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Reframing the Audience in Shakespeare Studies

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Drama is a difficult medium to analyze because its intended mode—performance—is inherently transient. Playwrights write their plays to be performed as theatrical events. These temporally-bound events, in which drama reaches its full potential, introduce factors that do not exist in textual forms of literature. One factor is that of the theatrical audience, which takes on a more influential role than that of the reader of a text. The theatrical audience exists in the same physical space and time as the players, which enables more immediate reception and response. Simultaneously, the players, as characters, are able to directly address and respond to the audience, creating an intercommunicative relationship between play and audience. Through this intercommunication, the playgoer becomes a collaborator with the players and playwright in the construction of the play itself. The theatrical audience, then, helps to shape the play's meaning, which can vary as plays are performed before different audiences across historical eras with varying theatrical conditions.

Due to their enduring popularity over time, Shakespeare's plays, perhaps more than any other plays, allow scholars to trace how different audiences have reshaped the plays' meanings at different cultural and historical moments. In the centuries since the original productions of these plays, countless audiences have engaged with them, importing their own ideologies as well as their distinct understandings of their role and function as an audience, which are shaped by shifting theatrical conventions. Since the advent of commercial playgoing in Shakespeare's time, notions about audience and norms of audience behavior have changed, distancing contemporary audiences from the original modes of reception of Shakespeare's plays. Theatre practitioners, such as those at the reconstructed Globe in London, have attempted to recreate the original performance contexts of Shakespeare's plays by creating audience experiences that replicate those of early modern London. Yet despite any effort to recreate the early modern playgoing

experience, contemporary productions are inherently different from Shakespeare's original theatrical events due to the unfixed nature of the audience. In *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, Andrew Gurr examines the gap between modern audiences and Shakespeare's original meaning. He argues that contemporary theatre-makers and audiences "always rewrite Shakespeare into our own image, and in the process lose much that originally enriched the plays" (6). This "rewriting" includes conceptualizing the theatrical audience in ways that conform to contemporary norms and conventions of playgoing. For example, contemporary playgoers might hold expectations of etiquette that are quite distinct from the norms of behavior of the early modern playhouse. Literary critics and theatre practitioners alike have sought to bridge this distance between contemporary historical audiences by imagining and recreating the playgoing conditions of Shakespeare's first audiences.

Shakespeare's "original audience," however, never existed as a singular, rigidly-defined construct. In his essay "Who Are We Talking About When We Talk About 'the Audience'?", Stephen Purcell notes that Shakespeare wrote his plays "with the reasonable expectation that they might be performed before relatively diverse popular audiences at open-air 'public' theatres like the Globe, regional audiences on tour, more exclusive audiences at indoor 'private' theatres like the Blackfriars, and elite audiences at the court" (19). The concept of Shakespeare's original audience, then, contains within it a range of different types of audience. Further complicating the conceptualization of Shakespeare's original audience is the fact that there was no early modern consensus among Shakespeare and his contemporaries regarding *what* the audience was or should be. The emergence of commercial theatre during Shakespeare's career introduced a new type of audience—one that was composed of paying playgoers assembled for the purpose of attending a play. Through their plays, early modern playwrights shaped the role and function of

this audience. Situating Shakespeare's plays within the evolution of early modern theatrical practice illuminates how Shakespeare contributed to the construction of audience.

Shakespeare offers a concept of the theatrical audience through his plays that metatheatrically examine the theatrical form. His employment of the "play-within-a-play" device, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*, allows him to construct a fictional audience, signaling to his actual audiences how he envisions the activities and behaviors that comprise play-reception. But Shakespeare does not merely project an ideal audience through these fictional representations of audience; rather, he invites his actual audience members to consider their role within the theatrical event. By heightening the audience's metatheatrical awareness, Shakespeare likewise heightens audience members' awareness of their contributions to the overall theatrical event, emphasizing the role of the audience as co-creator. His characters' direct addresses to the audience, as in the Chorus's prologues in *Henry V*, also foreground the audience's presence. Shakespeare's plays, then, call attention to the theatrical audience, encouraging audience members to realize their influential powers within theatrical performance.

While Shakespeare's plays grapple with the emerging early-modern audience, they anticipate a critical examination of the theatrical audience that has extended into the twenty-first century. The final decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of theatre audience studies, which call for a deeper understanding of the complex role that theatrical audiences play in the overall experience of a performance. In her landmark book *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, Susan Bennett examines the relationship between drama and the audience, emphasizing how drama both depends on and is created by its audience. Her conceptual model of the theatrical event considers theatre "as a cultural construct" formed by "the audience's definitions and expectations of a performance" (Bennett 1-2). Bennett's model

enlarges the theatrical event beyond the stage to include the understandings that the audience imports. Such a pronounced critical focus on the audience is relatively recent within performance studies and broadens the studies of plays beyond the texts.

Audience theory is distinct from reception theory, which focuses on readers' interpretive responses to texts. Reception theory conceptualizes theatrical audience members as "readers" of a performance "text," separating their processes of meaning-making from the performance. Audience theory, conversely, melds audience members' interpretive processes with the play-performance. Stephen Purcell argues that "audience activity can go beyond mere 'response' and become an active part of the performance" ("Who Are We Talking About" 19). In this sense, the audience is not merely an interpretive entity that responds to a performance but, rather, is a collaborator in the overall production of play-meaning; the audience, then, is a central component that cannot be conceptually separated from the performance. Audience theory's emphasis of the audience's central role in performance calls for an examination of how different theatrical practices and conventions have reshaped the audience's role in performance, including the extent of the audience's participation and the audience's sense of their relationship with onstage characters and with other audience members.

The continually increasing popularity of audience theory opens new areas of exploration in Shakespeare studies. Given the markedly different conventions of playgoing in Shakespeare's time, Shakespeare's plays require contemporary theorists to consider how historical changes in the role and function of the theatrical audience have reshaped the plays' meanings. Historical shifts in such factors as the physical positioning of the audience, norms of audience behavior, and cultural notions of playgoing all impact audience experiences of Shakespeare's plays. Contemporary audiences inherently experience Shakespeare's plays differently than

Shakespeare's original, early modern audiences did, which has prompted critics and theatre practitioners to theorize and recreate a more "original" and, ostensibly, more authentic reception of these plays. Through such preoccupation with Shakespeare's "original audience," however, critics and theatre practitioners seek to reify a singular, historical audience that has only ever existed in theory. This thesis aims to reframe studies of Shakespeare's audience by challenging notions of the "original audience" and, instead, considering how Shakespeare's plays interact with continually-changing conceptions of the theatrical audience. While Shakespeare responds, through his plays, to early modern conventions of commercial playgoing and to increasing pressures to control the crowds of London's public playhouses, his plays continue to address some of the same questions raised by contemporary audience theorists regarding the role and function of the audience. In the same way that Shakespeare's plays shaped an evolving early modern audience, these plays continue to invite contemporary exploration of what it means to be an audience.

"Original Practices"

The emergence of "original practices" in theatrical Shakespeare productions has sharpened focus on the audience within Shakespeare studies. Particularly, the reconstructed Globe in London has generated discussion of how such a theatre not only recreates a historical audience experience but also creates new types of audience experience. The Globe, as an experimental project, is rooted both in the research of the conditions of early modern playgoing and, inherently, in contemporary shifting conceptions of the theatrical audience. The Globe, then, bridges the studies of the historical and the contemporary audience; just as it raises questions about playgoing in Shakespeare's time, it inspires—for scholars, practitioners, and audience members alike—deeper examination of the conditions and conventions of contemporary

playgoing. Practitioners at the Globe often emphasize the significance of the audience in their work; for example, former artistic director Mark Rylance describes the Globe as “an audience’s theatre” (Carson and Karim-Cooper 108). Does such a shift in the audience’s power dynamics signal a return to an earlier, more Shakespearean understanding of the role of the audience in the theatrical event, or does it reflect a more recent theatrical movement toward a participatory audience?

In order to assess whether the Globe is approaching “original” in its constructions of audience, it is necessary to consider how the Globe establishes audience experiences that are different from other theatres that produce Shakespeare’s plays. In *Shakespeare’s Globe: A Theatrical Experiment*, Christie Carson offers a perspective of how the Globe model engenders unique experiences for contemporary audiences:

Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre undoubtedly presents a challenge to established ways of thinking because the space itself is so unfamiliar at first. Given that almost half the audience are visiting the building for the first time the performing conventions and rules of social engagement must be established at the beginning of each performance. As a result this theatre provides an international, intercultural collective space that allows for a negotiated audience/actor relationship rather than a space that reaffirms traditional behaviours and hierarchies. (Carson and Karim-Cooper 124)

Carson’s suggestion that there is a “negotiated audience/actor relationship” at the Globe reframes the type of audience experience that “original practices” Shakespeare productions might seek to achieve. According to Carson, the Globe does not merely exchange contemporary theatrical traditions of “behaviours and hierarchies” for early modern ones; rather, it enables audience

members to examine and assert their role in the theatrical event without the interference of contemporary norms and conventions of playgoing.

Rylance substantiates Carson's perspective of Globe audience dynamics through his accounts of his experiences as artistic director and actor at the Globe. Rylance notes that, especially in the earliest Globe productions, "the audience was learning how to be in the Globe just as we actors were learning" (Carson and Karim-Cooper 113). This "learning" process, however, was not so much a process of learning to be more like Shakespeare's original audience but, rather, a process of grappling with a wholly new audience experience. Rylance explains that this distinction became clearer as the Globe evolved. He writes, "Eventually, we had no one coming along pretending to be a member of an Elizabethan audience or throwing things. Quite the opposite, they were still, witty, lively, imaginative, everything you would want from an audience" (Carson and Karim-Cooper 113). Rylance's accounts highlight how "original practices" do not necessarily shape an audience that replicates a specific historical audience, but they invite audiences to honestly explore their positions and powers in the theatrical event. Just as Carson suggests the "negotiations" that occur between audience and actors in the Globe, Rylance illustrates how "original practices" enables audiences to explore new modes of being an audience. Situating this audience self-exploration within broader movements of the theatrical audience, Rylance argues, "Audiences want to have something more happen than they did twenty years ago. I do not think they are happy to sit quietly in the dark and admire us with their minds" (Carson and Karim-Cooper 108). Perhaps counter-intuitively, Rylance and Carson illustrate how invoking the conditions of early modern playgoing at the Globe has answered contemporary audiences' calls for new types of theatrical experience.

In Carson's and Rylance's accounts of Globe practices, it is evident that "original practices" productions of Shakespeare have as much to do with the current moment as they do with the historical conditions that they recreate. Rylance argues that if the Globe "was just an experiment in recreating the past, then it would fail" and that, instead, the project must "have some meaning" for contemporary audiences (Carson and Karim-Cooper 112). It is in this regard that many critics have struggled to grasp the value of the Globe. If "original practices" productions do not propel audiences closer to the historical conditions of Shakespeare's original play-performances but, instead, invite new conceptions of the play-audience relationship, then what do these productions contribute to contemporary understandings of Shakespeare's plays? In *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, W. B. Worthen recognizes the value that these productions have beyond merely recreating the past. He challenges critics who aim for an "original" or "more authentic" Shakespeare, arguing that, in imagining such fixedness in Shakespeare's plays, critics "reify Shakespearean drama—and the past, the tradition it represents—as sacred text, as silent hieroglyphics we can only scan, interpret, struggle to decode. We impoverish, in other words, the work of our own performances, and the work of the plays in our making of the world" (Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority* 191). Worthen's view illuminates how critics devalue the new meanings that contemporary audiences produce in their reception of Shakespeare's plays. Critics' futile search for a fixed, objective, original meaning in Shakespeare's plays detracts from the ongoing exploration of the theatrical audience that Shakespeare encourages within his plays.

Defining "Audience"

The ambiguity of the early modern audience stems from the fact that, during Shakespeare's time, there were disagreements among playwrights, impresarios, and others

outside the theater about what the audience could or should be. Early modern playwrights and others who wrote about the theatre used varying terminology to describe an assembly of playgoers. A dichotomy existed between the use of the terms “audience,” or “auditors,” and “spectators.” These differences are not merely semantic; they represent a fundamental disagreement regarding the role and function of playgoers. As Gurr emphasizes in *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London*, the Latin roots of these different terms all imply an emphasis on different senses—“audience” and “auditor” coming from the Latin “audire” meaning “to listen” and “spectator” coming from “specere” meaning “to see” (102). These different terms prioritize different senses, representing different functions of the audience in play-performances. Arguing that playwrights had an interest in this terminology, Gurr writes, “Understandably the writers valued their poetry more than the ‘shows’ of the common stage, and consequently rated hearing far above seeing as the vital sense for the playgoer” (102). Playwrights, then, had an artistic interest in positioning playgoers as auditors rather than as spectators. The playwrights’ ideal audience, however, did not necessarily align with actual early modern audiences. Some playgoers might have considered themselves auditors while others considered themselves spectators. These varying views created a public discourse surrounding the function of audience. Plays were the primary discursive mode by which playwrights could convey their concept of audience to playgoers.

Shakespeare showcases the diverging concepts of the early modern audience within his plays. For example, Hamlet insults the intelligence of “the groundlings,” who he suggests are “capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows” (*Hamlet* 3.2.10-12)¹. In criticizing these “dumb shows,” Hamlet also suggests that mere spectators are less intelligent than those

¹ All references to Shakespeare’s text are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

playgoers who come to hear a play. Through Hamlet's harsh criticism, Shakespeare positions the audience as auditors. He then complicates the role of the audience by including a dumb show in *Hamlet's* inset play, positioning the audience as spectators. Shakespeare juxtaposes the players' dumb show with Hamlet's criticism of spectatorship, foregrounding the opposing concepts of audience. Moreover, Gurr notes that *Hamlet* marks Shakespeare's "first use of the word 'spectator'" and that, from then onwards, Shakespeare "abandoned the idea of an auditory and called his customers spectators" (*Playgoing* 110-111). Hamlet, however, speaks negatively of theatrical spectators, referring to them as "barren spectators" (*Hamlet* 3.2.41), again implying the lower intelligence of playgoers who seek spectacle. By underscoring Hamlet's negative perception of spectators, Shakespeare heightens his playgoers' awareness of their own position as spectators during the subsequent dumb show, requiring audience members to grapple with their own roles. *Hamlet*, then, does not contain a single, unified view of the audience but represents the unfixed conceptualizations of audience that were changing and evolving during Shakespeare's career.

Apart from the distinction between auditors and spectators, early modern playwrights had to contend with another distinction in concepts of audience—that between audience as collective or audience as a group of individuals. Gurr notes that the collective audience "is unique in the way it shares the excitement of the experience. Being in a crowd enhances the feeling and makes it a collective, not an individual, pleasure" (*Shakespearean Stage* 259). In Shakespeare's time, playgoers largely perceived themselves as collective groups. Audiences exhibited their collective identity through their behaviors at performances, including through their vocal responses that were made public, as opposed to inherently private mental responses. The players, especially clown figures, encouraged the participatory nature of the audience through their use of backchat,

or improvised responses to comments from the audience. By extemporizing backchat, players turned performance into a verbal contest between audience member and player, whereby homogenized crowds could express their collective support for the player as the hopeful “winner.”² Through such intercommunication, crowds became powerful collective units that took on a participatory role in the play-event. Hamlet warns against such behavior, instructing the players’ clowns to “speak no more than is set down for them” (*Hamlet* 3.2.38-40). By limiting the clowns’ extemporizing, Hamlet not only controls the players but also restricts the inset audience’s ability to participate and, thereby, to become a collective. Hamlet asserts the power of the written or “set down” play-text to control an audience.

Hamlet’s concern for limiting audience participation parallels early modern concerns that were shared by English playwrights and authorities alike. The participatory audience proved to be a dangerous presence in the early modern theatre. London authorities looked down on the crowds of playgoers who exhibited undesirable behaviors. Concerns over assemblies of playgoers likely stemmed from broader early modern fears of crowds. Apart from the theatre, the early modern crowd itself existed as a new construct with untested potentiality. Paul Menzer observes, “The experience of being in a crowd may have been a novelty to many Londoners, for it was immigration that fueled London’s growth” (21). As the London population grew during the latter half of the sixteenth century, crowds became a new feature of London society. The theatrical audience was just one of the many forms that these public assemblies took. Crowds also formed for sermons and other public events. According to Menzer, crowds of large volumes were unique to London, as “London was growing far faster than any other urban center and

²See Gurr, *Playgoing* 150-158, for a more extensive documentation of the conventions of backchat in the early modern playhouse.

much faster than the country at large” (21). It is significant that these crowds were contained to London because London was the site of the playhouses. These playhouses drew crowds of people who wanted to see plays, but they also offered the opportunity to be a part of the London crowds. In other words, the audience itself might have drawn people to the play-event. Apart from the performance onstage, playgoing was also a social activity and an opportunity to be part of a crowd.

London authorities’ concerns over playhouse crowds went beyond audiences’ mere vocal responses and rowdiness. Riots were also a genuine concern in early modern London. While few violent riots actually occurred in the playhouses, the authorities viewed the playhouses as particularly dangerous sites for crowds to assemble. In *Unruly Audiences and the Theater of Control in Early Modern London*, Eric Dunnun explains that “early modern authorities feared playhouse riots because of a widespread belief in the efficacy of language—the belief that individuals and groups of individuals could be controlled through language” (12). By highlighting the early modern belief in the “efficacy of language,” Dunnun outlines how early modern authorities perceived a causal relationship between plays and audience behavior. According to their view, audiences did not just riot *at* the play but also *because* of the play. Such a view is rooted in early modern ideology. Dunnun writes, “Early modern rhetoric and humanism are both action-oriented and, consequently, they both causally link the audience of an utterance with the speaker of the utterance” (17). In a theatrical context, this “action-oriented” perspective maintained that plays caused audiences to act in certain ways. From the authorities’ fearful view of playhouse crowds emerged another early modern concept of audience: the reactive audience. In the predominant humanist perspective, audiences were receivers of spoken

utterances. According to this rhetorical definition, audiences were crowds of people affected by the play.

Shakespeare represents reactive audiences in his plays, perhaps most notably in *Hamlet*'s inset performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*. Hamlet's purpose in staging the play is to observe Claudius's reactions in order to determine his guilt. Prior to the performance, Hamlet, in soliloquy, says, "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (*Hamlet* 2.2.604-605). Hamlet's concept of observing an audience member's "conscience" speaks to the power drama has on the audience. According to Hamlet's perspective, drama emotionally affects its audience. Earlier, he indicates that this emotional effect is typical of dramatic performance when he says,

I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been strook so to the soul, that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions (2.2.588-592)

Hamlet's perspective suggests an emotional control that plays have over audiences. While Hamlet's conception of the play-audience relationship might not represent that of Shakespeare, it must have, at least, been reasonable to Elizabethan playgoers in order for them to accept it as a significant plot-point. After all, the inset play does cause Claudius to rise with fear, allowing Hamlet and Horatio to deduce his guilt. If, in his depiction of the audience in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare appeals to any contemporary understanding of audience, it is that of the reactive audience—the very type of audience that the crowd-fearing Privy Council believed would lead to riots.

Such fear of the reactive audience significantly impacted early modern theatres. Playhouse riots resulted in theatre closures, which were economically detrimental to the playing companies. For example, Dunnun points to a 1597 performance of Ben Jonson and Thomas Nashe's *The Isle of Dogs* that incited a riot at the Swan theatre, after which "the playwrights were jailed and, astoundingly, the Privy Council ordered all theaters to be closed and torn down" (12). Through such theatre closures, the Privy Council punished theatre practitioners for the actions of playgoers, and even though the playhouses were not torn down, this act displayed the Privy Council's power over the theatres. The authorities' responses to playhouse riots reveals a distorted concept of audience—one that conflates playgoers with theatre practitioners. The Privy Council failed to recognize playgoers' riotous behaviors as independent actions but, instead, viewed them as a constituent part of the play-event. They viewed the theatre practitioners as inseparable from the playgoers' riots. Given the Privy Council's anxiety over playhouse crowds and their demonstrated power to close playhouses, the riotous behaviors of the audience proved a threat to the success and existence of early modern theatre.

The Privy Council effectively pressured playwrights to construct—or attempt to construct—what Dunnun calls "non-reactive" audiences, or audiences that "did not respond to performance with action—political or otherwise" (5). The construction of non-reactive audiences would both distance playwrights from the unruly playgoing crowds and diminish undesired audience action. Dunnun argues that playwrights attempted to create non-reactive audiences by shifting "away from a rhetorical understanding of performance and toward a performative understanding of stage utterances" (73). This shift was logical for playwrights from a financial standpoint, as their livelihoods depended on the theatres being open. The non-reactive audience became early modern playwrights' ideal audience. Just as the playwrights wanted to position

playgoers as auditors, they also wanted them to not respond to plays. Yet, as shown in the aforementioned inset play in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare represents a reactive audience within his plays, setting his own construction of audience apart from what Dunnun suggests was the ideal audience for early modern playwrights.

Despite the Privy Council's looming threat of theatre closures and imprisonment, Shakespeare makes no attempt to distance himself or other theatre practitioners from the audience. Conversely, Shakespeare magnifies the play-audience relationship and positions the audience as collaborators in the overall construction of the play. He provides another representation of audience in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* during the mechanicals' performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. As Claudius represents an emotionally-affected audience in *Hamlet*, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Theseus represents a reactive—and active—audience. During the mechanicals' performance, Theseus says, "The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them" (*MND* 5.1.211-212). Theseus' suggestion that the audience's imagination can "amend" the players' incompetence grants the audience an active role in the complex, social experience that is theatrical performance. Moreover, by referring to players as "but shadows," Theseus underscores an inherent limitation of theatrical performers; even the best actors are only imitations of reality. Theseus recognizes the boundaries of the players' abilities to construct a play-reality, pointing to the audience as necessary co-creators of play-meaning. He urges Hippolyta to "imagine no worse of" the mechanicals "than they of themselves" (5.1.215-216), recognizing that the audience's imagination must work in conjunction with that of the players. Adam Rzepka suggests that Theseus' concept of theatrical performance positions "imagination at the center of the collaboration between playwright, performer, and audience" (310). Rzepka reads Theseus' understanding of theatre as a

collaborative effort that hinges on imagination. Theseus' recognition of a collaboration between theatre practitioners and the audience upholds the Privy Council's rhetorical understanding of the play-audience relationship.

Shakespeare's representation of audience within the play affects the construction of his audience in the playhouse, as he underscores a parallel between the inset audience and the actual audience. In the final line of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck tasks the audience with the same imaginative, collaborative role that Theseus outlines during the inset play. Puck says,

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumb'ed here

While these visions did appear. (*MND* 5.1.423-426)

Puck suggests that, by imagining that they have "but slumb'ed," the audience can "mend" anything in the play that was offensive, just as the inset audience has the power to amend the mechanicals' incompetence. Puck, then, not only demands a reactive audience but also shapes a collaborative audience that co-constructs meaning in the play by "mending" it with their imagination. By positioning the audience as a collaborator, Shakespeare invites audiences to exercise the power that they have over the play, constructing a complicit relationship between playwright and audience that forms the play-event.

Metatheatre and The Play-Audience Relationship

With the prevalent focus on the theatrical form within Shakespeare's plays, Shakespeare's play-events became forms of discourse in which playwright and playgoers could examine theatre itself. Shakespeare invites his audiences to consider their own role in the play-event by examining and challenging a multiplicity of conceptualizations of audience within his

plays. He reinforces playgoers' metatheatrical awareness of their existence as a theatrical audience. In the metatheatrical prologue to *Henry V*, the Chorus not only calls attention to the "unworthy scaffold" (Shakespeare, *Henry V* 1.Prologue.10), or stage, but also to the audience's "imaginary forces" on which the players must "work" (1.Prologue.18). He acknowledges both the physical reality of the playhouse and the presence of the audience's "forces," emphasizing the audience's awareness of their presence within the playhouse and of their influence over the play. Continuing to address the audience, the Chorus urges, "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts" (Prologue.23). Much like Theseus' understanding of the audience's power to "amend" a play, *Henry V*'s Chorus grants the audience the power to "piece out" the play's limitations. Both Theseus and the Chorus conceptualize the audience as active playgoers who are aware of their function in the play-event.

The distinctness of early modern theatrical practices from contemporary theatrical conventions blurs the level of self-awareness that Shakespeare expects from playgoers. Stephen Purcell argues that "early modern drama is always 'metatheatrical' to some extent" because "these plays are designed never entirely to lose sight of the material realities of their performance, or of the physical co-presence of their audiences" (19). While Purcell's assertion of the inherent metatheatricality of early modern plays is supported by the persistence of metatheatre across Shakespeare's canon, it is not clear to what extent, or by whom, these plays were "designed" to be metatheatrical. Rather, metatheatricality was an inherent reality of early modern theatre. Gurr argues that early modern theatrical practices led to the audience's pronounced awareness of each other. He notes that at neither the public amphitheaters nor the private halls "was there any thought of using darkness to conceal the playgoers from the players and from themselves" (*Playgoing* 54). This shared lighting, combined with the physical

conditions of the playhouse that placed audiences completely around the stage, made the audience consistently visible to other audience members. The audience was, therefore, a more prominent component of the overall theatrical experience, resulting in an incidental metatheatricality. Early modern playgoers' self-awareness stemmed from the constructs of the playhouse reality and not necessarily from any deliberate devices of the playwright.

Gurr, however, also acknowledges that metatheatricality was, in part, a designed feature of early modern plays, though not willfully designed by the playwrights. He examines the motivation behind playwrights' use of anti-illusionism. Anti-illusionism is connected to metatheatricality in that both devices increase the audience's awareness of reality, but while metatheatricality intends to draw attention to the theatrical form, anti-illusionism intends to diminish the play's illusory power. Gurr suggests that anti-illusionism was common in early modern plays due to Puritan teachings "which claimed any deliberate illusion to be Satan's work" (125). According to Gurr, Shakespeare's anti-illusionism might be more of a reaction to Puritan pressures—or even a form of censorship—than it is an artistic choice. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare parodies early modern anti-illusionism. While rehearsing for the *Pyramus and Thisbe* performance, Bottom says, "I have a device to make all well. Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not kill'd indeed; and for the more better assurance, tell them that I Pyramus am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear" (*MND* 3.1.16-22). Bottom's proposed prologue is so explicitly anti-illusionistic that it yields comic effect. His intention is to put the audience "out of fear," but such fear was not likely to exist in the first place. Underlying Bottom's intention to inform the audience that "Pyramus is not kill'd" and that he is "not Pyramus, but Bottom" is a Puritan notion of the sinfulness of deception.

While Shakespeare depicts Bottom's anti-illusionistic prologue as fundamentally flawed, Bottom's "device to make all well" is, at first glance, quite similar to Shakespeare's own anti-illusionistic tendencies. For example, in the aforementioned prologue to *Henry V*, the Chorus asks, "Can this cockpit hold / The vasty fields of France?" (*Henry V* Prologue.11-12). Through the Chorus' rhetorical question, Shakespeare juxtaposes the restrictive size of the playhouse or "cockpit" with the vastness of the fields of Agincourt. Like Bottom, the Chorus diminishes the illusory quality of the play by emphasizing a disparity between the play-fiction and the reality of the play-event. Both Bottom's and Shakespeare's prologues are anti-illusionistic. What Shakespeare, however, understands—and that Bottom does not understand—is that, regardless of anti-illusionistic devices, plays will never fully deceive audiences. Bottom's notion that the audience will mistake his identity for that of a fictional character underestimates the audience's ability to differentiate between fiction and reality. Conversely, in his prologue to *Henry V*, Shakespeare empowers his audience by recognizing their influence over the construction of the play-fiction. The Chorus says, "'Tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings" (Prologue.28). Quite distinct from Bottom's anti-illusionistic intentions, the Chorus here metatheatrically highlights the play's limited illusionistic ability, not to distinguish fiction from reality, but, rather, to indicate the audience's role as co-creator. In positioning the audience as co-creator, the Chorus utilizes the audience's self-awareness as a means of "amending" the play's inability to replicate reality. Through the Chorus' prologue, Shakespeare recognizes—and makes use of—the metatheatrical awareness that was inherent in early modern theatrical performance.

Given the inherent self-awareness of early modern playgoers, metatheatricity might seem to be an inadvertent component of early modern drama. Shakespeare, however, sharpens the metatheatricity of his plays through such overt metatheatrical devices as inset plays. The

result of this deliberate metatheatre was not a heightened self-awareness, as early modern audiences were self-aware at the outset of performances. Dunnun suggests an alternative purpose that playwrights sought through their inclusion of metatheatre, and that was “to show playgoers how to behave within the playhouse and to affect their playhouse behavior” (112). Indeed, Shakespeare presents Theseus as a model audience member during *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s aforementioned inset play. Additionally, with the looming threat and fear of playhouse riots, early modern playwrights had motivation to manipulate audience behavior. Dunnun’s assertion, however, that playwrights sought to “affect” the audience’s “playhouse behavior” implies a sense of control that playwrights assumed over their audiences. Shakespeare does not suggest control over his audience. Conversely, he shifts agency to the audience. In the prologue to *Henry V*, when the Chorus requests the audience’s “humble patience pray / Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play” (*Henry V* Prologue.33-34), he does not so much instruct the audience how to behave as he does request the audience’s merciful reception. Shakespeare’s metatheatre is not, as Dunnun suggests, an attempt to control the audience. Shakespeare employs metatheatre to reinforce the audience’s autonomy and ultimate power over the play.

Shakespeare’s inset plays invite audiences to consider their own role in the construction of the play. For example, the mechanicals’ performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* allows audiences to witness a play-audience relationship—that between the mechanicals-turned-players and the audience at Theseus’ court. John Wall observes that this inset performance gives Shakespeare’s audience “not only a chance to be both audience and observers of an audience, but also to have a unique role in this transaction” (37). The “unique role” that Wall ascribes to Shakespeare’s theatrical audience stems from the mechanicals’ preceding rehearsal scenes. Wall notes that “of the audiences from *Pyramus and Thisbe*,”

meaning between the inset play's fictive audience and Shakespeare's actual audience, only the actual audience constitutes "the audience that knows the concerns of the Athenian tradespeople about the credibility of their performance as Pyramus and Thisbe, and who will play each part the best, and whether the female members of the audience will be afraid of the lion" (37).

According to Wall, Shakespeare, by including the rehearsal scenes, crafts a theatrical audience that shares in the dramaturgical concerns of the players. For example, in the first rehearsal scene, Shakespeare reveals Bottom's concern that "the ladies cannot abide" a depiction of Pyramus' suicide (*MND* 3.1.10-12). Bottom goes on to resolve his concern with his aforementioned suggestion of an anti-illusionistic prologue. Therein, Shakespeare outlines the mechanicals' process of play-production. He later enables his audience to witness the efficacy—or lack thereof—of this process during the mechanicals' performance. By inviting his audience to participate in the dramaturgical thought process, Shakespeare underscores the collaborative relationship between audience and theatre practitioner.

Within his inset plays, Shakespeare depicts different characters' concepts of audience. Bottom perceives an audience that cannot differentiate between fiction and reality, Theseus recognizes an audience with a significant imaginative power, and Hamlet anticipates a reactive audience that will allow him to "catch the conscience of the King" (*Hamlet* 2.2. 605). Yet these depictions of audience concepts do not necessarily reflect or represent those of Shakespeare. Even so, each character's metatheatricality establishes a context for the character's relationship with the audience. Purcell argues that Shakespeare's characters "know they are in a play; they could not talk to us in asides and soliloquies if they did not" ("Are Shakespeare's Plays Always Metatheatrical?" 21). If Hamlet, for example, is aware of his existence within a play, then he must extend his conception of drama to his own existence. During the performance of *The*

Murder of Gonzago, Hamlet says to Ophelia, “The players cannot keep counsel, they’ll tell all” (*Hamlet* 3.2.141-142). As a metatheatrical acknowledgment of his own function as a player, Hamlet implies that he will “tell all” to the audience. By suggesting that Hamlet will not “keep counsel,” Shakespeare establishes reliability in the relationship between Hamlet and the audience. Additionally, while directing the First Player, Hamlet states that the “purpose of playing” is “to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature” (3.2.20-22). By comparing “playing” to a “mirror,” Hamlet upholds the perspective that drama reflects reality. Again, while Hamlet’s view does not necessarily align with Shakespeare’s, it does inform the character’s relationship with the audience. Shakespeare implies Hamlet’s awareness of the reflective relationship between fiction and reality in the play-performance.

Shakespeare further constructs the relationship between Hamlet and the audience through his use of direct address, which refers to any instance in which a character speaks directly to the audience. Hamlet’s first line in the play is a direct address in the form of an aside in which he says, “A little more than kin, and less than kind” (1.2.65). Hamlet’s initial aside distinguishes his internal thoughts from his external dialogue with other characters, as he expresses enmity toward his uncle through the aside but does not vocalize this feeling in dialogue. Soon after this aside, Hamlet, in soliloquy, says, “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue” (1.2.159). Shakespeare’s juxtaposition of “heart” and “tongue” encapsulates the distinction between the internal and external. What Hamlet is unable to speak he must internalize, but his ability to speak to the audience gives him the ability to externalize what would otherwise be completely internal. Shakespeare returns to a symbolic juxtaposition of the internal and external in Hamlet’s soliloquy before speaking to Gertrude, in which he says, “My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites” (3.2.397). Hamlet clarifies to the audience that, in the scene to follow, what he says

with his “tongue” will not align with what he feels in his “soul.” Hamlet now “tells all” and is truthful to the audience. His mother will not be aware of his internal thoughts, but the audience will be.

Shakespeare’s metatheatre does not function as an anti-illusionistic removal of the audience from the play-fiction but, rather, as a constructive device that informs the play-audience relationship. Purcell’s definition of metatheatre elucidates the type of metatheatre that Shakespeare produces. Purcell understands metatheatre as a complex interplay between two planes that he calls “M₁” and “M₂.” “M₁” refers to the “Now and Here” or the reality of the play-event, while “M₂” refers to the “Then and There” or the play-fiction (“Metatheatrical” 23). He argues that metatheatre does not consist of “the moments at which the audience *notice* M₁—they almost certainly never stopped noticing it in the first place—but those moments in which M₁ and M₂ become entangled, a line or theatrical moment resonating on both planes at once” (26). When, for example, Hamlet refers to the ghost as the “fellow in the cellarage” (*Hamlet* 1.5.151), he acknowledges the physical presence of the “cellarage” space under the stage. Hamlet uses the word “cellarage” both to symbolize the ominous underground and to acknowledge the physical reality of the playhouse. By using a theatrical metaphor to symbolize a fictional element, Shakespeare does not only construct fiction but also foregrounds the reality of the playhouse. Similarly, in the mechanicals’ first rehearsal scene in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Peter Quince says, “This green plot shall be our stage” (Shakespeare, *MND* 3.1.3-4). In response to Quince’s line, Shakespeare’s audience must imagine a “green plot” where—in the playhouse—there is only a bare stage. Simultaneously, Quince and the other mechanicals imagine that the fictive “green plot” is a stage, thereby imagining a fictional element of the play as the very object that represents it in the reality of the playhouse. Shakespeare’s metatheatrical attention to

playhouse reality allows the characters to simultaneously exist within play-fiction and co-exist with the audience within the physical playhouse space.

Play, Reality, and Liminal Space in the Playhouse

Shakespeare's characters bridge the gap between play and reality, existing in a liminal space between the two. Early modern deviations from medieval theatrical conventions enabled Shakespeare to manipulate the relationship between play and reality. Early modern theatre abandoned the medieval constructs of *platea* and *locus*. Robert Weimann defines the *platea* as "a 'place' or platform-like acting area" (74) and the *locus* as "the scaffold" (74) or the raised area that was a fixed feature of the medieval stage. Weimann contrasts the *platea* and *locus*, noting how the *platea* was "an entirely nonrepresentational and unlocalized setting" (79) while the *locus* could assume an "illusionary character" (79). The physical distinction between *platea* and *locus* signified to medieval audiences two separate planes of existence: the play-fiction and the shared reality of the play-event. Characters' movement between those planes aligned with their physical movements between scaffold and playing area. The early modern playhouses' platform-stages removed the physically-differentiated *platea* and *locus*, which enabled a new play-audience relationship in Shakespeare's plays. Instead of differentiating between the shared space and the fictional separation of players and audience members, Shakespeare transcends the medieval dichotomy between *platea* and *locus*, allowing both sites to coexist on the early modern platform-stage. His construction of a collaborative audience causes reality and fiction to converge on a single platform.

Shakespeare emphasizes the merging of fiction and reality through his characters' relationships with the audience. For example, in his aforementioned epilogue, Puck says, "Give me your hands, if we be friends" (*MND* 5.1.437). Here, Puck does not only acknowledge the

physical presence of the audience, but he also bridges the gap between play-fiction and playhouse reality. Puck suggests that he, as fictional character, can befriend the playgoers who are bound to reality. When he invites playgoers to give him their hands, he suggests both a physical joining of hands and a figurative invitation of applause. Puck allows the audience—through their applause—to initiate the friendship-connection between playgoer and stage figure, underscoring the influence of audience behavior. Jeremy Lopez argues that, in *Hamlet*, Claudius makes a similar appeal to the audience. Lopez suggests that Claudius asks “that the spectators accept him as a king” (71). He examines Claudius’ soliloquy in which he addresses England, urging the English authorities to execute Hamlet. In this soliloquy, Claudius says, “Do it, England, / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me” (*Hamlet* 4.4.65-67). Lopez interprets Claudius’ soliloquy not only as the character’s imagined message to English subjects but also as a “plea” to “the actual theatregoers of London” (71). By addressing the physical place of the playhouse, Claudius enacts the convergence of fiction and reality. Later, in his final line, Claudius says, “O, yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt” (5.2.324). Just as Puck befriends the audience, Claudius metatheatrically looks to the audience as friends who can defend him after death. These characters, like Shakespeare, exhibit reliance on the audience and, therefore, acknowledge their existence within playhouse reality.

The place of the early modern playhouse intensified playgoers’ awareness of their ability to construct play-meaning. Jean Howard views playgoers’ entrance into the playhouse as a conversion due to their payment of admission. Howard argues that these playgoers were “transformed by a commercial transaction from guests to customers” (74). The payment of admission altered the social relationship between playing companies and playgoers in that it created a direct financial connection between the two. Howard also suggests that this transaction

gave audiences a sense of social mobility at odds with other early modern institutions and power structures. She writes, “While the public theaters were hierarchically designed to reflect older status categories (common men in the pit; gentlemen in the galleries; lords on the very top), in actuality one’s place at the public theater was determined less by one’s rank than by one’s ability or willingness to pay for choice or less choice places” (75). In other words, money, and not necessarily social status, is the key determinant in the audience’s placement within what Howard calls the “politics of the playhouse” (73). Early modern playgoing, then, encompassed more than just witnessing a play. It involved a monetary transaction that, for at least the duration of the play-performance, granted playgoers the ability to move among a social stratification within the playhouse that could subvert the social order in early modern England.

Similar to the fiction that playwrights construct on the stage, early modern audiences had a newfound ability to construct their own social order within the politics of the playhouse. Aware of these playhouse politics, early modern anti-theatricalists viewed the playhouses as threats to the social order. John Northbrooke expresses such a fear of the playhouse in *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Playes, or Enterluds are reprov'd*, a 1577 anti-theatricalist tract. He writes, “I am persuaded that Satan hath not a more speedie way and fitter schoole to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthie lustes of wicked whoredome, than those places and playes, and theaters are” (qtd. in Howard 25). Northbrooke emphasizes the place of the playhouse, encapsulating the early modern notion that the place of the playhouse was diametrically opposed to that of the Church—a notion that inspired the Privy Council to ban performances from taking place at the same time as religious observance. As audiences share the same place of the playhouse—Satan’s “schoole,” as Northbrooke describes it—with the players, they take on a complicit role in the overall play-

event. Howard sees an additional significance in the place of the playhouse, as she argues that “place for Northbrooke determines identity. People at the theater are not *where* they should be (i.e. in their parishes, at work or at worship); consequently, they are not *who* they should be” (27). Howard’s interpretation of the audience’s identity-transformation mirrors the type of on-stage counterfeiting that the anti-theatricalists criticized. Moreover, Howard argues that plays transform playgoers into counterfeiters, as they “put certain privileged symbols such as representations of monarchy into broad cultural circulation. This stripped those symbols of their sacred aura, making it more possible for spectators to have a critical, rather than a merely reverential, attitude toward them” (31). Shakespeare demands such a critical attitude from his audience when, for example, he depicts Claudius as a morally ambiguous character. Early modern playgoers had the ability to take on a new or different role in representational discourse, and Shakespeare relies on his audience’s awareness of this ability in his construction of meaning.

Shakespeare’s construction of meaning in the intersection between the fiction and the reality of the play-performance problematizes contemporary reception in which audiences do not co-exist in the historical reality of the plays’ initial performances. Does this historical separation also distance contemporary audiences from the plays’ original meanings? In *The Elizabethan Hamlet*, Arthur McGee argues that the distinctively Protestant ideology of Shakespeare’s original audiences shaped the original meaning of *Hamlet*. McGee emphasizes that “no dramatist can afford—literally—to offend his audience” and that, therefore, “Shakespeare wrote for a mainly Protestant audience” (42). Such a view homogenizes the Elizabethan audience, but, given the extent of Protestant indoctrination under Elizabeth I, this view of a uniformly Protestant audience might be reasonably accurate. According to McGee, a more devoutly Protestant audience accesses meanings in *Hamlet* that modern audiences are not privy to. For example, he argues that

the Ghost follows “the tradition of the evil revenge ghost which still held the stage at that time” (18). A modern audience might sense moral ambiguity in the Ghost, as Hamlet’s determination of Claudius’s guilt simultaneously determines the moral nature of the Ghost. As Hamlet explains his plan for the inset play to Horatio, he says that if Claudius’s “occulted guilt / Do not itself unkennel in one speech, / It is a damned ghost that we have seen” (3.2.80-82). Despite Hamlet’s uncertainty, the Elizabethan audience, according to McGee, already knows that the Ghost is “damned” whether Claudius is guilty or not.

McGee offers reasonable assertions regarding how a Protestant, Elizabethan audience would likely have interpreted *Hamlet*, but what is unclear is the extent to which such lines of reasoning illuminate a more “authentic” interpretation of the play. McGee’s reading of *Hamlet* belongs to a specific school of Shakespeare criticism that Bettina Boecker dubs “Neo-Elizabethanism.” Boecker explains, “The stated aim of Neo-Elizabethanism is a return to the ‘origin’ of the text, to the historical circumstances under which the latter was produced” (127). Neo-Elizabethanists like McGee, then, aim not to determine what Shakespeare’s plays “really” mean but to unearth what these plays *meant* to their original audiences. In other words, Neo-Elizabethanists exchange interpretation of subjective meaning for discovery of an objective, historical interpretation. Though Elizabethan “meaning” might be thought of as a more objective meaning within Shakespeare’s texts, Boecker highlights a fallacious notion at the core of Neo-Elizabethanism: “What the Elizabethan audience made of a play is what Shakespeare intended to be made of it” (125). According to Boecker, Neo-Elizabethanists conflate what the audience “made of” a play with what Shakespeare “intended.” They use Shakespeare’s original audience as a source of assumedly objective, authentic, superior meaning.

While historical context surely informed Shakespeare's playwriting, contemporary critics undermine Shakespeare's construction of subjective meanings when they attempt to restore an Elizabethan reception. Shakespeare relied on his original audience's ability to construct meaning so that he could contend with censors who strictly forbade anti-Protestant plays. Returning to McGee's example of the Ghost, who prompts the revenge that is antithetical to Protestant teaching, it is reasonable to conclude that "such a ghost was 'allowed' because it was clearly evil to a theatre audience" (McGee 41). It can only be the audience who concludes that the Ghost is evil because Shakespeare does not offer such a judgment within his play-text. Hamlet does not recognize any inherent evil quality of the revenge ghost. He says,

Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn'd,
 Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell,
 Be thy intents wicked, or charitable,
 Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
 That I will speak to thee. (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.4.40-44)

The Ghost comes in a "questionable shape" to Hamlet, but, according to McGee, its morality would not be so questionable to Elizabethan audiences. Yet, through the parallel structures of "heaven" or "hell" and "wicked" or "charitable," Shakespeare underscores the diverging possible subjective interpretations of the Ghost. Shakespeare allows the audience to apply their own ideologies in determining the Ghost's—and, ultimately, Hamlet's—morality. Though a Neo-Elizabethan reading of *Hamlet* might emphasize how Shakespeare would have anticipated an interpretation of the Ghost that was informed by Protestant ideology, Shakespeare presents the Ghost as a morally ambiguous character. Contemporary audiences, then, need not access Shakespeare's "original" meaning by imagining the play's original reception but, rather, can

participate in the subjective modes of reception that Shakespeare shapes by applying their own ideologies in their interpretations of Shakespeare's meaning.

Shakespeare's early modern audiences did not interpret his plays in ways that were intrinsically more authentic than contemporary audiences. Shakespeare's plays respond to early modern anxieties over a newly emerging theatrical audience. While these anxieties are unique to a specific historical moment, Shakespeare raises more universal questions regarding the theatrical audience and its role in the play-performance. His positioning of audience members as participants and collaborators emphasizes the active role that the audience plays in the creation of fiction and meaning. At a time of heightened anxiety over the power of the crowd, such empowerment of the audience likely held distinct meaning for early modern playgoers who were exploring new forms of engagement during the advent of commercial theatre. The impact of Shakespeare's audience empowerment, however, is not lost on contemporary audiences who, in the words of Mark Rylance, continue to "want more" from theatrical experiences. Limiting examination of the audience in Shakespeare studies to merely the "original audience" obscures the transhistorical examination of audience that Shakespeare's plays continue to invite. As metatheatricality is a permanent feature of Shakespeare's plays, these plays continue to heighten audiences' awareness of themselves and the conditions of the play-performance and, therefore, continue to serve as a site for examining the roles, functions, and powers of the theatrical audience.

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