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Acting out of Character: a Performance-as-Research Approach to *The Three Ladies of London*

This essay considers The Three Ladies of London *from a Performance or Practice as Research point of view. It introduces the concept of Practice-as-Research, highlighting its use as a mode of discovery of productive textual problems that are not usually spotted in the course of a more traditional close reading. It then considers some of the textual problems in* The Three Ladies of London, *especially its characters' relationships with their own identities, with the play's plot and with its audience. It also considers the play's lack of the kind of deictic language usually endemic to the early modern script-writing process and its status as a comedy in which somebody dies, reminding us that the 1580s lacked the kind of genre practice we now associate with the period because of the influential demarcations made on the title page of Shakespeare's 1623 play collection. Using these considerations, the essay charts the scope for actorly choice written into the heart of this play script.*

> You marvel then what stuff we have to furnish out our show.
>
> Your patience yet we crave a while, till we have trimmed our stall[.]
>
> (Prologue 14-15)[1]

The prologue to this play is a reminder that theatre is an uncertain art, played out in a present tense that partly recycles and partly enacts anew things that have been prepared in advance. Hence the prologue, speaking before the play has begun, can talk of the 'stuff we [already] have to furnish out our show' as well as the company's task to use that stuff until they 'have trimmed our stall'. Performance as Research (more usually known as Practice as Research, or PAR) returns the scholar to this moment in a play's life when preparation for a production (which includes, but is not limited to the creation of a performance script) is put to work onstage in front of an audience.

The value of Practice as Research rests in its exploration of stage possibilities. This work is fruitful in and of itself, but is helpful, too, as a methodological challenge and a pedagogical prompt to resist scholarship's obsession with facts, that-which-can-be-argued and the primacy of text. Practice as Research counters these problems by calling attention to choices, possibilities, and opportunities that other kinds of reading can either ignore or

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overlook. In that sense, the binary suggested by Holger Syme in his worry that Practice as Research 'suggests that actorly decisions are always interpretative rather than creative' might dissolve once we acknowledge that early modern playwrights built their texts around actors who were already both creative and interpreting elements of the play, people who might have commissioned or inspired or in any other way predetermined the play.[2] In the early modern period, such actors were the preconditions of the text, not the other way round.

One of the surprises for me about a recent turn to theatre, performance, and theatre history has been the revelation that anti-theatricality continues to colour our scholarly engagements. An interest in the part system, for example, frequently seems to permit academics to assume that early modern actors were entirely ignorant of everything outside their part.[3] But once we get beyond the notion of the text as a pre-performance thing, we can see how 'the' script will have been shaped – from and throughout its inception – by the needs of the acting community for whom it was commissioned. Such actors, in other words, were creative agents in the text long before they found themselves working with it onstage in front of an audience. Hans-Thies Lehmann sees a 'fundamental difference (and competition) between the perspective of the text ... and the entirely distinct perspective of the theatre, for which the text is raw material'.[4] But this problem may be a very modern one, and particularly a modern problem for texts which now are very old. In early modern theatre, performance scripts were produced by as well as for theatre companies, were co-operative rather than competitive and the needs and abilities of the theatre companies may well have been the raw material for texts, not the other way around.

Thinking performatively also throws weight onto the practical implications of a text that other forms of reading can easily miss. In that sense, it offers a corrective to the apparent neutrality and comprehensiveness of close reading. Lyn Tribble, for example, has written about the timing implications built into the seemingly simple and self-evident one-word stage

direction '*Dies*', a direction that makes enormous demands of the creative decision-making process: how does this character die, how might it affect their lines and − the question most often missed in a non-theatrical reading of a text − how long should it take?[5] In PAR workshops, stage directions which may be original or added by modern editors and which seem intuitive, sensible, and self-evident, frequently turn out to be not only complex but also contestable.

A problem inherent in theatre history is its tendency to privilege the history over the theatre: it either tries to prove that a particular thing must have happened during performance, or, in the absence of the ability to mount such a proof, it refuses to speculate at all. But theatre *is* a speculative, contingent thing: actors do different things at different performances, and different audience members see different things during the same show. Early modernists ought to be particularly alive to this productive problem since early modern plays routinely highlight it. When Leontes says 'too hot, too hot', the ensuing play will only make sense if the audience see something that is instead lukewarm, lukewarm. In Chapman's *An Humorous Day's Mirth*, an entire scene hinges on the fact that two people onstage read a third person's series of gestures differently; Iago prises apart a marriage by inviting Othello to re-view his wife's sexual probity; *The Alchemist* builds a laboratory of characters all interpreting their immediate whereabouts in different ways. Again and again, early modern plays explore the contingency of action, text, and their reception. It seems odd, therefore, that when early modernists have engaged with performance as a form of research, they have tried to push it towards establishing truths. The value of PAR, then, is that it allows us to once again marvel at the stuff performers 'have to furnish out [a] show'.Performance-as-research returns us to the creative point of view, from which performance is primary, text secondary, not only in terms of priority but also in terms of time. It is not surprising that *Three Ladies of London* was performed; what is surprising is that it was published.

Performance as Research advocates open rehearsal as a mean of discovering potential performance choices in real time rather than a carefully rehearsed production presenting already-discovered choices that have already been made. Moreover, when we experiment with a play in performance that has no performance history, there can be no expert in the room. No one can have a firm or essentialized identity on either side of the practitioner/researcher divide. A performance workshop on *The Three Ladies of London* puts us all in the position of learner, and back into what we might want to call a discovery space.

With this framework in mind, we can usefully explore some obvious problems or opportunities associated with this play in performance workshops, and I list some of them here:

- Discard the critical commonplace that the verse in this play is rough. On the contrary, the verse of this play appears to offer enormous opportunities to the actors to play with or against the verse line. An exploration of different approaches to verse speaking in this play may help us get beyond a teleological way of thinking that judges all stage verse against the virtues and practice of blank verse.

- The challenge for actors, especially modern actors who are likely to bring with them a highly specific set of expectations and skills, in representing characters who are, at least to some extent, fixed by their allegorical significance and identity. Indeed the value of performance will be to explore the meaning of that phrase 'at least to some extent'.

- The concept of an aside or audience address is often much more prolix and ambivalent than both early modern printing practices and modern editorial conventions suggest. In *The Three Ladies of London*, we have the added problem, as we shall see, that the script envisages an often antagonistic relationship between play world and audience and often projects emotive and physical responses onto audience

members.

- Since this play was identified as a comedy in the 1580s, perhaps we should make the point at the outset that comedy may not have been a genre-marker in this early period. Indeed, with its range of characters across the social scale, its lack of interest in romantic love, its refusal of anything approaching a happy ending and its willingness to kill off members of the cast, this play is particularly strong evidence that 'comedy' did not mean what we now often assume it to mean in the early modern period.

- Remember that where we have uncertain action encoded in a performance script, we also have uncertain duration. Time is an excellent example of an aspect of performance that cannot be measured in a traditional reading of a play. Performance workshops cannot determine the duration of a particular action either, of course, but it can usefully foreground that problem and thus remind professional researchers of dramaturgical decisions that are often hidden when simply reading a play. Several moments in this play invite such performance-based research: '*Let FRAUD run at him, and let SIMPLICITY run in, and come out again straight*' (2.175 sd); '*Here let LUCRE open the box, and dip her finger in it, and spot CONSCIENCE face, saying as followeth*' (10.104 sd)

- *The Three Ladies of London* is relatively free of the kind of deictic language that James Thomas has called '*indigenous blocking*', that is, textually implicit movement.[6] With three exceptions, conventionally deictic words such as 'thus', 'so', 'this', or 'that' are used comparatively rarely and usually without gestural or dramaturgical significance. The major exception is Lady Conscience's entrance selling brooms, which sparks a sudden flurry of uses of the deictic 'thus' referring to her new costume and social status. 'Thus' is the first word she speaks after her song and one of the last in her long speech before she sings again:

> Thus am I driven to make a virtue of necessity ...
>
> But while I stand reasoning thus, I forget my market clean,
>
> And sith God hath ordained this way, I am to use the mean.   (10.21, 37-8)

In the last speech of the play, Judge Nemo similarly uses a demonstrative, self-referential thus: 'Thus we make an end' (17.100). For the most part, however, the language of *The Three Ladies of London* is not noticeably self-conscious in its linguistic references to the stage. Workshopping the moments above in conjunction with scenes which do not employ such deictic language may help us to understand the importance (or unimportance) of such indigenous blocking.

- The play is unusual, however, in its highly negotiable stage directions. These seem to offer a relatively uncommon degree of choice to either actor or company. As Leslie Thomson has noted in her essay for this website, these stage directions use 'early, rare, or unique formulations' such as 'let', 'here', 'make as though', and 'make ready for'.[7] In addition to Thomson's comments, these locutions are noticeable for the distance they map out between the performer and the fictive world: they are notations for real actions that might connote and represent fictional ones. Some stage directions are unusually permissive, not least 'if you can'.

In light of these questions, we might also explore this play's distinctive interest in imagining − and perhaps constructing − what its audience is thinking and doing:

> *Enter SIMPLICITY, with a basket on his arm*
>
> SIMPLICITY You think I am going to market to buy roast meat, do ye not?
>
> I thought so, but you are deceived, for I wot what I wot.
>
> I am neither going to the butcher's to buy veal, mutton, or beef,
>
> But I am going to a bloodsucker; and who is it? Faith, Usury, that thief.
>
> Why, sirs, 'twas no marcle he undoed my father, that was called Plain Dealing,

When he has undone my lady and Conscience too with his usuring.

I'll tell ye, sirs, trust him not, for he'll flatter bonacion and sore,

Till he has gotten the baker's vantage, then he'll turn you out of door.   (7.1-8)

Performance workshops tend to focus on actorly choices and decisions made available in (or resisted by) the text. With this play, though, it will be just as interesting to workshop possible audience choices and decisions, since characters often script audience reaction. A performance workshop can test out what happens when an audience member does or does not fulfill the responses being imagined and how an actor may respond.

This problem of audience response is even more apparent in the following scene in which an audience member's facial expression and physical size is described by Simplicity − indeed, the audience member's body is described first as it responds to Simplicity's performance and then as a reason for Simplicity to leave the stage:

Come and resist me, that I may sing with the more meliosity.

But, sirs, mark my cauled countenance when I begin -

But yonder is a fellow that gapes to bite me, or else to eat that which I sing.

Why, thou art a fool; canst not thou keep thy mouth strait together,

And when it comes, snap at it, as my father's dog would do at a liver?

...

Now, sirrah, hast eaten up my song? An ye have, ye shall eat no more today,

For everybody may see your belly is grown bigger with eating up our play.

He has filled his belly, but I am never a whit the better,

Therefore I'll go seek some victuals, and 'member, for eating up my song you shall be

   my debtor.   (8.163-7, 179-82)

Obvious questions to ask in workshop are whether the actor playing Simplicity needs to clearly identify the audience member being described, or whether that audience member is

simply a fictive part of the audience; in the case of the former decision, the audience

member's own choices will work with or against Simplicity's words and inform the

performance of the actor playing Simplicity.

Again and again in this play, the narrative pauses whilst characters describe

themselves or are described in detail. Dissimulation's first entrance begins with an immediate

negation of the audience's (presumed) reactions to his appearance. The last two lines of this

speech (already quoted above) testify to how far the rest of the speech has gone from the

level of story: the character almost has to jerk himself back to the business of narration. But

notice that his first word is 'Nay' (as is the first word of his third line) — surely unusual for an

early modern character to come out onstage and immediately negate his audience's assumed

reaction:

Nay, no less than a farmer, a right honest man,

But my tongue cannot stay me to tell what I am:

Nay, who is it that knows me not by my parti-coloured head?

They may well think, that see me, my honesty is fled.

Tush, a fig for honesty! Tut, let that go,

Sith men, women, and children my name and doings do know.

My name is Dissimulation, and no base mind I bear,

For my outward effects my inward zeal do declare,

For men do dissemble with their wives, and their wives with them again,

So that in the hearts of them I always remain.

...

Then why make you it strange that ever you knew me,

Seeing so often I range throughout every degree?

But I forget my business. I'll towards London as fast as I can,

To get entertainment of one of the three ladies, like an honest man.   (2.1-10, 16-19)

Dissimulation's determination to explain who he is stands in conspicuous contrast to his claim, made in the same opening speech, that his identity is immediately obvious ('my outward effects my inward zeal do declare', 8). Indeed at times in this speech Dissimulation seems to envisage his body, and especially his tongue and head, to be in competition with him for representational power. There is scope in performance to workshop this speech and its underlying assumptions about the actor's relationship to the character and the character's relationship to his identity: is this a confident or an anxious declaration of identity, and what relationship with the audience does it encode? In performance, of course, these may turn out to be the wrong alternatives or even the wrong questions, but seemingly this speech requires the actor to work out his relationship with the audience in real time. In other words, significant scope exists for actorly choice in speeches which at first appear to be declaring absolute and fixed dramaturgical identity. By the end of the speech, the character appears to be responding to another presumed audience response before, as we have seen, turning back to the plot of the play:

> Then why make you it strange that ever you knew me,
>
> Seeing so often I range throughout every degree?
>
> But I forget my business. I'll towards London as fast as I can,
>
> To get entertainment of one of the three ladies, like an honest man.   (16-19)

This scene is full of such conversations with the audience before characters turn inwards to the fictional world. Simplicity tells the audience 'you see I am a handsome fellow – mark the comporknance of my stature' (24), Fraud enters with a decisive resolution ('Huff once aloft', 33). A performance workshop can try to map out possible responses to these lines, not only on the part of audience members but of the speakers as the audience responds. The scene offers obvious and plentiful opportunity for adlib, play, and projecting fictitious but perhaps

exhortatory responses onto the audience, which the workshop can help to explore.

Performance would thus enable an exploration of a recurrent concern of this script, the real or imagined responses of its audience, which can be seen from the moment the prologue sets out the play's identity by listing the things it is not: 'You marvel, then, what stuff we have to furnish out our show' (14). Only through performance or Performance as Research can we test out the very stuff of a performance script.

Notes

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[1] Robert Wilson, *The Three Ladies of London*, Lloyd Edward Kermode (ed.), *Three Renaissance Usury Plays* (Manchester, 2009). All references to the play are to this edition.

[2] Holger Syme, 'My trouble with practice-as-research',

http://www.dispositio.net/archives/1889 (accessed 20 February 2015).

[3] This interest responds to Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern's excellent *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford, 2007).

[4] Quoted and translated by Syme.

[5] Evelyn Tribble, unpublished paper, SAA 2014.

[6] James Thomas, *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*, 2nd ed. (1992; Oxford', 1999), 42 (his italics).

[7] Leslie Thomson, '"As it hath been publiquely played": The Stage Directions and Original Staging of *The Three Ladies of London'*, 2.