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"Prompting, backstage activity, and the openings onto the Shakespearian stage" Andrew Gurr and Gabriel Egan

In the concluding paragraph of Andrew Gurr's "Stage Doors at the Globe" (*Theatre Notebook* 53, 1999, 8-18), it was suggested that doors were an innovation in the custom-made playhouses like the Rose and the Globe, and that they only gradually and inconsistently replaced hangings as the principal means of entry through the two or three openings built for access to the stage. In "Behind the Arras: the Prompter's Place in the Shakespearean Theatre" (*Theatre Notebook* 55, 2001, 110-18), Tiffany Stern implicitly denies that premise, arguing that hangings were the routine form of access for the players throughout the period, on the grounds that they provided the best means for everyone backstage to hear what was happening onstage. But to claim that real doors were never used on the early stages is to ignore too much of the evidence, not only references in stage directions, for the existence and the use of real doors.

We need to identify the exact kind of door that the early stages might have had. Gabriel Egan's article in *Theatre Notebook* 52 (1998, pp.62-4) suggested that the doors on the second Globe's stage were given the kind of "strange geometricall hinges" that Bosola cites in *The Duchess of Malfi*, a new play at the new playhouse [1]. That allusion seems to indicate that the new Globe had a set of doors which, by means of special hinges, could be opened either inwards or outwards. Gurr's article in the following year cited the main evidence for the use of real doors in the stage openings, and suggested that any door, with or without geometrical hinges, could have easily been removed in favour of a set of hangings whenever a particular day's play might demand it. It argued that the tradition out of which playing at the London playhouses grew, and to which the players regularly returned, of playing at temporary locations such as guildhalls and great houses, meant that they were always ready to use a set of fit-up hangings as the concealment for their tiring houses, through which they emerged to play. It was the permanence of the London playhouses such as the Theatre and the Rose which first allowed them to use real doors.

Real doors can present difficulties that access through a curtain is free from. It takes more time to open and close a door, and many entrances, and especially exits, have to be hurried. Should the door open outwards onto the stage, or inwards into the tiring house? If the latter, the need for a clear space behind it would take up some of the limited room in the tiring house, and would certainly reduce any space the player waiting to come on could occupy. Above all, in Stern's argument, real doors would have impeded the players' capacity to hear their cues, and would have made it impossible for a prompter either to hear or to be heard in his duty to prompt a player who corpsed. Stern overstates the solidity of the back-wall of the reconstructed Globe stage, which is made of plaster panels filling the interstices of a largely open oak frame. Stern, however, claims that the reconstruction has a "heavy oak *frons scenae*" (p. 110) and that this is an error because the 1599 Globe was "assembled out of the pared-down leftovers from an earlier theatre" (pp. 115-6). There is no evidence that the huge structural members of the Theatre were pared down when used to make the Globe, and indeed doing so would have rendered them less useful. As Irwin Smith noted 50 years ago, Elizabethan carpentry relied on uniquely-made joints and any paring down of the Theatre's main posts would have prevented them going back together the same way; it is much more likely that the joints, and hence the overall size and shape, were preserved as the Theatre became the Globe [2]. Moreover, the in-fill between the main posts (including the material which formed the *frons scenae*) is most unlikely to have survived the dismantling of the Theatre and would have been made afresh on the new site. In all, the recycling of the Theatre's timbers to make the Globe has no bearing on the solidity or acoustic properties of its *frons scenae*.

Given then a plaster-and-oak *frons scenae*, were hangings essential for hearing what was said onstage from backstage? There is strong evidence from several sources for doors giving access to the stage having grilles or grates cut into them, behind which the players would stand waiting to hear their cues. The Rose may have had stage doors after 1592, since Salisbury in Shakespeare's *1 Henry VI* seems to use one:

> Here, through this Grate, I count each one,
>
> And view the Frenchmen how they fortifie:
>
> Let vs looke in, the sight will much delight thee

(1623 Folio sig. k4v)

The customary caution when reading such signals is to remember Alan Dessen's point that a verbal reference to a stage feature might indicate either that the feature really is there, to be gestured at, or that it is referred to because it has to be imagined. This grate may therefore have been designed as a fictional indication of a symbolic stage feature rather than an actual material presence. But when in the original productions Salisbury urged Talbot to "looke in", it is difficult not to believe that he gestured to a real stage door fitted with a grille of vertical iron bars.

Such doors with their window-like openings can still be seen in early modern prison cells such as the one at the old Guildhall in Boston, Lincolnshire, where the first Pilgrim Fathers were held in 1607. Barred openings in doors were a standard feature in London doors. Falstaff names a grate as what baboons peer through in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1623 Folio, sig. D5r). John Marston invoked a prison grate from behind which Mellida speaks in *Antonio's Revenge* 2.3.125, at the indoor Paul's playhouse. Editing the play independently, G. K. Hunter and W. Reavley Gair agreed that Mellida speaks from her dungeon "*within*" [3]. When she parts from her on-stage lover the original quarto tells us "*Antonio kisseth Mellida's hand*: *then Mellida goes from the grate*" [4]. Such an opening would provide a prompter as well as the waiting players with access to what was being spoken on stage. Something like a grate must have been visible in the open-air amphitheatres since in 1595 or 1596 John Davies wrote an epigram about the kind of gallant who likes to leave his seat in the theatre and "either to the stage himself transfer, | Or through a grate doth shew his doubtfull face" [5].

Stern's characterization of what happened backstage during a performance elides a number of unresolved problems. Theories about the purpose of that puzzling class of documents called playhouse "plots" or "plats" are more complex and contentious than Stern acknowledges by her single citation of W. W. Greg's view that these were summaries of plays hung backstage as a reference tool for actors (p. 111). The seven extant "plots" are seriously deficient for the purpose Greg proposed, and David Bradley might be right that they were created for the casting, not the acting, of a play [6]. In whatever way the backstage affairs were controlled, we must not think of entering and exiting as instantaneous events but as activities occupying a finite period of time, as Mariko Ichikawa has shown [7]. An actor's "part" was a scroll of his speeches interspersed with "cues", the last three or so words of the previous speaker. Amongst interlocutors already on the stage, listening for their "cues" would release actors from the obligation to memorize the entire scene since each could simply deliver his words when needed, but this expedient would not be available to an actor who needs to enter before speaking. Stern believes that an actor simply leapt onto the stage when he heard the last few words of the preceding speech (p. 112), but since entering took some time--Ichikawa thinks on average 4 lines--this would bring him on well past his cue. How actors managed these things is notoriously unclear. Some theatre documents have anticipatory annotations, as though someone wanted to make sure that each actor was ready and waiting behind the door he was to use for his entrance, but these notes are not consistently used in any document and most playbook manuscripts omit them. The common "readying" note is rarely placed sufficiently early for a dilatory actor actually to be found and put in his place.

Stern's article raises larger questions. Was there always a man on hand in the early modern playhouses at every performance to prompt the players in their lines? Was the role of prompter a regular function for the book-holder? Were company practices invariably the same, and did the companies of adult players rate the prompter's function as highly as the managers of boy companies did? While Jonson might expect to lurk backstage supervising the

preparations of the boy players, could he have done the same for the Chamberlain's Men? Or was he, as Dekker notoriously claimed, only free at the Globe to stand in the auditorium and greet his acquaintances in the lords' rooms? [8]. The authority of the prompter goes with the authority of the playbook, and there is good reason to see the author's authority, vested in the playbook, as being far less potent with adult sharers than with boy players. Playtexts like the Q1 edition of *Henry V* provide strong evidence that one author at least in the Chamberlain's Men had little to do with the playbook in preparing the play for the stage. The group authority of the players, who had absolute rights of purchase and possession over the book, and who could abbreviate the version known as the "allowed book" as much as they chose, left the book-holder as the recorder of their choices, not as the controller of what they did on stage.

The writers who in 1599-1600 chose to write for the new boy companies were of quite a different social status from the Henslowe teams and the Shakespeare company authors. The well-endowed gentleman John Marston, for instance, first writer for Paul's Boys, bought himself into the company's management, later transferring his financial interest to the Blackfriars group. He more than anyone had a right to direct his play from the tiring house, and to insist on the boys closely adhering to the playscript. Nobody in the Chamberlain's had anything like such a position. Its players worked as a team, and if the evidence of Q1 *Henry V* has any value in showing what they did to the scripts that they bought, they shared the work of revising a playbook for the stage as readily as they shared their profits. Under such conditions the book-keeper worked as a stage manager and scribe, not a prompter. The one surviving printed playbook that seems to have been marked up for use in later years as a promptbook, the Folger copy of *The Two Merry Milkmaids*, written for and staged at the Red Bull open-air playhouses by an adult company, indicates the need to get players ready to go onstage, but shows little concern for what they did while they were on [9]. The prompting role bore much less authority in a company of adult sharers than it may have done with the boy players.

We might also ask why, if the adult companies regularly used a prompter, have almost no manuscript promptbooks survived? "Allowed" books are even fewer, but they had a massive value as capital assets to their companies. Printed playbooks are mostly the "maximal" text sold by the author or authors to the company, not either the "allowed" book with its crucial valorizing signature or the book-keeper's working copy, the so-called prompt book [10]. Several manuscripts have survived from the King's Men's repertory, most of them containing notes and corrections made by the company book-keeper, Edward Knight, and at least one of them is the maximal "allowed book", having the Master of the Revels's enabling signature at the end. Yet *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, *Believe As You List*, *The Soddered Citizen* and others show no sign of use as a minimal prompt-book. There is certainly no way that a book-holder or book-keeper holding the Folio version of *Henry V* as the company's "allowed book" could have used it to prompt the company if they were playing the minimal quarto text as their chosen playscript. Against any attempt to find consistent patterns of working in the early modern

playhouses, we have to accept the inevitability of substantial change through time, and of major differences in practice, company by company and playhouse by playhouse.

Notes

1 John Webster, *The Duchesse of Malfy* STC 25276 (London: N. Okes for J. Waterson, 1623), sig. A2v.

2 Irwin Smith, "Theatre into Globe" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 3 (1952), 113-120.

3 John Marston *Antonio's Revenge* ed. G. K. Hunter, *Regents Renaissance Drama Series* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966) 2.2.64; John Marston *Antonio's Revenge* ed. W. Reavley Gair, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978) 2.3.64.

4 John Marston, *Antonio's Revenge* STC 17474 (London: for Thomas Fisher, 1602), sig. D4v.

5 John Davies and Christopher Marlowe, *Epigrammes and Elegies* STC 6350 (Middleborough: publisher unknown, [1595-6]) sig. A4r. For the dating of the epigrams, see Robert Krueger, "Sir John Davies: *Orchestra* Complete, *Epigrams*, Unpublished Poems", *Review of English Studies* 13 (1962), 13-124.

6 See David Bradley, *From Text to Performance in the Elizabethan Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 75-94.

7 Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa, *Staging in Shakespeare's Theatres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 72-95.

8 Thomas Dekker *Satiromastix, or the Untrussing of the Humorous Poet* STC 6521 (London: for E. White, 1602), sig. M1r.

9 See Leslie Thomson, "A Quarto ‘Marked for Performance’: Evidence of What?" *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 8 (1996), 176-210.

10 See Gurr, "Maximal and Minimal Texts: Shakespeare v. the Globe", *Shakespeare Survey* 52 (1999), 68-87.