

## FOUR RENAISSANCE COMEDIES

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# Four Renaissance Comedies

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*The Old Wives Tale*  
*The Shoemakers Holiday*  
*The Alchemist*  
*A New Way to Pay Old Debts*

Edited by

ROBERT SHAUGHNESSY

palgrave  
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Introduction, selection and editorial matter  
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*For Jacqueline*

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# General Introduction

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For many contemporary readers, theatre practitioners and theatregoers, there is one basic problem with the plays that are found under the generic umbrella of comedy during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: they are not, on the face of it, very funny. Indeed, at the turn of the twenty-first century, when the global template of comedy is defined by the uniquely brilliant combination of domestic soap opera, everyday surrealism, sly media references and social satire of *The Simpsons*, the sense of humour that informs the comic drama of the English Renaissance can often seem misguided, objectionable or incomprehensible, and the plays themselves contrived and artificial. The theatre director Sam Mendes recalled a particularly dispiriting experience of this kind during the first reading of *The Alchemist* for the RSC in 1991: 'the first day in rehearsal, it was like the actors were reading a sort of Swahili text. I've never had such a terrible run-through in my life, and such an appallingly depressed group of actors'.<sup>1</sup> Jonson, like most if not all of his contemporaries (other than Shakespeare for some; including Shakespeare for others), is perceived as opaque, deadly and alien; and no doubt a major component of the actors' despondency was the dread that they were not only going to have to make the text work, but, even more terrifyingly, actually provoke audiences to laughter. Mendes and his team quickly realised that the most effective route into the play was to abandon preconceptions about motivation and character psychology and to focus instead upon the rhythm and shape of the action, which meant 'doing a very early run-through just to see what doors people had to come in and out of'; 'we had to sort of decode it as a series of moves, a series of journeys, a series of stage shapes'.<sup>2</sup> It seems a sensible way of approaching not only Jonsonian comedy but comic drama in general (and one not without precedent in

original stage practice, where the work of rehearsal would of necessity be limited to the orchestration of entrances and exits, set-pieces and group scenes<sup>3</sup>), and the result was a brilliantly energetic, intelligent and genuinely laugh-filled production. Nonetheless, the adjustment of perception that was needed in order to negotiate the difference between modern and early modern comic expectations was quite considerable, and prompts not only the theoretical and practical question of whether renaissance comedy can still be funny, but also the more historical question of what 'comedy', in this setting and in subsequent ones, actually means.

## Kings and Clowns

We can address this question, initially, by considering two very different views of the comic drama in the early modern period. The first is taken from a work of literary theory, Sir Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poesie* (written 1582; published 1595). Sidney wrote within the context of the literary culture of the court, and the *Defence*, is accordingly, coloured by disdain for the products of the popular entertainment industry. Noting that the comic was something that 'naughty play-makers and stage keepers have justly made odious', the poet Sidney castigates the lowly hacks of the popular stage (whom he characterises as artisan 'play-makers' rather than 'poets') for corrupting a genre which, after its particular fashion, has both a formal and generic coherence, and an ethical purpose. Comedy, Sidney proposes, 'is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be; so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one'.<sup>4</sup> Sidney's conviction that comedy should be sternly corrective rests upon an austere classical understanding of the purpose of comic satire, and thus furnishes the rationale for comedy that was unaccountably omitted from Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which the philosopher had observed that 'comedy aims at representing men as worse than they are nowadays, tragedy as better'; according to Aristotle, 'worse' is used 'in the sense that the ridiculous is a species of ugliness or badness', and thus is amenable to exposure and correction.<sup>5</sup> For Sidney, comedy presents the grotesque, the excessive and the disordered to mirror the spectator's own deficiencies (primarily greed, lust and vanity), and to prompt

him to mend his ways accordingly: 'nothing can more open his eyes than to see his own actions contemptibly set forth'.<sup>6</sup>

According to this scheme, proper comedy proceeds appropriately and decorously in its chosen task, and Sidney illustrates its basic sobriety (indeed, its legitimacy) by comparing the relation of comic vice to virtue to the kind of reciprocity found in geometry, where 'the oblique must be known as well as the right, and in arithmetic the odd as well as the even'; similarly, 'the actions of our life, who seeth not the filthiness of evil, wanteth a great foil to perceive the beauty of virtue'.<sup>7</sup> Comedy, moreover, balances tragedy by dealing with 'our private and domestical matters',<sup>8</sup> whereas its generic partner addresses the larger issues of politics and statecraft. The difficulty, unsurprisingly, is that few if any sixteenth-century plays come anywhere near to living up to the strictures Sidney prescribes. Sidney is hard pressed throughout the *Defence* to sustain the case for the high purpose and political orthodoxy of the drama with contemporary examples (although he does cite Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc* as one instance of a tragedy 'full of stately speeches and well sounding phrases ... full of notably morality'<sup>9</sup>); all the more because, as he sees it, the popular drama is in a scandalous state of generic fluidity and hybridity. In an often-quoted passage, Sidney lampoons the extravagances of a performance practice that wantonly ignores the Aristotlean unities of time, place and action:

... you shall have Asia of the one side, and Afric of the other, and so many other under kingdoms, that the player, when he comes in must ever begin with telling where he is, or else the tale will not be conceived. Now you shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers, and then we must believe the stage to be a garden. By and by we hear news of a shipwreck in the same place, then we are to blame if we accept it not for a rock. Upon the back of that comes out a hideous monster with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it for a cave; while in the meantime two armies fly in, represented with swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field?<sup>10</sup>

Sidney evokes a drama that is episodic, picaresque, given to extravagant spectacle and cheerfully accommodating the everyday alongside the materials of romance and fantasy. This is the style of plays such as Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*

(1589), in which Prince Edward swaps roles with his Fool to pursue love in the countryside, encountering magicians and the devil; and, as represented in this volume, George Peele's *The Old Wives Tale* (1592). Nor that this eclecticism was confined to the works that advertised themselves as comedies. The new and experimental genre of the history play, in particular, was particularly energetic in its assimilation of legendary and folklore material into the process of national myth-making (as in Robert Greene's *Scottish History of James IV* [1590], Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays [c. 1590]); and in the hands of a writer such as Christopher Marlowe, plays nominally designated as tragedies made extensive use of burlesque, black comedy and clowning (e.g., *The Jew of Malta* [1589] and *Doctor Faustus* [1592]). At the end of stage performances, even of tragedies, it was customary for the players to dance a jig.<sup>11</sup>

For some Renaissance theorists, as Stephen Orgel points out, comedy was not just tragedy's corollary but 'the largest condition of drama',<sup>12</sup> in that the comic both encompassed the tragic and permeated it. For Sidney, however, the mixture of modes and styles in the drama was a serious moral concern, in that both tragedy and comedy were, as a consequence of this mixing, denied their appropriate functions:

But besides these gross absurdities, how all their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in the clown by head and shoulders to play a part in majestic matters, with neither decency nor discretion; so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragicomedy obtained.<sup>13</sup>

If 'right sportfulness' is proper to comedy, it is not the same thing as laughter; and the distinction between 'laughter' and 'delight' forms the basis for a further refinement of Sidney's definition of the genuinely comic. 'Our comedians' (i.e. players), Sidney gloomily notes, 'think there is no delight without laughter, which is very wrong ... delight hath a joy in it either permanent or present. Laughter hath only a scornful tickling'.<sup>14</sup> Delight resides in the contemplation of truth and beauty, whereas laughter is provoked by the sorry spectacle of deformity and misfortune. Here, then, is one Elizabethan view of comedy in which raising a laugh is not the primary imperative; indeed, it may even be detrimental to the purpose.

Although it is impossible to determine whether Sidney's 'thrust in the clown by head and shoulders' is intended to refer to actual performance practice, it is reminiscent of the stage antics of his contemporary, the celebrated clown Richard Tarlton, whose exploits articulate a radically different account of the comic. According to one writer, Tarlton had only to show his memorably grotesque face onstage to reduce audiences to helplessness:

As Tarlton when his head was only seen,  
The Tire-house and the tapestry between,  
Set all the multitude in such a laughter,  
They could not hold for scarce an hour after.<sup>15</sup>

Gratuitous, senseless and uncontrolled, this is the kind of laughter that Sidney deplored; nonetheless, Tarlton's skill in soliciting it earned him the kind of favour that the poet might well have envied, in that the monarch herself was reportedly one of his admirers: 'when Queen Elizabeth was serious, I dare not say sullen, and out of good humour, he could *un-dumpish* her at his pleasure ... he told the Queen more of her faults than most of her chaplains, and cured her melancholy better than all of her physicians'.<sup>16</sup> The idea that laughter had a quasi-medicinal function, perhaps analogous to purging or laxatives, in addition to an ethical one, can be traced back to Aristotle, and it is echoed in theoretical pronouncements on comedy elsewhere; as Nicholas Udall claimed in the Prologue to one of the earliest printed English-language comedies, *Ralph Roister Doister* (1541), 'Mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health / Mirth recreates our spirits, and voideth pensiveness' (Prologue, 3–4). Tarlton, however, evidently felt no inclination to engage an ethical rationale for his craft. In addition to his ready, often brutal wit, and the singing and dancing skills that were *de rigeur* for the professional clown, he was renowned for his talent for extemporisation. His part in the comic chronicle history *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (c. 1588) afforded one such opportunity:

At the Bull at Bishopsgate was a play of Henry the fift, wherein the judge was to take a box on the ear; and because he was absent that should take the blow, Tarlton himself, ever forward to please, took upon him to play the same judge, besides his own part of the clown: and Knel then playing Henry the fift, hit Tarlton a sound box indeed, which made

the people laugh the more because it was he, but anon the judge goes in, and immediately Tarlton in his clown's clothes comes out, and asks the actors what news. O, saith one, hadst thou been here, thou shouldest have seen Prince Henry hit the judge a terrible box on the ear. What, man, said Tarlton, strike a judge? It is true, yfaith, said the other. No other like, said Tarlton, and it could not be but terrible to the judge, when the report so terrifies me, that methinks the blow remains still on my cheek, that it burns again. The people laughed at this mightily: and to this day I have heard it commended for rare; but no marvel, for he had many of these.<sup>17</sup>

The anecdote suggests a performer in his element in a theatre that is rowdy, makeshift, iconoclastic and ripe for moments of spontaneous improvisation: if the initial joke resides in the substitution of clown for Lord Chief Justice, Tarlton's subsequent ironic play upon the doubling points to the sustained and sophisticated self-awareness of Elizabethan popular performance. Armed with the levelling scepticism, sardonic wit and direct rapport with the audience inherited from the medieval stage figure of the Vice, the clown is able to move in and out of the dramatic fiction at will; as this incident suggests, moreover, the scope of comic improvisation was not limited to the written script. Although Hamlet was later to warn the players visiting Elsinore to 'let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them' (3.2.34–5), it appears that ad-libbing was the professional clown's stock-in-trade. In a period in which all playscripts had to be submitted to the state censor, the Master of the Revels, for licensing, this was a dangerously unregulated domain of speech, all the more so because the clown's discourse characteristically engages with the profane, the lewd, the scurrilous and the scatological.

An important aspect of the history of comic drama during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, then, was the progressive reining-in of the clown, so that Tarlton's successors (including Robert Armin and Will Kemp) found themselves increasingly – although still not entirely – integrated within the dramatic fictions they inhabited. By the time of Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), the clown's (and, by extension, the player's) penchant for extra-textual improvisation and horseplay has been drastically curtailed, and thoroughly subordinated to the authority of the dramatic text and its author. In the Induction

to this play, the 'Stage-keeper', a figure directly associated with the older tradition, introduces the action with nostalgic recollections of 'Master Tarlton's time', but ruefully reports that the author, one of 'these Master-Poets', has 'kicked me three or four times about the tiring-house' (Induction, 24–5); he is then banished from the stage by his literary- (and legalistically) minded successors, the Book-holder and the Scrivener, whose task is to establish a new contractual relationship between author, text, stage and spectators, whereby 'the Author promiseth to present them by us, with a new sufficient play called *Bartholomew Fair*, merry, and as full of noise, as sport; made to delight all, and to offend none. Provided they have the wit or the honesty to think well of themselves' (Induction, 74–5).<sup>18</sup> As Jonson was at pains to point out (and as *The Alchemist* perfectly demonstrates), the comic dramaturgy that this entailed was one that adhered to the classical precepts which Sidney had regarded as shamefully lacking in the dramas of the previous century; by his own account, 'the laws of time, place, persons he observeth / From no needful rule he swerveth' (*Volpone, or The Fox*, Prologue, 31–2). There may have been no place for clowns like Tarlton in either Sidney's or Jonson's comic worldviews, but audiences continued to remember them with affection well into the seventeenth century.

## Money, Sex and the City

The polar positions occupied by Sidney, apologist for a courtly mode of comedy conceived in a spirit of high literary seriousness, and Tarlton, representative and exponent of a clowning tradition that subordinated drama to improvised play and the exigencies of circumstance and popular taste, indicate the spectrum of opinion and activity within which English Renaissance comic theatre operated. In the years before and after the opening of London's (and England's) first permanent playhouse, The Theatre in Shoreditch, in 1576, comedy was characterised by opportunism, eclecticism and diversity; it was a genre – or range of genres – which drew upon a range of comic sources, models and traditions: domestic material such as fairytales and folktales, ballads, mummers' plays, mystery and miracle plays, interludes; and also classical and contemporary European influences such as Roman New Comedy, Italian *commedia erudita* (learned comedy)

and the *commedia dell'arte*. The comic genre in this period thus encompassed works of fantasy such as *Clyomon and Clamydes* (1570), *Mucedorus* (1590) and Greene's *Orlando Furioso* (1594), works of erotic intrigue imitating the Roman model such as George Gascoigne's *Supposes* (1566; this was a reworking of the Italian Arisoto's *I Suppositi*), elegant, stylised compliments to Queen Elizabeth such as John Lyly's *Endymion* (1588) and plays written for schoolboys, students and clerics as an extension of their training in the arts of rhetoric and public speech, and as the vernacular became recognised as a legitimate medium for comic drama (*Ralph Roister Doister*, *Gammer Gurton's Needle* [1575]).

The form and content of early modern comedy was shaped by the material circumstances in which it was produced. The establishment of the playhouses on the outskirts of the city of London (so located in order to elude the regulatory powers of the City of London authorities) during the final decades of the sixteenth century (the Curtain was built in 1577, the Rose in 1587, and the Globe in 1599), and the formation of playing companies under the protective auspices of the nominal aristocratic patronage, marked the beginnings of the professionalisation of the theatre industry, but also an important change in the nature of the conceptual, as well as material, domain of performance: in that its conduct began to be conceived in terms of architecture and fixed location, as well as according to the shifting and contingent circumstances faced by the older itinerant playing troupes. The playhouses continued to operate as one among many of the places in which players could be called to perform (indeed, some maintained that the playhouses were merely the venues in which they rehearsed prior to performances at court), but the increasing identification of playing companies with specific buildings was reflected in the drama itself in the cultivation of a dramaturgy precisely attuned to the rhythms and practices of everyday life in the city of London. The success of the early modern metropolitan theatre industry was to a large extent a result of the expansion and economic success of the capital itself, whose population grew to a quarter of a million during the period, and whose patterns of entrepreneurial activity and business organisation provided the template for those of the playing companies. These were, of the most part, set up as joint stock entities with a core of named sharers (the principal players), surrounded by a support system of apprentices (boy players, who took the female roles

until they reached maturity) and hired men, amongst which group were included musicians and writers. Within this system, the craft of playwriting was conducted in a situation in which the dramatist was subordinate to the company that had commissioned him: plays became the property of the playing company, not the author (and were often printed with the former's name on the title page rather than that of the latter), and literary ambitions were decisively secondary to the imperative of catering to the tastes of the heterogeneous popular audiences which, much to the displeasure of the city authorities, the playhouses succeeded in cultivating and sustaining over a quarter of a century of profound social, cultural and economic change. It is this sense of change and mutability that is at the heart of the comic drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: it is a landscape of gulls and tricksters, in which lovers keep as wary an eye on their chances of financial gain as on the possibility of erotic satisfaction (this is the prevailing mood of plays ranging from Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* [1598], through Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* [1606], to Philip Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* [c. 1625]); in which the business of role-playing, disguise and cross-dressing (from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* [1599] to Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* [1608]), reflects deeper unease about the mutability of class and gender roles; and in which the traditional prerogatives of the aristocracy find themselves vulnerable to the new civic mercantile order.

When the playhouses re-opened in 1594 after two years of closure enforced by the prevalence of plague, it marked the emergence of a small nucleus of companies that would dominate the theatrical market during the last decade of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth: chief among them the Lord Admiral's Men, based at the Rose and subsequently the Fortune, and the Lord Chamberlain's Men, first at the Theatre and the Curtain and, from 1599, at the Globe. Backed by the theatrical entrepreneur Philip Henslowe, whose ledger of accounts of his financial dealings have provided an invaluable record of the business of playmaking during the period,<sup>19</sup> the Admiral's Men hosted the output of writers such as George Chapman and Thomas Dekker; the Lord Chamberlain's Men (who became the King's Men after the accession of James I in 1603), meanwhile, claimed the talents of Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare. Jonson also supplied material to

rival organisations such as the St Paul's Boys, a company of juvenile players located at the Cathedral specialising in satirical drama (*Cynthia's Revels*, *Poetaster* [both 1601]); and scripted a considerable number of masques staged at James's court. Shakespeare, however, wrote exclusively for the Lord Chamberlain's/King's Men, and, indeed, was one of the company's most profitable assets. From the early 1590s through to 1613, the year of the burning of the Globe playhouse during a performance of Shakespeare and John Fletcher's history play *Henry VIII, or All is True*, Shakespeare supplied a steady stream of works that were sufficiently lucrative for him, as one of the company's principal sharers, to be able to purchase a substantial house in Stratford and, in 1613, property in Blackfriars. Shakespeare may have been a shrewd businessman and author of demonstrably popular plays, but, at least as far as his comic writing went, his success was achieved by going against the grain of his contemporaries, in that the social milieu of the works is primarily aristocratic rather than bourgeois, its geographical setting fabled or romantically foreign (the Forest of Arden, Illyria, Verona, Vienna) rather than localised, its general tenor rural and pastoral rather than civic; unlike Jonson or his occasional collaborator Middleton, Shakespeare rarely foregrounds financial imperatives as the driving forces of plot or characterisation (in part, this explains Shakespeare's longevity as a theatrical presence).

Shakespeare's house in London was close to the Blackfriars playhouse, an indoor venue acquired by the principal members of the King's Men in 1608 as a subsidiary outlet for their work during the winter months, the open-air Globe remaining in use during the summer. The Blackfriars theatre was one of a number of playhouses located within the environs of the city of London that have often been described as 'private' (as distinct from the 'public' playhouses distributed around the city's perimeter, along the South Bank of the Thames and to the North). Smaller, more expensively priced and more socially exclusive, catering for a coterie audience rather than the variegated, volatile crowds drawn to the open-air stages, these indoor theatres housed a theatrical practice subtly differentiated from that of the public playhouses in terms of technical sophistication and formal organisation: in order to allow for the trimming and re-lighting of the candles that provided the sole means of illumination, plays were required to be structured in five acts, with musicians playing

during the intervals (the texts of plays designed for the public playhouses were generally published without act divisions). Formidably equipped with machinery for the production of spectacle, contrivance and effect, the Blackfriars could accommodate the late comedies of Shakespeare (featuring, e.g., the appearance and disappearance of a banquet in *The Tempest* [1611] and the descent of Jupiter in *Cymbeline* [1610]); it was equally the perfectly apposite setting for *The Alchemist* (1611), a play confined for four of its five acts to the domestic interior of 'a house in Blackfriars'.

The relative intimacy of the indoor playhouses furnished the circumstances for a progressive narrowing of the social range and theatrical ambition of the stage comedies of the Caroline period (whose beginning was marked by the accession of Charles I in 1625, although the inward-looking trend was already well under way). The primary audience was now the fashionable London elite, and the comedies of the 1620s and 1630s reflected their tastes and preoccupations, as represented, for example, in the plays of James Shirley, whose *Hyde Park* (1632) indicates in its title the limited social and geographical locale inhabited by the work and its intended recipients. As Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack observe, playwriting, at least when operating in the service of the court, was a respectable and well-rewarded activity by the 1630s: 'no longer the preserve of jumped-up craftsmen's sons and traders', it was 'an acceptable demonstration of one's courtly accomplishment'.<sup>20</sup> But as the boundaries of the private-playhouse drama's subject-matter contracted, the numbers of new plays diminished: whereas thirty-six works were commissioned in 1624, a mere nine were in 1630.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the open-air playhouses continued to operate on the fringes of the city, surviving on revivals of Elizabethan and Jacobean scripts, recycled, rewritten and adapted to sustain their appeal to popular tastes, but also mobilising a nostalgia for the drama of a former era that offered an alternative perspective upon the critical period that culminated, in 1642, with the closure of the playhouses and the outbreak of the English Civil War.<sup>22</sup>

## New Ways to Play Old Texts

It remains to return to the concerns aired at the beginning of this introduction; and in particular to the question of how far, and in

what ways, the comic drama of early modern England remains theatrically viable within a twenty-first-century performance culture which we may suspect to be largely unsympathetic to it. The situation is complicated, of course, by the anomalous position of Shakespeare, a selection of whose plays continue to dominate what is already a fairly restricted and repetitive professional theatrical repertoire. In general, the history of early modern drama on stage from the late seventeenth century (when the theatres were restored along with the monarchy in the person of Charles II) through to the twenty-first has been that of Shakespeare in performance; it is a history that has been well-documented, as have the complex cultural, political and ideological forces which have manufactured and perpetuated Shakespeare's global dominance.<sup>23</sup> As a consequence of the imperialist ventures of the English, then British, empire (and its successor, the United States), Shakespeare has entered into – and has been adapted to – the theatrical repertoires of most cultures worldwide; and this ubiquity has been both celebrated (as proof of the Bard's universality) and condemned (as evidence of cultural colonialism). As far as the consequences for the reception of the works of Shakespeare's contemporaries are concerned, however, the centrality, and singularity, of Shakespeare has meant that these are almost invariably regarded as the master-dramatist's 'others', perpetually defined in terms of what they are not. As Mick Jardine has argued, paying specific attention to the critical pairing of Shakespeare and Jonson (although his analysis could be amplified, adjusted and extended to account for the processing of many other Elizabethan and Jacobean writers), 'Shakespeare's cultural pre-eminence is posited upon Jonson's secondary status as a scapegoating Other to a Shakespearean centre or ideal'.<sup>24</sup> Simon Shepherd makes a similar case in relation to Marlowe, who is, he urges, customarily treated as 'Marlowe-who-isn't-Shakespeare, the leading playwright in what is always called "pre-Shakespearean" drama, but who, in comparison with Shakespeare, is found to be immature'.<sup>25</sup>

In such instances, so the argument runs, the immense gravitational force of Shakespeare has the effect of bending his fellow-travellers out of shape, so that readers, critics and theatre-goers find them wanting because they are looking for the wrong kind of pleasures – particular modes of characterisation, of narrative construction, or, perhaps most troublingly, of dramatic ethos.

This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that there has been a long cultural tradition of adjusting Shakespeare to conform to the theatrical norms of the age (sometimes drastically so, as in Nahum Tate's 1681 revisions to *King Lear*, which supplied the play with a romantic subplot and a happy ending; sometimes in the spirit of reclaiming the authentic spirit of the work, as in Peter Brook's modernist/Absurdist 1962 version of the same play); so that Shakespeare can continue to be plausibly claimed as a kind of modern. The result is that the work of his contemporaries can seem even more mired in its own period, its own conventions, and, therefore, its own limitations. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sphere of comedy: cruelly liable to the harsh test of the presence or absence of laughter, the genre is spectacularly exposed to the prospect of failure.

For many advocates of the non-Shakespearean sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama, this is a risk worth taking, for there is a body of valuable and viable work here which, if it were allowed to escape from Shakespeare's shadow, might prove its worth alongside (and in some instances over and above) that of the tried-and-tested canon. Of the many hundreds of plays that survive from the period between the accession of Elizabeth I in 1588 and the closure of the playhouses in 1642, no more than a few dozen have been revived with any degree of regularity, at least in the professional theatre; and while there are multiple film and television versions of Shakespeare's plays, the screen history of the non-Shakespearean drama is negligible.<sup>26</sup> In a valuable history of stagings of early modern drama on the London stage from the late seventeenth century through to the twentieth, Wendy Griswold demonstrates that the eighteenth-century theatre turned repeatedly to *Bartholomew Fair*, *Epicoene*, *Every Man in His Humour* and *The Alchemist* (the basis for Francis Gentleman's popular adaptation, *The Tobacconist* [1770], which became a successful vehicle for David Garrick), to Jonson, Marston and Chapman's *Eastward Ho!*, and to *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. By the middle of the nineteenth century, this had narrowed to *Every Man* and *New Way*. From 1848 (when *Every Man* was staged at the Haymarket) to 1899, Jonson disappeared from the English stage, although Massinger's comedy remained popular (it was revived at least seventeen times between 1840 and 1877).<sup>27</sup> In 1899, under the auspices of his amateur group the Elizabethan Stage Society, William Poel produced the first showing of

*The Alchemist* for over a century at the Apothecaries Hall; committed to 'authentic' stagings of Renaissance plays within reconstructed Elizabethan performance conditions, Poel established an important aspect of the twentieth-century history of Shakespeare's contemporaries in performance.<sup>28</sup> As far as the professional theatre in the British Isles has been concerned, the record has been patchy. Griswold documents the re-establishment of the Jonsonian nucleus, and the sporadic reappearance of *Eastward Ho!* and *New Way*; to these can be added the return (in 1921) of what would prove to be the perennially resilient *Volpone*;<sup>29</sup> and revivals at the Old Vic during the 1920s and 1930s of Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1931–32); it was not until 1962 that the Old Vic company returned to early modern comedy with Tyrone Guthrie's rendering of *The Alchemist*. According to the editors of the 1979 Revels edition of the play, *The Shoemakers Holiday* could be fairly claimed as 'the most frequently performed non-Shakespearean play of its period,' with a professional stage history that begins in 1922 with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre (closely followed by an Old Vic revival in 1925); its most recent revival was at the National Theatre in 1981.<sup>30</sup> Outside London, the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon staged *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1910), *The Two Angry Women of Abingdon* (1914) and *Volpone* (1944, 1952). During the same period, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre also presented *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1914), *The Alchemist* (1916), *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1919), *Volpone* (1935), *The Silent Woman (Epicoene)* (1947), *The Alchemist* (1957) and, in 1958, a programme of 'Three Elizabethan Rarities,' which included *A Mery Play Between Johan Johan, the Husbande, Tyb, his Wyfe, and Sir Johan, the Preest*. This was a daring experiment: for the most part, the revival of the more obscure aspects of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama has been the provenance of amateur organisations and university drama departments.

In the 1960s, the advent of the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company saw the non-Shakespearean repertoire extended to incorporate many rarely performed comedies. The only Renaissance comedies to be staged at the National when it was housed at the Old Vic were Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* in 1964 and *Volpone* in 1968; after the move to the South Bank in 1976 (an event marked by Peter Hall's epic production of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*), the handful of revivals included

Middleton and Rowley's *A Fair Quarrel* (1979), *Bartholomew Fair* (1989), *Volpone* (1995) and *The Alchemist* (1996). The Royal Shakespeare Company revived only two non-Shakespearean comedies in the first two decades of its existence: *Bartholomew Fair* in 1969 and *The Alchemist* in 1977. However, the 1980s saw a clutch of revivals of non-Shakespearean work: Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* was aired on the main stage at Stratford in 1983, whilst the company's studio space, The Other Place, presented *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1983) and *Volpone* (1983). A further impetus was given by the opening of the RSC's replica Jacobean auditorium The Swan in 1986, which initially pledged itself to the fostering of the plays of Shakespeare's antecedents, colleagues and successors, 'to provide a context for our Shakespeare productions', by presenting 'the plays that influenced Shakespeare and the plays that Shakespeare influenced'.<sup>31</sup> The Swan has mounted numerous productions of Jonson, including not only the relatively familiar *Every Man in His Humour* (1986), *The Alchemist* (1991), *Bartholomew Fair* (1997) and *Volpone* (1999), but also *The Silent Woman* (1989) and *The Devil is an Ass* (1995); it has also undertaken Heywood's *Fair Maid of the West* (1986) and Shirley's *Hyde Park* (1987), although in recent years the keen winds of commercial viability have whittled down the repertoire to a more mainstream Shakespeare-dominated programme (even so, 2003 saw the RSC mount an unprecedented West End season of Jacobean plays, including John Marston's *The Malcontent*, John Fletcher's *The Island Princess* and Massinger's *The Roman Actor*). A second boost was supplied by the opening of the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe on Bankside in 1997: its revivals have included *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1997), *A Mad World, My Masters*, Dekker's *The Honest Whore* (both 1998) and Brome's *The Antipodes* (1999). The Globe also hosts a regular programme of rehearsed readings of unperformed early modern plays.

I began by observing how many encounters with non-Shakespearean early modern drama – and with comedy in particular – are initially conducted in a spirit of anxiety and despondency; the experience of theatre history shows that, when negotiated successfully, these forebodings give way to relief, and sometimes astonishment and exhilaration. For some, the first seasons at The Swan not only demonstrated the viability of a neglected and undervalued body of work, but also prompted

questions about the early modern comic canon itself: as Barry Kyle, The Swan's first Artistic Director put it in 1987 (citing two of the space's hits): '*Fair Maid of the West* and *Hyde Park* could now be taken up by other theatres as alternatives to say *Comedy of Errors* or *Much Ado*.'<sup>32</sup> As ever, Shakespeare remains an issue, but Shakespeare does not necessarily have the upper hand: in such experiences of performance, somewhere between the pleasures of novelty and unfamiliarity, lies the prospect of laughter that has not grown forced and stale through convention and repetition. Such a hope may be optimistic and, given the dwindling range of Shakespearean drama engaged by the mainstream theatre, even wilfully naïve, but it articulates something important about our relationship with the early modern comedy and with Shakespeare's place within it, in that it dreams of a capacity for spontaneity, surprise and delight that – thanks to the accumulated weight of cultural history – Shakespeare's comedies can no longer have. Whether this relationship is best explored by presenting the texts more or less as they stand in physical conditions intended to replicate those of their originating context, or by subjecting the raw material of early modern drama to the kind of bold interventions and improvisations that characterised its writing and performance, is beyond the scope of the present discussion; it is enough here to observe that the centuries of cultural difference that separate the early modern sense(s) of humour from their late modern counterparts makes the task a daunting but potentially rewarding one.<sup>33</sup> It is as well to be realistic: although full production (preferably by professional actors) remains for many the ideal, the smaller-scale, but perhaps more adventurous and open-ended, possibilities afforded by workshop performance may yet yield results that are more achievable, more productive and, perhaps, genuinely funnier in practice.<sup>34</sup> Representative as they are of the range and diversity of comic drama during the period, the plays in this volume are offered in this understanding that, just as reading alone is unlikely to reveal their real comic potential, so may the strategies and vocabularies of comic performance that have served in the past also need re-imagining for a new century. It is for the reader to discover how the cues these plays provide may best be answered.

## Notes

- 1 'Interlude 1: Sam Mendes talks to Brian Woolland', in *Ben Jonson and Theatre: Performance, Practice and Theory*, ed. Richard Cave, Elizabeth Schafer and Brian Woolland (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 79.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 3 See Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).
- 4 Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie*, in *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, Vol. 3, ed. Albert Feuillerat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 23.
- 5 Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, in Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. and ed. T. S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 33–7.
- 6 Sidney, *Defence*, p. 23.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 38
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 See Richard Wilson, *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 45–62.
- 12 Stephen Orgel, 'The Comedian as the Character C', in *English Comedy*, ed. Michael Corder, Peter Holland and John Kerrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 36.
- 13 Sidney, *Defence*, p. 39.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 15 Peachum, 'Thalia's Banquet' (1620), quoted in *Tarlton's Jests and News Out of Purgatory*, ed. J. O. Halliwell (London: The Shakespeare Society, 1844), pp. xxvi–xxvii. See Peter Thomson, 'The True Physiognomy of a Man: Richard Tarlton and His Legend', in *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries in Performance*, ed. Edward J. Esche (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 191–210.
- 16 *Fuller's Worthies*, Vol. 2., p. 312, quoted in *Tarlton's Jests*, p. xxvii.
- 17 *Tarlton's Jests*, pp. 24–5.
- 18 See Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 118–19.
- 19 See *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).
- 20 Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack, *English Drama: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 78–9.
- 21 James C. Bulman, 'Caroline Drama', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*, ed. A. R. Braummuller and Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 353.
- 22 See Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis 1632–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); David Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 201–20.
- 23 See Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1989); Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660–1769* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997). For the history of Shakespeare on stage, see Jonathan Bate and Russell Jackson (eds), *Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- 24 Mick Jardine, 'Jonson as Shakespeare's Other', in *Ben Jonson and Theatre*, p. 104.

- 25 Simon Shepherd, *Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p. xiii.
- 26 Richard Cave observes that there is 'no recording of a Jonson production contained within the archives of the British Film Institute', and the BBC has 'only a truncated version dating back to the early 1950s of Wolfitt's *Volpone* in its archive of televised drama' (*Ben Jonson and Theatre*, p. 1). *Volpone* has occasioned one modern screen spin-off, in the shape of Joseph Manciewicz's *The Honey Pot* (1966), which was derived from Frederick Knott's stage play *Mr Fox of Venice*.
- 27 See Wendy Griswold, *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre, 1576–1980* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
- 28 See Marion O'Connor, *William Poel and the Elizabethan Stage Society* (Cambridge: Chawyck-Healey, 1987); Gabriel Egan, 'Reconstructions of the Globe: A Retrospective', *Shakespeare Survey*, 52 (1999), 1–16; Robert Shaughnessy, *The Shakespeare Effect: A History of Twentieth-Century Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
- 29 See Robert Shaughnessy, 'Twentieth-Century Fox: *Volpone*'s Metamorphosis', *Theatre Research International*, 27, 1 (2002), 37–48.
- 30 R. L. Smallwood and Stanley Wells (eds), *The Shoemaker's Holiday, The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), p. 47.
- 31 Trevor Nunn, 'Flying High', in *Royal Shakespeare Company 1978*, ed. Simon Trussler (RSC/TQ Publications, 1979), p. 5.
- 32 Barry Kyle, 'Role of the Swan', *Plays International*, September 1987.
- 33 For a discussion of a range of twentieth-century revisions of Elizabethan and Jacobean texts, see Martin White, *Renaissance Drama in Action* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 217–32.
- 34 Simon Shepherd offers a range of possibilities of intervention in 'Acting Against Bardom: Some Utopian Thoughts on Workshops', in *Shakespeare in Performance: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 218–34.

# A Note on the Texts

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This anthology is primarily intended for use by general and student readers, interested practitioners and theatregoers, and the texts have been edited with their needs in mind. Accordingly, spelling, punctuation, font styles and capitalisation have been regularised and modernised throughout, act and scene headings translated from Latin to English and speech tags rendered consistent (although this is done in the awareness that variation in speech headings in the original texts may be an significant index of a shift of theatrical status or function). With regard to the identification of speaking parts, I have, where appropriate, opted to follow the lead of the texts by identifying *dramatis personae* in terms of role rather than personal name (thus Wife rather than Margery). In this respect, only the Jonson and Massinger texts supply castlists of the kind found in modern editions; for the remaining plays in the volume, I have incorporated lists of *parts* (rather than 'persons', or more anachronistically, 'characters'), as this better approximates to the early modern performer's relation with the text. I have refrained from interpolating extensive editorial stage directions (such as asides), in the belief that thoughtful and imaginative reading and rehearsal practice are best geared towards finding creative solutions to any ambiguities, lacunae or apparent contradictions in the texts themselves. Interpolations are clearly marked by square brackets ([...]). In the case of Peele and Dekker, I have made one substantial editorial intervention, in that (largely for the purposes of ease of reference) I have divided the texts into scenes, for the most part according to the principle that a scene ends when the stage is cleared of performers. For the most part, the texts of the five plays present few major headaches for the editor, and in each case I have worked

from the recognised control text of the play: the 1595 Quarto of *The Old Wives Tale*, the 1600 Quarto of *The Shoemakers Holiday*, the version of *The Alchemist* included in Jonson's 1616 Folio edition of his works and the 1633 Quarto of *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. Readers looking for more specialist information about textual variants and emendations should consult the Revels Plays editions of Peele, Dekker and Jonson, and the Clarendon Press edition of the works of Massinger. The present edition is, of course, extensively indebted to these and other modern scholarly editions of the plays.