'Now mark that fellow; he speaks Extempore': Scripted Improvisation in *The Antipodes*

Concluding his near-paraphrase of Hamlet's famous advice to the players, Letoy in Richard Brome's *The Antipodes* chastises Byplay, an actor with a penchant for improvisation, with the following lines:

> But 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 coactors in the scene,
> You hold interlocutions with the audients— (2.1.93–9)[1]

Unlike the silent company Hamlet addresses, whose leader assents to Hamlet's presumptuous lessons with only 'I warrant your honour' and a slightly more defensive 'I hope we have reformed that indifferently with us, sir' (3.2.13, 30),[2] Byplay argues back saying, 'That is a way, my lord, has been allowed / On elder stages to move mirth and laughter.' 'Yes', Letoy replies, 'in the days of Tarlton and Kemp, / Before the stage was purged from barbarism, / And brought to the perfection it now shines with' (2.1.100–4) .

Scholars often acknowledge, like Letoy, that improvisation played a significant role in early English theatre. Actors playing Vice characters in Tudor theatre improvised before and after the plays in which they performed.[3] Renaissance texts contain stage directions instructing actors to improvise—*Greene's Tu Quoque* (1611), for example, includes a direction for characters to 'talk and rail what they list' and *The Trial of Chivalry* (1601) contains the remarkable direction, 'speaks anything, and Exit'.[4] Elizabethan clowns, and in particular Richard Tarlton and William Kemp, were famous for their ability to improvise. At times, Letoy's speech is taken as evidence that by Brome's era improvisation had, in fact, been largely 'purged' from the stage.[5] Complicating statements exist, however, such as the claim in Thomas Jordan's masque *Fancy's Festivals* (printed 1657) that 'Extempore's in fashion'[6] and Thomas Nabbes's in *The Bride* (1640) which, in terms that mimic Byplay's diminishment and augmentation of his scripts, says the play 'is here drest according to mine own desire and intention; without ought taken from her that my selfe thought ornament; nor supplied with any thing which I valued but as rags'.[7]

By the restoration, Aphra Behn still had reason to complain of the 'intolerable negligence of some that acted in' her play *The Dutch Lover* (1673) and particularly of the actor in the title role who 'spoke little of what I intended for him, but supply'd it with a deal of idle stuff, which I was wholly unacquainted with, till I had heard it first from him'.[8]

While noting such instances of a culture replete with improvisational theatre, scholars less frequently discuss dramatic representations of improvisation and spontaneous speech.[9] From its earliest extant printed playtext, Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrece* (1497), English drama flirts with the boundary between unpremeditated speech and written words, scripting spontaneity. English drama throughout the sixteenth century presents scripted scenes of 'improvisation' from the clowns' improvised poetry in John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (1515) to Falstaff's 'play extempore' in *1 Henry IV* (1596–7). The professional drama of the Elizabethan and the Jacobean eras portrayed spontaneity extensively, especially in plays written for the boys' companies. Inductions to plays for both boys' companies and adult companies, such as that to John Marston's *The Malcontent* (1604), penned, possibly by Webster, for the play's transfer to the Globe, create fictions of actors speaking spontaneously before the play proper begins, ushering the audience into the world of the scripted fiction through questionably scripted dialogue. It is a form that Ben Jonson in particular repeatedly investigated throughout his dramatic career, as well as examining spontaneous speech within his plays themselves, and his inductions to *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), *The Staple of News* (1626), and *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) carry such moments of seeming spontaneity from the Elizabethan to the Caroline era. Though later examples are somewhat fewer, the 1638 Praeludium to *The Careless Shepherdess*, often attributed to Jonson's 'secretary' Richard Brome, features an extended account of the preliminary aspects of Caroline playgoing in a similar style to earlier inductions. A potential audience member haggles with the doorkeeper over admission price, gallants compare clothing styles, discuss where they will sit and with whom, theorize about playwriting and poetry, and subsequently heckle two Prologues off of the stage.[10]

These instances, scattered as they are throughout the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth century, reflect an interest in the interplay between the premeditated and the spontaneous, the scripted and the unscripted, the licensed and the unruly. Among the most extensive of such investigations of 'scripted improvisation' is Richard Brome's *The Antipodes*. The play presents

the fantastical Lord Letoy, playwright and patron of his own household company of players. Along with a skilled doctor, he undertakes the theatrical cure of Peregrine, a mad, travel-obsessed young man more interested in reading his Mandeville than in consummating his marriage. As his players take Peregrine on a theatrical journey to the Antipodes which both instructs him in proper social behavior by presenting the opposite and leads him to his sexual union with Martha, his wife, the verisimilitude of his journey is aided by Byplay's skill in holding improvised 'interlocutions with the audients'. Through the course of the play-within-the-play and through the course of some additional unscripted role-playing along the way, Peregrine is healed and other familial bonds are strengthened and restored.

Brome's play has ties through Christopher and William Beeston's acting company to another of the most extensive examples of scripted improvisation in renaissance drama: Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607). The title page of the 1635 second quarto advertizes its connection to Beeston's company—it is 'now acted by Her Majesties Servants at the Private house in Drury Lane'.[11] That it was among the plays that William Beeston legally reserved for the recently established Beeston's Boys in 1639 suggests not only that it had become a standard part of their company's repertory, but also that it may have been an attractive script for other companies as well.[12] *The Antipodes*, composed around 1636, was also 'intended for the Cockpit stage, in the right of my most deserving friend Mr. William Beeston, unto whom it properly appertained', according to a note from Brome printed in the text. Though *The Antipodes* appears to have been finally pulled from Beeston's company for legal reasons,[13] Brome claims to have designed it for the company that had lately performed or was perhaps still performing Beaumont's play.[14] The remainder of this paper will consider *The Antipodes*, not quite in repertory with, but designed to play in repertory with *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*—to play with it, to play off its successes, and to highlight Brome's own outstripping of Beaumont's scripted improvisation.

Despite the tonal differences between them, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and *The Antipodes* have many visual and thematic similarities including sophisticated satire; domestic settings combined with exotic locations; combination plots of London city comedy and fantasy narrative; references to Lucrece and allusions to Shakespeare; references to Sir Bevis of Hampton; on-stage 'audience members' providing commentary on a play-within-a-play, at times becoming so engaged in that play that they confuse fiction with reality; and theatrical improvisers who are servants in their masters' households and

have reputations with their employers for being exemplary performers. Each improviser is provided with the opportunity to show off his skill in multiple roles, over-extemporizes, but in fact manages to make the play in which he appears more effective through his improvisation.

The most direct allusion to *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* in *The Antipodes* occurs in Peregrine's deluded-knight-errant tiring-house attack as related in Byplay's exuberant account.[15] Ironically allowed too much scope for travel and discovery, Peregrine stumbles backstage during the play and in doing so, inadvertently threatens to spill his medicine before it is swallowed. But surprisingly, for Peregrine, as for the 'audience members' in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, experience with the behind-the-scenes components of theatrical illusion does not reveal that illusion to be illusion. In *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, a London citizen, George, and his wife, Nell, overrule the players' choice of play, a city comedy called *The London Merchant*, and demand that their servant Rafe be allowed to perform a scenario of their own spontaneous creation. Though they dictate precisely what they wish to occur onstage, when their desired scenes are in fact staged, they are unable to recognize them as fictions of their own design.[16] Similarly, Peregrine's explorations in the tiring house do not reveal the Antipodes to be a work of theatre, but rather allow him to enter a new fantasy life, no longer merely as explorer, but as conquering knight errant as he with 'thrice knightly force...snatcheth down' the very weapon with which Byplay has performed the role of Sir Bevis of Hampton and:

> Rusheth amongst the foresaid properties,
> Kills monster after monster, takes the puppets
> Prisoners, knocks down the Cyclops, tumbles all
> Our jigambobs and trinkets to the wall. (3.302–08)

Peregrine's attack on the theatrical properties, which proceeds to become proto-imperialist as he crowns himself and sets about to conform the Antipodeans to his own native values, acts as both a visual and verbal reference to *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* within the theatrical context for which it was designed. This Don-Quixotean, knightly fervor against commonplace inanimate objects as performed by an improvising actor specifically recalls Rafe's exploits.[17] Furthermore, if Brome designed *The Antipodes* to be performed by Beeston's company, then it is plausible that the role of Byplay was designed for the actor who had recently performed Rafe and thus not merely the text

alludes to the earlier play, but also the performer himself.[18] The length of the speech and the actions it describes provides the actor playing Byplay with an opportunity for physical reenactment, allowing for not only verbal allusions to the actor's previous role, but also visual parody. Although Byplay is recounting actions performed by Peregrine, he could equally be describing actions performed by Rafe—a connection that would provide an in-joke for audience members who had seen the earlier play.

Brome takes *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* as a point of reference and departure for his own exploration of scripted improvisation. Performing both plays in repertory would not only have highlighted in-jokes of the sort identified above, but also have highlighted Brome's elaboration of Beaumont's scripted improvisation. *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* creates a situational necessity for Rafe and those who interact with him onstage to improvise—their parts must be 'unscripted' since they immediately fulfill each subsequent whim of Rafe's employers, who also seem to be speaking spontaneously. But Brome takes this improvisational role-playing and applies it to nearly every character in his text in subtle variations. Byplay improvises characters in the play-within-the-play. Though both remain unaware that they are participating in a fictional world, Peregrine and Martha also improvise roles within the play-within-the-play: Peregrine in the role of disguised prince among his people and Martha as the Antipodean princess chosen for his new bride. Outside of the play-within-the-play is a world filled with disguises and role-playing. Blaze reveals to the audience almost immediately that he is hiding from Joyless that he was 'cured' by the doctor of his jealousy. Barbara deludes Martha as she presents her to Peregrine. The final surprise revelation of the play discovers that Diana's 'supposed father', Truelock, has merely improvised that role, keeping the knowledge of her true parentage locked up, and Letoy has kept a closet-full of secrets, finally revealing many in the final act of the play. Diana is the most elaborate of these 'real-life' extempore actors: she not only excels in the role of disobedient and lascivious wife (which she has taken on in order to cure her jealous husband and restore their marriage), but also provides continuous sharp and witty commentary, revealing her facility with spontaneous linguistic play.[19] 'Real-life' improvised role-playing mirrors theatrical improvisation; as Letoy lifts seduction speeches out of Jonson's *Volpone*, he suddenly reflects both Byplay's impromptu creativity and his irreverence towards his script.

But in addition to weaving the theme of improvisation throughout his text, Brome also continually reifies it in a way that Beaumont does not. In

fact, Brome's text contains the most overt discussions of improvisational performance in renaissance drama. Through these discussions and through repetition of the word 'extempore', Brome asks the audience to consciously consider the improvisational quality of his scripted drama. While text and plot champion the pleasure and power of the spontaneous, repeated reference to the idea of improvisation emphasizes instead Brome's crafting of his text. Brome draws the audience's attention to the subject of improvisation early in the play when Letoy and the doctor engage in an extended conversation about 'that mimic fellow' who, Letoy says, 'never will be perfect in a thing / He studies' but 'makes such shifts extempore / (Knowing the purpose what he is to speak to) / That he moves mirth in me 'bove all the rest' (2.1.16–9). Byplay echoes Letoy's phrase, to 'move mirth,' in his defense of improvisation later in the scene: 'That is a way, my lord, has been allowed / On elder stages to move mirth and laughter' (2.1.100–1). During this conversation, however, Letoy hides the pleasure he takes in Byplay's improvised acting, referring to it as 'barbarism', playing the role of the playwright protective of his text. Once the play-within-the-play begins, Letoy directly calls attention to Byplay's improvised speech: 'Now mark that fellow; he speaks extempore' (2.2.198). From this statement, Diana picks up the term 'extempore' and applies it to Byplay as a nickname, using it throughout the play, punctuating his performance: 'Never was such an actor as Extempore!' (4.385). Finally when the cure threatens to descend into chaos, Letoy still hangs on to the potential for an improvised solution through improvised acting: 'We now / Give over the play, and do all by extempore' (4.399–400).

In addition to his deliberate verbal pointing to the subject of improvisation, Brome carefully scripts the rhythms of an impromptu speaker and dramaturgically develops the dangers produced by venturing off script. Rafe's language in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is continually shifting to fulfill an ever-changing role which demands he play apprentice, knight-at-arms, morris dancer, lover, soldier. But where Beaumont beautifully composes a patchwork of discourses for his Rafe, they often lack the air of spontaneity present in many of Brome's speeches for Byplay. One example of Brome's linguistic investigation of improvisation occurs earlier in Byplay's announcement of Peregrine's backstage escapades:

> He has got into our tiring-house amongst us,
> And ta'en a strict survey of all our properties:
> Our statues and our images of gods,

> Our planets and our constellations,
> Our giants, monsters, furies, beasts, and bugbears,
> Our helmets, shields, and vizors, hairs, and beards,
> Our pasteboard marchpanes, and our wooden pies. (3.288–94)

The anaphoric repetition of 'our' at the beginning of each line, highly constructed and rhetorical, in terms of spontaneous invention buys the speaker time to develop the rest of the line. The lists are arranged by category, as if Byplay were taking his own imaginary survey of the tiring-house contents, picturing the piles of properties around the room, while at the same time they recall renaissance categorizations of commonplaces, lists of 'topoi' by topic, prepared places for the mind to look when faced with the necessity for spontaneous public oratory. Potentially convincing as spontaneous speech, this passage also functions as a linguistic version of the delusions of Rafe and Don Quixote: low cardboard cutouts and paper moons couched in a high rhetorical style, both comic burlesque and anticipation of the mock heroism to come.

Even the best actors can be put 'out' of their parts when consistently interrupted by audience members. At several points in Beaumont's play, boy actors plead with their unruly audience members to allow them to continue uninterrupted, but Brome captures the drama and potentially disastrous outcome of such interference as even Byplay, who excels at quick-witted improvisation, loses his powers of invention at a crucial moment. Just before the critical culmination of the play-within-the-play designed to lead to Peregrine's erotic cure, Byplay becomes the subject of a violent debate between Joyless and Diana over her flagrantly public admiration of his attractiveness and skill (perhaps enough to distract anyone from a scripted role, let alone one that requires spontaneous invention). Letoy's prediction that they will 'spoil all' with their fighting appears for the moment to come true when onstage Byplay is able only to stutter: 'Your grace / Abounds—abounds—Your grace—I say, abounds—' (4.10.105–8).

When he recovers, however, Byplay performs at the height of his linguistic powers, speaking in impressive rhymed couplets. This passage may recall Rafe's own thirty-six line series of fourteener couplets in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (Interlude 4.26–62), an extensive speech, given in an elaborate morris dancing costume, and occurring, as Byplay's couplets do, in the play's fourth act. Although any rhyme scheme, even one as simple as a series of couplets, may strike a modern ear as a highly scripted form, many examples exist

of renaissance clowns, Marlowe's 'rhyming mother-wits,' speaking in couplets. The posthumously published renaissance jestbook, *Tarlton's Jests* (1611), features several examples of supposedly-spontaneous rhymed poetry, often couplets, as examples of Richard Tarlton's witty improvisational responses to the 'theames' given him by audience members. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare's Touchstone provides a series of comic riffs on Orlando's trite odes: 'From the East to Western Inde / No jewel is like Rosalind' (3.3.65–6),[20] improvising his own couplets:

> If a hart do lack a hind,
> Let him seek out Rosalind;
> If the cat will after kind,
> So be sure will Rosalind. (3.3.78–81)

Although Touchstone's repetition of 'Rosalind' appears at the end of each couplet rather than at the beginning, this structure recalls Byplay's anaphoric structuring, allowing the witty wordsmith time to develop his next rhyme as well as his comic twist on conventional love poetry.

As for Byplay, after a moment of being 'out', he gains control of his faculties and improvises a climactic verse prelude to Martha's entrance. Peregrine has overheard Letoy's desperate shouting at Byplay, another potential disaster, coming just at the moment in which Peregrine is to be led to the curative arms of his forgotten bride. Byplay smoothes all over, announcing that the voice:

> doth inform me of the tidings
> Spread through your kingdom of your great arrival,
> And of the general joy your people bring
> To celebrate the welcome of their king.
> Hark how the country shouts with joyful votes,
> Rending the air with music of their throats.
> Hark how the soldier with his martial noise
> Threatens your foes, to fill your crown with joys.
> Hark how the city with loud harmony
> Chants a free welcome to your majesty.
> Hark how the court prepares your grace to meet
> With solemn music, state, and beauty sweet. (4.410–421)

The lack of rhyme in the first two lines of Byplay's reply shows him recovering, getting back into the role. As he proceeds, however, his lines fall first into a simple rhyme scheme and then develop into a familiar repeating structure of balance and delay. Perhaps, finally, his moment of faltering only serves to highlight the ingenuity of his recovery.

In the induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, Brome himself is featured in a scene of scripted spontaneity—characterized as Jonson's 'man' who hides 'behind the arras' (induction 7). His work has its antecedents in his days backstage in Jonson's theatre as well as in the works of such playwrights as Marston and Beaumont. Its rich intertextuality references both this background and contemporary performance repertory. It is situated not after improvisation 'was purg'd from the stage', but in the midst of an ongoing investigation of theatrical spontaneity that spans renaissance drama. As in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, this investigation of improvisation in *The Antipodes* addresses both spontaneity and textual alteration. It is perhaps ironic therefore that *The Antipodes* itself, concerned as it is with an actor's ability to 'alter or diminish what the writer with care and skill composed', suffered diminishment at the hands of Brome's actors who 'left (certain passages) out of the presentation for superfluous length'.[21] Yet the writer's skill wins out in *The Antipodes*: as it explores the pleasures and dangers of spontaneous speech, at the same time, it calls conscious attention to its own craftedness. Brome's verbal pointing to supposed scenes of extempore instead emphasizes just the opposite, that such scenes are actually scripted. As he underscores his play's improvisational byplay, asking the audience to 'mark that fellow', suggesting 'he speaks Extempore', in fact the actor's lines serve to highlight Brome's own skillfully scripted improvisation.

KAREN KETTNICH

Notes

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1 This and subsequent citations from *The Antipodes* derive from Anthony Parr's edition in his collection, *Three Renaissance Travel Plays* (Manchester and New York, 1995).

2 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Philip Edwards (ed.) (Cambridge, 1985).
3 David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge, 1987), 4–5.
4 See these and other 'permissive stage directions' in Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama 1580–1642* (Cambridge, 1999), 161–2.
5 For example, Jane Milling, 'The development of a professional theatre, 1540–1660', in Jane Milling and Peter Thomson (eds), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre* (Cambridge, 2004), 1:151–2.
6 Thomas Jordan, *Fancy's Festivals: A Masque, As it hath been privately presented by many civil persons of quality And now at their requests newly printed* (London, 1657), Bv.
7 Thomas Nabbes, *The Bride: A Comedie. Acted in the yeere 1638 at the private house in Drury Lane by their Majesties Servants* (London, 1640), A3-A3v.
8 Aphra Behn, Preface to *The Dutch Lover: A comedy acted at the Dukes theatre* (London, 1673), A5v.
9 Some exceptions include Jane Freeman and her application of the term 'scripted improvisation' to Shakespeare's work in 'Shakespeare's Rhetorical Riffs', in Timothy J. McGee (ed.), *Improvisation in the Arts in the Medieval and Renaissance Eras* (Kalamazoo, MI, 2003), 247–72; Robert Henke, 'Orality and Literacy in the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the Shakespearean Clown', *Oral Tradition* 11.2 (1996), 222–48; and Frances Barasch, 'The Bayeux Painting and Shakespearean Improvisation', *Shakespeare Bulletin* (1993), 33–6. The tradition is, of course, not only English and recently scholars have been exploring the interplay between scenes that sound unscripted in Plautus's drama, often with links to earlier improvisational Atellan farce, with scenes that sound decidedly adapted from Menander's Greek New Comedy. See Gregor Vogt-Spira, 'Traditions of Theatrical Improvization in Plautus: Some Considerations', in Erich Segal, *Oxford Readings in Menander, Plautus, and Terence* (Oxford, 2001), 95–106; and Niall W. Slater, 'Words, Words, Words', *Plautus in Performance: The Theatre of the Mind* (Princeton, 1987), 118–46.
10 The Praeludium is printed in Thomas Goffe, *The Careles Shepherdess: A tragicomedy Acted before the King & Queen, And at Salisbury-Court, with great Applause* (London, 1656), Br-B4v.
11 All references to *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* are from Michael Hattaway's New Mermaids edition (New York, 1969).
12 Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage: Dramatic Companies and Players* (Oxford, 1941), 1:330–1. That *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* seems to have become a standard part of the repertory in the 1630s makes its initial failure, described in the publisher's opening epistle in the first quarto of the play, all the more

intriguing. The play's varied reception history continues: it was still being performed in 1662, but the final act 'pleased' Samuel Pepys 'not at all' when he saw it on May 7 <http://www.pepysdiary.com/archive/1662/05/07/> (accessed 5 September 2007).

13 See Matthew Steggle, *Richard Brome: Place and Politics on the Caroline Stage* (Manchester and New York, 2004), 105–9 for a discussion of the legal dispute over Brome's play.

14 Jackson Cope makes this connection as well in *The Theater and the Dream: From Metaphor to Form in Renaissance Drama* (Baltimore, 1973), 304, fn. 44.

15 *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is certainly by no means the most prominent homage in Brome's patchwork of textual allusions. For an overview of many others including Ford's *The Lover's Melancholy* as well as, of course, *Hamlet* and *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, see the Appendix, 'Sources of Brome's *Antipodes*' in Clarence Edward Andrews, *Richard Brome: A Study of His Life and Works* (Hamden, CT, 1972), 113–28.

16 See, for example, George and Nell's helpful cries and fears for his safety as he fights the 'giant' Barbaroso (3.321–49) when earlier in the scene they themselves requested that this fight be staged (3.282–92).

17 This complex scene also appears to reference the famous 1617 Shrove Tuesday attack on the Cockpit theatre by London apprentices which is recounted in 'A Ballad in praise of London Prentices, and what they did at the Cockpit Play-house, in Drury Lane.' See Ann Haaker (ed.) *The Antipodes*, *Regents Renaissance Drama Series* (Lincoln, 1966), 69n.

18 Rafe is a longer role than Byplay by more than one hundred lines, but as the actor playing Byplay would probably fill in some of the play-within-the-play's non-specified roles, they are fairly comparable in size.

19 That Diana is also an excellent improvisatory actor makes it particularly appropriate that she is the one to accord Byplay the nickname, 'Extempore', and repeat it as often as she does, and it is appropriate that he is the actor she claims to find most attractive.

20 Quotations are from William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Michael Hattaway (ed.) (Cambridge, 2000).

21 From the prefatory epistle to the reader in the 1640 edition.