McMullan sought to bring together textuality and sexuality, while feminism, gender studies, and queer theory shaped the approaches of Kathleen McLuskie, Jonathan Dollimore, Nicholas F. Radel, Mario DiGangi, and others.¹³ Surprisingly, given this established tradition, Beaumont and Fletcher have been less prominent in recent efforts to bring queer theory into dialogue with the early modern, notwithstanding the valuable recent work of scholars such as James M. Bromley and Valerie Billing.¹⁴ The essays in this 'Issues in Review' section thus suggest just some of the paths that future criticism might explore, while the impact of Beaumont's plays in their recent performances — with a range of reviews, tweets, and other responses effectively 'archiving' these productions online — argues for the theatrical vitality of his works. Beaumont's 'lives' — textual, critical, theatrical, and biographical — continue to pose new questions and offer fresh insights.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the other speakers at this event, Suzanne Gossett, Sarah Dusta-geer, Kate Graham, Lois Potter, Adele Thomas, and Jackie Watson, as well as the director of *The Woman Hater*, Perry Mills.
- 2 Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, *et al.*, *Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher Gentlemen* (London, 1647), c3v. Italics in the original.
- 3 For further details on these and other productions see Eoin Price's essay in this cluster; useful lists of earlier professional and university productions — including, for instance, a production of *The Woman Hater* at Cornell University in 2002 — can be found in the appendices (by Karin Brown and Jeremy Lopez) to Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince (eds), *Performing Early Modern Drama Today* (Cambridge, 2012), 178–227, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139047975>.
- 4 On the authorship of *The Woman Hater* see Cyrus Hoy, 'Shares of Fletcher and his Collaborators in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon (III)', *Studies in Bibliography* 11 (1958), 86–107, and discussions in the essays by Munro and Price in this cluster.
- 5 Peter Kirwan, 'The Knight of the Burning Pestle (Read not Dead) @ Sackler Studios, Shakespeare's Globe', *The Bardathon*, <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2013/02/20/the-knight-of-the-burning-pestle-read-not-dead-sackler-studios-shakespeares-globe/>.
- 6 Gordon McMullan, 'Review: *The Woman Hater*', *Edward's Boys* website, <http://www.edwardsboys.org/reviews-and-feedback/review-the-woman-hater/>. Harry R. McCarthy offers another detailed and insightful review: '*The Woman Hater* Presented by Edward's Boys', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34 (2016), 719–23, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2016.0063>.
- 7 Jeremy Lopez, *Constructing the Canon of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2014), 75.
- 8 See, for example, the very different uses of biography in Charles Mills Gayley, *Beaumont, the Dramatist, A Portrait* (New York, 1914); Philip J. Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher* (Princeton, 1990), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400860722>; Gordon McMullan, *The Politics of Unease in the Plays of John Fletcher* (Amherst, MA, 1994); and Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 1997).
- 9 Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York, 2004), 318.
- 10 For some recent contributions to this debate, see Joshua S. Smith, 'Reading Between the Acts: Satire and the Interludes in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*', *Studies in*

- Philology* 109 (2012), 474–95, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sip.2012.0027>; Bret E. Whitted, ‘Staging Exchange: Why *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* Flopped at Blackfriars in 1607’, *Early Theatre* 15.2 (2012), 111–30, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.15.2.912>; Robert Zacharias, ‘Rafe’s Rebellion: Reconsidering *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*’, *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 31 (2008), 103–26; Lopez, *Constructing*, 74–8.
- 11 Claire M.L. Bourne, ‘“High Designe”: Beaumont and Fletcher Illustrated’, *English Literary Renaissance* 44 (2014), 276–7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6757.12029>.
- 12 Masten, *Textual Intercourse*, 19.
- 13 See, for example, Masten, *Textual Intercourse*; McMullan, *Politics of Unease*; Masten, ‘My Two Dads: Collaboration and the Reproduction of Beaumont and Fletcher’, in Jonathan Goldberg (ed.), *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham, NC, 1993), 289–309, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822382607-014>; Jonathan Dollimore, ‘Subjectivity, Sexuality, and Transgression: The Jacobean Connection’, *Renaissance Drama* 17 (1986), 53–81, <https://doi.org/10.1086/rd.17.41917213>; Kathleen E. McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hemel Hempstead, 1989); Nicholas F. Radel, ‘Fletcherian Tragicomedy, Cross-Dressing and the Constriction of Homoerotic Desire’, *Renaissance Drama* 26 (1995), 53–82, <https://doi.org/10.1086/rd.26.41917318>; Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. 134–61, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511585319>.
- 14 See James Bromley, *Intimacy and Sexuality in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 2011), esp. 81–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139057752>; Valerie Billing, ‘Female Spectators and the Erotics of the Diminutive in *Epicoene* and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*’, *Renaissance Drama* 42 (2014), 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1086/674680>. I am very grateful to Kate Graham for discussion of these issues and for the paper that she delivered as part of Beaumont400: “[N]or bear I in this breast / So much cold spirit to be called a woman”: The Queerness of Female Revenge in *The Maid’s Tragedy*’.

