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Playing No Part But Pyramus: Bottom, Celebrity and the Early Modern Clown

Louise Geddes

HAMLET'S famous instructions to the players who arrive at Elsinore includes the directive that the "clowns speak no more than is set down for them."[1] This offhand remark is not only one of the scant pieces of evidence we have for Shakespeare's critique of clowning practices, but representative of the more general dearth of evidence on this popular form of entertainment. Much of the information that we have on sixteenth-century clowning comes through playbills, anecdote, and most importantly, the plays themselves. What is known is that Will Kemp, the chief clown of The Chamberlain's Men and a significant presence in Shakespeare's early works, abruptly left the company in late 1599, bringing to an unceremonious end a long tradition of rustic clowning that began with Richard Tarlton two decades earlier. Kemp was replaced by Robert Armin, who established himself as a fool, not only in his own 1600 text, *Foole Upon Foole,* but also in the subtle shift of the clown's personae in Shakespeare's seventeenth-century plays from country simpletons such as Dogberry and Launcelot Gobbo to the more acerbic and urbane Lavatch, or Lear's unnamed Fool.

A Midsummer Night's Dream occupies an ambiguous place in its relationship to clowning and scripted drama. The juxtaposition between rule and misrule that Wiles sees as the key organizing principle of Shakespeare's pre-*Hamlet* theatre[2] simply does not exist in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Instead, the play renegotiates the role of the clown through dramaturgy, planting the seed for the shift from "clown" to "fool" five years prior to Armin's arrival at the Globe. The decision to divide the clown's role in between Puck and Bottom dissipates the performer's power, denying Kemp (if indeed, we assume that the role was written for and performed by Kemp) the opportunity to take command of the stage. The play repeatedly encourages Bottom to overstep dramatic boundaries and then mercilessly mocks him for doing so, while authorizing Puck to reign as the Lord of Misrule.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the actions of the clown become integral to the plot, and thereby controlled by the playwright. Rampant improvisation is identified as a hindrance to the dramaturgical process, and the text recog-

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nizes the actor as distinct from the play only in order to dismiss him as foolish and pretentious. Donald Friedman's claim that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the clown is "both displayed perfectly, and, in a sense, imprisoned" by the playwright deserves some consideration;[3] however, Friedman fails to account for the way in which Bottom's containment is countered by Puck's autonomy, a decision that simultaneously illustrates Shakespeare's recognition of the limitations of a performer's celebrity, and his dependence on the spontaneity generated by such figures. What Shakespeare does in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is repackage the rustic clown in such a way that neutralizes the power held by those who perform such roles, instead, giving the festive influence of misrule to the more urbane Puck who is defined by his place as a servant in an established aristocracy. Puck's limited autonomy stands in contrast to Bottom, who spends much of the play unsuccessfully begging for opportunities to do as he would like. Together, these figures of the clown illustrate formal drama's dependence on the unrealized potential for chaos that is characteristic not only of comedy, but of theater as a whole. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Shakespeare resists the coexistence of two contrary forms of representation (the celebrity clown versus the player), insisting that if both forms must be allowed onstage, it can only be in the service of the play.

The clown was a popular and well-established figure on the early modern stage, an unofficially continuation of the Lord of Misrule, who, after enjoying significant popularity during the reigns of early Tudor monarchs, had fallen from formal courtly recognition during the years of Mary and Elizabeth. The premise of the professional fool was predicated on a certain degree of celebrity, in which favored clowns could expect a moderate fame, and by extension, some level of fiscal security from their noble patrons. Fools were either "natural" fools, or artificial fools, which gave opportunity to ambitious wits willing to play a madman or simpleton for profit. Over time, fools such as Henry VIII's favorite, Will Somers, became involved in the theatrical spectacle through their presence in courtly entertainments. Both Wellsford and Billington record Somers's presence in the famed Revels of 1552 at Edward VI's court, during which he played the fool to George Ferrers' Lord of Misrule.[4] These roles brought the two men into a complex interplay between theatre and ritual by the way in which they were both actively engaged in the masques, processions and mock combat that were presented for the king's entertainment. Unlike the nobility, who would engage in such display for royal favor, the fool's motives were more frequently fiscal, and at the end of his lengthy career, Somers was rewarded with a comfortable pension. Will Somers was the last of the royal fools to earn such an honor, however, as neither Mary nor Elizabeth's household accounts show expenditure that might have supported a jester. During this decline of the clown's favor

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at court, the natural progression was to the playhouse, where his popularity could be turned into steady income.

The playing company that Shakespeare joined in 1594 was one that was seeking to establish itself as pre-eminent in the blossoming culture of professional theater in London. The development of the playhouses in the Liberties created a profit-driven theater culture, making performance a commodity to be bought and sold, evidenced in the presence of such well-known documents as The Stationer's Register or Henslowe's *Diary*. This burgeoning commercial world of theater, the increasing censorial power of Revels office and the popularity of cheap print all converged to ascribe an increasing value to the published script. A playbook threatened (and continues to do so) to transform a theatrical event into a literary object, by creating a sense of authorial ownership independent of a company's legal rights, and separating the text of a play from its performance identity. The presence of print, moreover, contributed to the regulation of theater in unexpected ways, from the simple necessity of shaping a play based on a three-hour scheduled time slot, to the more complex transformation of a singular performance event into a marketable object with a distinct commercial value. The clown, who bore witness to the complexity of the transition from amateur entertainments to a professional theater, often came into the theater as a celebrity in his own right. Richard Tarlton was "already a personality before he became a player,"[5] popular in the alehouses of London, and at court. Will Kemp also appeared to sustain a balance between his fame as a dancer of jigs and a stage player having achieved a degree of public notoriety before officially joining the Chamberlain's Men. Kemp was a solo comedian for much of his career, and Wiles's acknowledgment that it is uncertain "how he coped with the tyranny of a script"[6] is consistent with the knowledge we have of the artistically autonomous clown. The clown's very presence on the early modern stage is indicative of the way in which competitive professional playhouses operated, using celebrity as a means of attracting audiences. Moreover, the presence of the clown was a concession to an unregulated improvisational presence that production companies needed to make to enhance audiences, and many plays were written to accommodate the popular clowning style of the late sixteenth century.

The professional buffoon brought a long and rich history from both rural and aristocratic English culture onto the Elizabethan stage. In particular, Tarlton's popularity was singularly responsible for the invention of the rustic clown. Tarlton's public persona was a rural peasant, crude and vulgar, rooted in what Mary Ellen Lamb terms "common culture."[7] Gurr explains that "Tarlton put the stereotype onstage, dressing himself in country clothes, a buttoned cap, baggy slops in russet, a bag at his side and the pipe and tabor (a small side-drum) commonly used in country May-games,"[8] explicitly associating himself with the carnival tradition that openly pushes against the

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restrictions of early modern social custom. Tarlton thrived on the violation of theatrical (and courtly) conventions, insulting lower-class patrons and aristocrats alike, courting brawls and trading on crude humor. Tarlton, as Alexandra Halasz points out, was a celebrity in the most modern sense of the word: he was famed, both on- and off-stage during his lifetime, and the nature of this celebrity is rooted in the overlap between anecdotes of spontaneous performance against the constraint of fixed role play dictated by posthumous pamphlets such as *Tarlton's Newes Out of Purgatorie.* These pamphlets do not give justice to Tarlton's unpredictability, instead, stabilizing his identity by creating a containable myth that symbolizes "the acting subject"[9] of the clown. A similar process exists in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because of the way in which Bottom's identity "is appropriated and adapted from the practices associated with the historical personage,"[10] which creates a "type" of clown, against which Shakespeare rebels through the elevation of Puck into a influential architect of the play's comedy.

Joseph Roach defines celebrity (or "it") as "charm, charisma and presence,"[11] and explains the paradoxes of contemporary stardom in terms that can be applied to both Tarlton and Kemp: "from moment to moment on stage or on the set, they must hold themselves together with the force of their personalities but in the service of a representation to which their personalities are supposedly excrescent."[12] Like a modern film star, the clown's trade was dependent on the transparency of their on-stage role, through which their "true" personality could be seen. Such celebrity creates an alternate symbolic marker for an audience that threatens to disrupt the aesthetic expectations of a theatrical event. Michael Quinn elucidates: "Celebrity carries its rhetoric of the real in acting an acknowledgment of the facts of performance that a poetics of illusion cannot typically accommodate, despite the somewhat illusive structure that creates the celebrity in the first place."[13] Unlike a tragic actor, whose success lay in his ability to inhabit the role, a clown was famous for skills such as juggling or dancing, talents that had little place in a structured drama, and the personality that made them famous often chafed against the theatrical spectacle that purported to contain it. As fledgling playwright, Shakespeare depended on the clown to make popular a role, yet as a shareholding member of a large theater company, he needed to keep the clown in check. The clown courted the crudest form popular appeal through the artistic association with the alehouse humor that defined the common man. Such popularity made him indispensable to a young company of professional players, but also something of a liability.

In the mid 1590s, when Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Richard Tarlton had reached a height of celebrity that was arguably unsurpassed by contemporary performers, either comic or tragic. His popularity exerted a great influence over early modern play structure, which often incorporated a role for a clown in the style of Tarlton, such as the courser in *Doctor*

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Faustus. In the wake of his death in 1588, Tarlton's reputation as the seminal English clown was cemented by the publication of *Tarlton's Jestes,* which offered anecdotes "making his performance into a text that reworks the entertainment Tarlton once provided."[14] To put it in contemporary terms, Tarlton was a star, evident in the evocations of Tarlton that echoed throughout dramas for the next twenty years, as much as the tavern signs across London that bore his likeness. Through the force of his charisma and personal celebrity, Tarlton established a generic format that Will Kemp struggled to sustain during his time at the Globe. Kemp's prior career as a solo entertainer marked him as the heir to Tarlton-esque foolery, and he continued to develop his career as an independent performer by publishing three jigs during the 1590s, while he was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Yet after his sudden departure from the company, Kemp's fame slowly dissipated and he died obscure and broke. Wiles suggests that Kemp's followers were less affluent than many of the Globe's regular attendants, and that fans of the clowning were more likely to sneak into the theatre at the end of the play without paying admission, merely to see the jig[15] not only elucidates Kemp's own professional failures, but can help us understand the devolution of the celebrity clown.

Traditionally, as critics such as Bente Videbæk have noted, the clown played a liminal role in relation to the script, standing on the margins of a play's action,[16] which would enable them to step out of the drama to engage with the audience in the persona of the celebrity clown. Melnikoff notes that clowns would traditionally enter announced, met with applause,[17] and would remain behind at the close of the play to interact with the crowd and dance a jig. These performers brought the anarchy inherent in their clowning into the playhouse, representing both their textually prescribed roles and their public persona, often at the expense of the drama onstage.[18] Wiles explains that "Tarlton's script existed only in order that he could destroy it. He destroyed it through improvisation, and in the process enlisted the spectators as his accomplices."[19] Nora Johnson's claim that the actor bore equal responsibility in the authorship of a play is a useful tool for thinking about the complex relationship between the clown and his play.[20] To an Elizabethan audience, the clown was as much of a draw as the play itself—possibly even more so. The power to extemporize suggests a degree of co-creativity that endowed the clown with great autonomy. The clown was offered the freedom to improvise through loosely scripted monologues that would allow for comic invention, and the right to end the play with a virtuoso performance. Wiles explains that Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote in the knowledge that their comedies would be rounded off by a jig, and they could therefore leave their scripts open-ended—in a sense, incomplete."[21] The plays themselves bear the weight of this assertion—*The Comedy of Errors,* for example,

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closes with the reconciliation of the two Dromios, giving the otherwise minor characters the opportunity to exit the stage at their own pace.

Wiles notes that scenes in Elizabethan comedy were structured in such a way as to allow the clown time to improvise, and the opportunity to speak directly to the audience, often at the end of a scene, when the performer might do the least damage to the rhythm of the play.[22] *Tarlton's Jestes* validates this assumption, repeatedly illustrating the clown's capacity to sabotage the play with their popularity:

> It chanced that in the midst of a play, after long expectation for Tarlton, being much desired of the people, at length hee came forth, where, at his entrance, one in the gallerie pointed his finger at him, saying to a friend that had never seene him, that is he. Tarlton to make sport at the least occasion given him, and seeing the man point with the finger, he in love againe held up two fingers.[23]

The audience member in the gallery, incensed by Tarlton's insinuation of cuckoldry, continued to argue, until, humiliated "the poore fellow, plucking his hat over his eyes, went his wayes."[24] The problem for a playwright lay in the audience's desire for the clown; plays had to be written in such a way as to involve the clown at regular enough intervals to keep the spectators satisfied without disrupting the trajectory of the main plot. Early plays from Shakespeare were clearly designed to accommodate typical clownish distractions. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* the clown, Launce has a substantial amount of stage time alone, and the frequent references to physical comedy (such as his tomfoolery with his shoes) imply a substantial dependence on slapstick humor. Moreover, the presence of Crab in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is revealing. Onstage animals are infamous for the degree of unpredictability, and to have sent a dog onstage illustrates a remarkable degree of confidence in Kemp's capacity to respond to spontaneous circumstances. Allowing a canine on-stage goes further than merely welcoming improvisation; it granted "Kemp his own self-sustained, self-authorized rights of performance."[25] Launce and Crab's interactions exist as part of two substantial interludes within the comedy, which allowed for the clown to assert authorship over his scenes, turning them into comic routines, whose pace is dictated by the performer and stands distinct from the progression of the play. Such interludes may have served a practical function by creating informal intermissions in a three-hour play, but also had the capacity to disrupt the timing of the drama, or create a diversion that damaged the audience's commitment to the trajectory to the other characters in the play. John Day's dramatic account of Will Kemp portrays the clown as assertively and consciously using his status as fool to stand apart from the dramatic conventions of a play and privilege his own representation over that of the character in the ensemble. According to Day, Kemp declared that he preferred to improvise, justified by

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his claim to be "hard of study."[26] Gabriel Harvey's famous description of Robert Greene's "piperly extemporizing and Tarletonizing,"[27] suggests that the assigned theatrical role frequently took second place to the celebrity of the performer. Recently, Richard Preiss has suggested that such a dramaturgical structure left the clown onstage in a position of remarkable authority, enabling him to eviscerate the climax of the play with his own entertainment, staging a theatrical coup, or a "rival authorship."[28]

And yet, despite Tarlton's widespread fame, which drove Marlowe to famously dismiss the "jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits / And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay,"[29] Shakespeare's Globe was not a place for a clown such as Kemp to thrive. In spite of the publication of three of Kemp's jigs in 1595, the Globe was not geographically conducive to accruing a popular crowd to appreciate Kemp's dances and as a result, the theater never acquired a reputation for such performance.[30] Wiles notes that the theater's physical situation was further away from the poorer areas of the city, which decreased the likelihood of Kemp's followers attending his performances on a frequent basis. Although Gurr implies that the popularity of clowning effectively died with Tarlton in 1588,[31] Wiles more intriguingly suggests that there existed an uneasy stalemate between the clown and his company during the 1590s, and this comparative failure of Kemp to capitalize on the legacy that he had inherited from Tarlton enabled Shakespeare to contain the disruptive nature of celebrity. In this light, the tension between order and disorder that characterizes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may well be seen as symptomatic of the ongoing negotiation of popular authority between playwright and performer. Kemp, either lacking the "it" factor that allowed Tarlton to enjoy such heights of fame, or simply arriving on the London scene too late to be in vogue, became trapped by his dependency on his stage roles, finding himself increasingly marginalized in Shakespeare's work until Brutus dismisses the clown entirely in *Julius Caesar* asking Cassius, "what should the wars do with these jigging fools?"[32]

Thematically, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* depends on the deviations from the conventions of romantic comedy, and by its meta-theatrical nature, the traditional figure of the bawdy clown is equally subverted. In the character of Bottom, Shakespeare proved that it is possible to create an exemplary rustic in the style of Tarlton and Kemp while implicitly denigrating the performer's skill through a superior representation of clowning, and the employment of Pyramus and Thisbe as an improvisational deterrent. Bottom is a member of the working classes, a rustic artisan, unfamiliar with courtly manners, either natural or supernatural. He is an honest fool in the style of Kemp, unwittingly imbued with the destructive capabilities of Tarlton. Bottom is a celebration of folly and arrogance, continually collapsing the boundaries between performer and role, not only as an actor in Pyramus and Thisbe but also as a participant in Titania's misguided fantasy of love. Hippolyta's

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shocked recognition of pity for Bottom strikes to the heart of his comic scenes—in spite of costumes, script, and an ass's head, Bottom is never fully absorbed into his role. He stands apart from all other groups onstage, too pompous for the mechanicals, too base for the Athenian aristocracy, and too earthly for the fairies. As C. L. Barber reminds us, the pleasure of Pyramus and Thisbe is derived from the fact that we never lose sight of the Bottom the performer[33]—and yet, the play itself condemns Bottom's attempts at artistry as hubris.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Shakespeare incorporates the extemporaneous dialogue into the performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* but at the expense of the performer, instead the audience member. Bottom's rebuke to Theseus' sardonic observation that "the wall methinks, being sensible, should curse again"[34] is a literal response that draws its irony from Bottom's misjudgment of Theseus' capacity to understand the nature of theatrical belief. He jumps up to explain that "the wall is down that / parted their fathers"[35] and attempts to offer an epilogue, only to be silenced before he can begin. By creating humor out of Bottom's inability to understand the basic principles of theatrical illusion, the play mocks the clown's conscious destruction of the "fourth wall" and in doing so, renders improvisation beyond the script an impossible task. Instead of lashing out at the spectators, as a clown would have been expected to do, Bottom is eager to please his audience, establishing Theseus as the mediator between the audience and the onstage action, which displaces not only the clown, but the watching audience of Shakespeare's playhouse, which is shut out by Theseus from its usual position of engaging the clown.

Bottom's desire to dominate the stage with his theatrical skill is one that his director, his audience, and the play itself rejects—he is to play no part but Pyramus. Bottom's inaccurate presumption of artistic greatness is the overarching joke of the Mechanicals's subplot because it so clearly underscores his ineptitude. Peter Quince's exasperation with Bottom's artistic tyranny is validated by the Athenian audience's impatience with his performance of Pyramus. Under such circumstances, Theseus's loaded observation that "with the help of a surgeon, he might yet recover / And prove an ass,"[36] becomes a complex allusion. The more obvious inference here is to Puck's improvisational directive to Bottom, and the audience member is encouraged to consider Puck's context as equally important to the primary meaning of the word as a fool. Alluding to both Puck's digression from the Oberon's specific orders, and Bottom's melodramatic performance style, Theseus's quip condemns those who improvise and draw out the scripted drama unnecessarily. No single actor will be allowed to dominate *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and this philosophy is confirmed by the collective reaction to the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe.

Overall, the play implements a dramatic structure that contains Bottom at

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almost every turn. Typically, a scene featuring a clown is left open-ended to allow for comic improvisation, but in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* all of Bottom's exits are structured in such a way as to curtail any lingering. In the first act Bottom drives the mechanicals off stage, cutting short the delays of Peter Quince, with a stern "enough."[37] At the end of the fourth act, Bottom drives the action once more announcing to Quince that he shall draw "not a word"[38] of his adventures, pushing the Mechanicals offstage, with the command "no more words. / Away! Go, away!" [39] By giving Bottom the impetus to move the actors into the wings, the play forces the clown to adhere to the script in order to generate laughter. To deviate from the explicit textual instructions would compromise the actor and force him to stand at odds with the play, which would risk alienating the audience, as Bottom does in the fifth act. Others are also involved in the practice of forcing Bottom into silent submission: Titania explicitly tells the fairies to "tie up my lover's tongue,"[40] leaving the clown outnumbered by fairies, under the instruction to "bring him silently"[41] offstage. Even the song allocated to Bottom—"The ousel cock so black of hue"[42]—is interrupted by the entrance of Titania, whose entrance physically wrests control from the unruly clown.

The characterization of Bottom trades on the public persona of the rustic clown while negating the meta-theatrical layer that allows the actor to be in on the joke. Audience members of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* for example, do not so much laugh at Bottom's song, but Titania's extravagant reaction to it when she asks "what angel wakes me from my flowery bed?"[43] Bottom's timid assertion that "I can gleek upon occasion"[44] is a feeble response to Titania's supernatural presence, and in order for the scene to work, the audience is discouraged from finding humor in his jokes. For example, any laughter in response to Bottom's declaration that "I am such a tender ass"[45] is contingent on his unawareness of the *double entendre*—Bottom's ignorance of his physical condition marks him out as the "straight" man in the play's comedy, rendering such extemporization as lewd gestures to the audience as detrimental to the veracity of the clown's representation. The physical comedy of Bottom's scenes with Titania is drawn from *her* capacity to improvise, as the script requires that she kiss "thy fair large ears,"[46] while Bottom sits quietly, encased by fairies as the prisoner of Titania's passion. By highlighting Bottom's fear at his first encounter with Titania, the play demands passivity from the clown, and Bottom becomes quite literally the dramaturgical butt of the joke.

Bottom's transformation into an ass evokes Joseph Roach's idea of the protean player, whose successful performance demands a degree of self-abdication to a role.[47] For early modern performers, the body was molded to the mind, and "the outward shapes of the passions, obedient to the animal spirits, are constrained only by the perimeters of the actor's imagination"[48]—an observation echoed by Hyppolita's caustic observation that it is

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not the Mechanicals's but Theseus's imagination that validates the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe. Bottom is consumed with the physicality of his performance, from the tears he will shed as Pyramus to the "monstrous little voice"[49] of Thisbe, yet his repeated resistance to the unifying transformative power of his passions proves him an ass, in more ways than one. Bottom fails to transcend his substantial body, and even when characterized by the blatant sexuality evoked by the association of "ass" with "arse" he remains quite innocent.[50] Bottom's inability to express his own dream without the help of Peter Quince underscores his limitations as an actor, just as he continually fails to complete the metamorphosis necessary to move his audience.

In spite of his repeated attempts to assume physical autonomy, Bottom's attempt at artistic pre-eminence is contained at every turn by the fairies that intimidate and restrain him. Equally, the Athenian court contains him by condemning his exuberance and denying him voice. Bottom, unbounded, is the epitome of the uncontrolled body, spilling over into other roles and derailing the action of Pyramus and Thisbe, but the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* never allows him to be unleashed. Instead, he is derided for his limited imagination, and he is most dramatically effective when he is subjugates his representation to a superior actor. Puck, by contrast, defines himself in a myriad of physicalities. He likens himself to a filly, a roasted crab, a three-foot stool, a horse and a hound, and we see him render himself invisible in order to terrorize the Mechanicals. Puck is dangerous in much the same way as the tragic actor—because he inhabits a role so closely as to create a symbiotic relationship between the clown and his character that allows for harmonious co-existence between playwright and performer that engenders fruitful creativity. Bottom, on the other hand, needs to be continually held in check.

The Mechanicals' performance of Pyramus and Thisbe, whilst seeming to critique excessive adherence to theatrical mimesis, instead strengthens the actor's dependence on his text by showing the disastrous consequences of improvisation. By creating a framework within which the literalism of the performers is mocked, Shakespeare creates "a duplicity that effects a deforming purpose of playing clearly marked by bathos."[51] Bottom's insistence on a prologue to soothe the fears of the ladies challenges his audience to accept the theatrical spectacle as it is given to them, mocking as rustic simpletons those who depend on the knowledge of the actor behind the character as a means of understanding a stage fiction. Because of his inability to understand the audience's relationship to theatrical mimesis, Bottom's overelaborate performance descends into a parody that leaves the actor vulnerable to the wrong kind of laughter, even as it showcases his comedic skills. In order to evoke the greatest humor, Pyramus and Thisbe forces the clown to assimilate his identity with that of Bottom, allowing for only one level of transparency in the performative process—instead of seeing the clown playing a role ineffec-

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tually, we see Bottom playing Pyramus, and this structure renders any further layers of theatricality superfluous.

As Videbæk notes, the figure of the clown in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is split between Bottom and Puck.[52] Bottom, the obvious candidate for the conventional rustic clown, is offered the opportunity to bluster around the stage, creating much noise, but ultimately, signifying very little. Instead, Puck is carefully authorized to utilize the functions of the clown. He is allowed the privilege of talking directly to the audience, and more importantly, is given the task of closing the play after the conclusion of the Bergomask dance. Puck is left alone onstage to give the epilogue that symbolizes the balance of representation and transparency that characterizes successful theatre. Furthermore, his promise that "Robin shall restore amends"[53] does not preclude the possibility of the actor lingering onstage, offering some kind of performative response to the audience's applause. Not only does Puck dramaturgically fulfill the clown's function, he also nimbly absorbs Bottom's identity as the simple country buffoon. The repeated references to Puck as wanderer gives him a nomadic identity that is congruent with the traditional clown who, in the case of Kemp's famous jig, were actual wanderers around the English countryside, and existed in the margins of the English court. Puck's alternative name, Robin Goodfellow, is rooted in English folklore, aligning him explicitly with the corporeality of the lower social strata that had previously been the exclusive domain of the rustic clown. Throughout the play, Puck is the author of not only the lovers' confusion, but also the "deeper and more generous"[54] festive vision that Bottom's transformation represents. Much has been written about the Saturnalian nature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* but if we are to accept that Nick Bottom is a signifier of such a vision, we cannot deny Puck's role in the creation of such a sign.

If Bottom is characterized by an overabundance of passion, Puck, in spite of his spontaneity, is notable for his restraint. Puck's presence in the play is one that sanctions improvisation and acknowledges the need for deviation from convention, but this chaos is only allowed to exist within the confines of a tightly controlled universe. Shakespeare's employment of Puck as a more aggressive agent for misrule recognizes both the liminality of the clown, and his comedy's dependence on the performative body. The carnival atmosphere that characterizes the play is created by Robin Goodfellow (which, incidentally, is the name attributed to the editor of Tarlton's jests in *Tarlton's Newes Out of Purgatory*), even though he cannot find a place for himself within the central relationships of the play. The play associates Puck with the disruptive carnality that is the cause of both the confusion and comedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and this renders him a more potent figure than Bottom. Puck usurps the traditional place of the clown, and transforms the stock character into a more substantial figure requiring the multi-faceted skills of the actor, instead of the limited capabilities of the celebrity. In spite of Puck's impor-

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tance to the progression of the drama, he remains a marginal character, his presence unacknowledged by everyone except Oberon and the anonymous fairy who serves Titania. Moreover, Puck's role as servant to Oberon positions him in the clown's conventional role as unofficial chorus, simultaneously an integral part of the action and completely isolated from the relationships at stake in the woodland chaos. Puck manages to sustain a delicate balance between the roles of actor and author by submitting himself to the will of others when necessary. Puck is a servant, like clowns such as the Dromio brothers, but the emphasis on his sharp intellect allows him to infuse his submissive role with a quiet autonomy. When Oberon voices his suspicion that Puck might have "committ'st [his] knaveries willfully"[55] Puck vehemently denies operating upon his own agency, only to assert moments later that that "am I glad it so did sort."[56] He is careful not to openly overstep his prescribed boundaries as servant, and keep his personal motives ambiguous.

Puck is an observer and commentator on the action of the play, often referring directly to the audience in his mockery, mediating between the drama and the response of the spectators, an idea often illustrated in performance through the doubling of Puck and Philostrate. Puck's interruption of the Mechanicals' rehearsal is crucial for understanding his identity in the play as modified clown. The scene is structured in such a way as to allow Puck unrestrained extemporizing, as he dances around the befuddled actors, while Bottom's only response is to blunder around in confusion. In this scene, Puck stymies Bottom by redacting his role even further—the placement of the ass' head subjugates the clown playing Bottom not only by restricting his capacity to mug for the audience, but by rendering him an instrument of another actor. At this moment, Kemp is completely obliterated, and his actor's body, represented by a rustic coat and ass's head, has become a symbol of Puck's authorial abilities. Puck acknowledges this power when he tells the audience that he will "be an auditor—an actor too, perhaps if I see cause."[57] This declaration is significant, as it recognizes the actor's power to reshape the play—it acknowledges the actor as creative force equal to that of the playwright. And yet, this statement of performative autonomy is all the more notable for the fact that it is given as a part of the scripted drama, entwining the performer and playwright in a sophisticated demonstration of dramaturgical restraint and free play.

Puck epitomizes the moment of transition between clown and fool in Shakespeare's plays and the shift in identity between his first and final acts emphasize this trajectory. Describing himself to Titania's fairy, Puck explains that "I jest to Oberon, and make him smile,"[58] marking him out as part of the courtly fool tradition. Puck continues in a Tarlton-esque vein, describing crudely how he torments old women, forcing them one to topple on her "bum"[59] for the sake of cheap laughs, yet, if the opening scene pres-

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ents Puck as a descendant of English folklore, his final appearance in the play is one that is representative of a darker universe, where Puck rules as a sophisticated creature of the night, representing the fairy court. The tone of the speech that begins "Now the hungry lion roars,"[60] is one of muted misrule. That the supernatural world in which fairies "now are frolic"[61] is countered only by Puck's directive that "not a mouse / Shall disturb this hallowed house," blending chaos with circumspection. Puck's presence in the final scene is one that establishes him as an actor both inside and outside of the drama, his status as actor/playwright evident when he announces "I am sent with broom before / To sweep the dust behind the door."[62] Puck is a licensed fool, given permission by the play to act upon his own impulses. In this moment, the actor playing Puck is both representative and transparent, which is the traditional characteristic of the onstage clown.

Puck's insidious appropriation of the clown privilege in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a direct reflection of the cultural tensions that Mary Ellen Lamb sees as integral to the play itself. Lamb explains:

> By engaging with the conceptualization of a popular culture, defined within a mutually constitutive relationship with a more elite culture, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* represents a precondition for the denigration and eventual rejection of popular culture as vulgar by the eighteenth century. But in the late-sixteenth century a clean and simple rejection was not yet possible.[63]

Puck negotiates these cultural hierarchies with aplomb, leaving Bottom behind, trapped by his ability to prove himself an ass. The transformation that Lamb sees occurring on a national level is reflected in the emergence of the professional playhouse, and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself. The play exhibits a profound ambivalence towards the type of comedy that Bottom can offer, and even the traditionally vulgar comedy that the clown would traditionally promote is muted when advocated by Puck, and absorbed into the hyperbolic blazons offered by the love-struck Titania. In spite of the carnival atmosphere in the play, very little in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is dramaturgically unrestrained, and the success of the play onstage depends on the commitment of an ensemble cast working within their prescribed roles.

By creating scenes that are predicated on the audience seeing Pyramus as Bottom, Shakespeare creates an "authentic" mask of a clown, from which the performer cannot escape. The meta-theatrical nature of the play insists on the supremacy of the role over the performer, and through this, celebrity's potential for disruption is contained. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Shakespeare delicately balances the desires of the audience—to see a celebrity, performing as they expect—and the desire to adhere to dramaturgical unity. As Halasz points out, both "player and writer occupy a version of the retail position: they retell stories."[64] However, at the heart of *A Midsummer Night's*

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Dream is a divergence of interests that the play nimbly appropriates and absorbs.

Notes

1. *William Shakespeare, The Norton Shakespeare,* Stephen Greenblatt, gen. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1997): *Hamlet* 3.2.35.
2. David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 60.
3. Donald.Friedman, "Bottom, Burbage and the Birth of Tragedy," in *Reconsidering the Renaissance: Papers from the Twenty-first Annual Conference,* ed. Mario Di Cesare (Binghampton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), 317.
4. Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 39.
5. Peter Thompson, "The True Physiognomy of a Man: Richard Tarlton and His Legend" in *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries in Performance,* ed. Edward J. Esche (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), 203.
6. Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown,* 35.
7. Mary Ellen Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in A Midsummer Night's Dream," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2000), 280.
8. Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 156.
9. Alexandra Halasz, "'So Beloved That Men Use His Pictures for Their Signs': Richard Tarlton and the Uses of Sixteenth-Century Celebrity," *Shakespeare Studies* 23 (1995), 26.
10. Ibid., 27.
11. Joseph Roach, "It." *Theatre Journal.* 56, no. 4: *Theorizing the Performer* (Dec.: 2004), 556.
12. Ibid., 559.
13. Michael Quinn, "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting." *New Theatre Quarterly.* 22, no. 6 (May 1990): 157.
14. Halasz, "So Beloved," 24.
15. Wiles, *Skakespeare's Clown,* 46.
16. Bente A. Videbaek, *The Stage Clown in Shakespeare's Theatre* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 43.
17. Kirk Melnikoff, "[I]ygging vaines' and 'riming mother wits': Marlowe, Clowns and the Early Frameworks of Dramatic Authorship," *Early Modern Literary Studies* Special Issue 16 (October 2007): 14. <http://purl.colc.org/emls/si-16/melnyy gg.htm>
18. It should be emphasized that I do not wish to argue for the disruption of a "realistic" acting style by celebrity, but instead suggest simply that celebrity creates an alternate symbolic marker for an audience, that threatens to disrupt the aesthetic expectations of a theatrical event. Michael Quinn elucidates: "Celebrity carries its rhetoric of the real in acting an acknowledgment of the f acts of performance that a

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poetics of illusion cannot typically accommodate, despite the somewhat illusive structure that creates the celebrity in the first place" (Quinn, "Celebrity," 157).

19. Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown,* 21.

20. Nora Johnson, *The Actor as Playwright in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.

21. Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown,* 53.

22. Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown,* 102.

23. Richard Tarlton. *Tarlton's Jestes and Newes Out of Purgatory.* Ed. James Orchard Halliwell (London: Shakespeare Society, 1844), 98.

24. Ibid., 98.

25. Robert Weimann, and Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance: Stage and Page in Elizabethan Theatre* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 106.

26. Qtd. in Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown,* 37.

27. Qtd. in Halliwell, *Tarlton's Jestes,* 30.

28. Richard Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 146.

29. Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great,* Part One. (New York: Penguin USA, 2003), prologue, 1–2.

30. Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown,* 47.

31. Gurr, *Playgoing,* 158.

32. *Julius Caesar,* 4.2.188. All quotations taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare.* 2nd Edition. Eds. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

33. C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), 151.

34. *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* 5.1.180.

35. Ibid., 5.1.337–38.

36. Ibid., 5.1.305–6.

37. Ibid., 1.3.102.

38. Ibid., 4.2.32.

39. Ibid., 4.2.42–43.

40. Ibid., 3.1.194.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., 3.1.10.

43. Ibid., 3.1.106.

44. Ibid., 3.1.139.

45. Ibid., 4.1.21.

46. Ibid., 4.1.4.

47. Joseph Roach. *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) 41.

48. Roach, *Passion,* 44.

49. *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* 1.2.44.

50. Annabel Patterson,"Bottom's Up: Festive Theory in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Critical Essays,* ed. Dorothy Kehle, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 189.

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51. Weimann and Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance,* 85.
52. Videbaek, *Stage Clown,* 40.
53. *Midsummer Night's Dream,* 5.4.414.
54. Patterson, "Bottom's Up," 175.
55. *Midsummer Night's Dream,* 3.2.346.
56. Ibid., 3.2.352.
57. Ibid., 3.1.74.
58. Ibid., 2.1.44.
59. Ibid., 2.1.53.
60. Ibid., 5.2.1.
61. Ibid., 5.2.17.
62. Ibid., 5.2.17–8.
63. Lamb, "Taken by the Fairies," 303.
64. Halasz, "So Beloved," 30.

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