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***To entertain, instruct  
and celebrate***  
*Studies in early modern theatre and  
theatricality in memory of André  
Lascombes*

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# Arrested Development: Bruegel's Children, Clowns, and Fooling Around on the Tudor Stage\*

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In this paper I will revisit a familiar association—that between dramatic clowns and folly on the one hand and childishness and children on the other. And I will look at it from the angle of theatrical kinesics, exploring the ways in which the two conceptions (childishness and clowning) are connected by particular presentations or representations of the human body, by ways of occupying stage space, and by a particular relation between the body and the passing of time. In particular I will draw attention to the ways in which both representations of children in one particular piece of pictorial art and the representation of clowns in Tudor plays draw upon depictions of the human subject as both prone to physical forces beyond its control and yet at the same time self-sufficient—indeed seemingly self-absorbed—oblivious of, and innocent to these forces, enjoying just “being in the moment”. In order to do this I will need to look at the ways in which the movements of clowns, indeed their whole stage personae—their characteristic *gesti*—are crafted in the surviving texts through dialogue to create a particular kind of relationship with audiences, a relationship built upon a pleasurable kind of what I will call “cued apprehensiveness” on the part of the spectator: a psychological and kinaesthetic tension linked to the presence of the clown’s body onstage that colours audiences’ responses to these figures and gives them their particular “edgy”, precarious, dramatic quality.

But first, a note on terminology. I will be talking here specifically about clowns rather than fools. Criticism has conventionally distinguished rather starkly between the two, echoing the

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\* I am very grateful to Professors John J. McGavin and Guillemette Bolens for their help and advice with this paper. Its initial inspiration was a conversation with Professor Bolens about motor cognition, the films of Jacques Tati, and the sport of curling, so I am especially pleased to be able to record my gratitude to her here.

similar distinction between the natural and the artificial fool. The clown, the argument runs, like the natural fool, is a childlike figure, a variation on the theme of the simple rustic out of his depth in the sophisticated world of the court or the city. His comedy resides in physical action, in responding to basic bodily urges, pulling faces, misspeaking, misunderstanding instructions and miss-delivering letters. His is primarily a comedy of errors, and he is himself the butt of much of the comedy. The fool, on the other hand, tends to be seen as a more mature, sophisticated figure. His is the comedy of wordplay and wit, of melancholy and occasional sharp satire, of eros misdirected. The *locus classicus* of the distinction is generally assumed to be the change in Shakespeare's company when Will Kemp, who specialised in improvised clowning, left the company and was replaced by Robert Armin, the witty, musical, published chronicler and theorist of fooling. Thereafter Shakespeare stopped writing variations of Lance, Dogberry, and Costard and gave us instead Touchstone, Feste, and Lear's Fool.<sup>1</sup>

What this account implies is that fools and clowns are very different things, and they inhabit incompatible models of stage comedy. And to an extent the separation is a real one, the result of changing circumstances and acting styles. The high point of early modern stage clowning does seem to have been the product of a particular generation of theatrical comedians, beginning perhaps with Robert Wilson (who wrote *Three Ladies of London*, partly as a vehicle for his own clown persona in the role of the rustic idiot Simplicity)<sup>2</sup> and taking in Richard Tarlton and Will Kemp, while Armin's style of "foolosophy" was very different, more studied and more closely scripted. But not every company got rid of its clowns when Shakespeare's did, and not every company had its equivalent of Armin. So clowns remained popular stage figures well into the Jacobean period. And what I also want to suggest here is that clowning was not necessarily an exclusive style, the preserve of just one type or generation of performer. It was more a mode of comic playing that many different actors could adopt and discard as part of a flexible playing style across the course of a play. Some, like Kemp, clearly specialised in it—indeed some seem rarely to have used anything else—but others might employ it as just one mode, one suit of jests, one part of a more complex, fluid, comic stage persona. Armin's fools themselves were not averse to moments of slapstick and misunderstanding, albeit perhaps they did so more knowingly, at a slight distance from the idiocy it implied. Touchstone, for example,

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1 See WILES, 1987, and PREISS, 2014 for excellent discussions of early modern clown traditions. I discovered the latter while revising this essay and include reference to it where relevant in the footnotes, as I have to the excellent work of GHOSE, 2022, which appeared after the essay was complete, and the brilliant treatment by VAN ES, 2013: 163-188, of the change from Kemp to Armin and its dramaturgical consequences.

2 For an accessible text of *The Three Ladies of London*, see WALKER, ed., 2014: 399-463.

is referred to as a “natural” (I.ii.46-53), a “clownish fool” (I.iii.129) and a “roynish clown” (II.ii.8) in *As You Like It*, but for most of the play seems to be a witty, artificial fool, “very swift and sententious” (V.iii.62). And in the post-Kemp period a number of significant roles in Shakespeare’s plays—most notably, perhaps, Polonius and the Gravediggers in *Hamlet*, the Porter in *Macbeth*, and the eponymous “Clown” in *Anthony and Cleopatra*—also draw heavily on the clown *gestus* that I will describe.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, earlier comic actors evidently adopted equally flexible strategies. The protean roles of the early and mid-Tudor Vices, precursors and progenitors of fools and clowns alike, were evidently equally adept at mixing up witty folly and idiotic clowning in a single, rich performance—at one moment falling over their own feet or unable to recall their own names, at the next bandying words with the great and outfoxing the protagonists in cunning.<sup>4</sup> When I discuss the comedy of clowning, then, I am talking about just one variegated, fluid form of comedy in which clowns, fools and vices, as well as (as we shall see) more sombre and serious figures, could partake on the Tudor stage.

I want to start, though, not with a play but with a painting, Bruegel’s wonderful pictorial representation of childish movement in the panoramic work known in English as *Children’s Games*.<sup>5</sup> As the art historian Edward Snow has demonstrated in his brilliant, comprehensive exposition of the painting,<sup>6</sup> this is a work chock-full of movement that cues an equally energetic phenomenological perceptual response in the viewer. Everywhere one looks in the picture there are vignettes of evocative, tensile bodies depicted in the process of movement or momentary stasis: pulling, pushing, twisting, climbing, spinning, fighting, squeezing themselves tightly together or stretching out precariously. Here are a multiplicity of young bodies joyfully or fearfully testing their physical potential against the forces of the material universe, and tottering on the edge of disaster, never quite in full control of their actions. Here, that is, are children depicted seemingly just being children.

Following Snow’s lead, one quickly notices the central grouping of boys playing at tug-of-war, two lads mounted on the backs of two others, each pulling at what looks like

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3 For similar scepticism about the idea that the words “clown” and “fool” referred to clearly distinct and entirely antithetical roles and ways of playing, see HORNBACK, 2009: 2. As Hornback notes, Armin names himself the Clown of the Curtain (theatre) (“Clonnico de Curtainio”) in his printed works on fools and folly, while Kemp refers to himself as a fool in his *Nine Days Wonder* (1600). And Shakespeare was to refer in stage directions to Touchstone, Feste, and Lavatch (in *All’s Well That Ends Well*) as all roles for the “Clown”, Armin. All references to Shakespeare’s plays are to the texts in WELLS and TAYLOR, eds, 2005.

4 For similar points about the persistence of clowns and clowning and some scepticism about the role of the Vice in the lineage of clowning, see PREISS, 2014: 182-183 and 65-66.

5 <<https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/321/>> (accessed 15 January 2022).

6 SNOW, 1997: 70.

a leather band or loop of rope which is pulled taut between them. As Snow notes, one boy is stretched out and pulled backward over his own shoulder, seemingly on the very point of falling and losing the game, the other seems to be drawing the band round behind his back, improvising an awkward manoeuvre to unseat his opponent and so claim the victory. A little further back and above them there is a girl balancing a tall broom-handle on the palm of one hand, seemingly drawn slightly forward by its momentum, but just starting to arch her body slightly backwards to try to correct her over-reaching, represented at the moment just before the broom either topples or is righted back into equilibrium by a subtle shift of her arms and feet. One senses one's own muscles twitching in motor-sympathy, cued into the simulation of similar movements by the skilful limning of the image. We may feel a similar urge as we view the older boy to the right precariously poised on those tall stilts, who has seemingly got himself into a momentary impasse trying to avoid the small girl in front of him. He stares intently at the base of the stilts, the momentum of his forward motion momentarily checked, while the girl is casting up a clutch of knuckle-bones, throwing wide her arms in seemingly oblivious rapture.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, almost everywhere we look in the painting there are images of movements arrested at the very point of collapse or of reversal into their opposite. Snow observes the boy recklessly throwing himself against gravity to the right and rear of the scene, running up the steeply sloping cellar doors at the side of the large central building, represented (one has consciously to resist using the term "caught" with its implications of the photographic capture of real movement) just at the moment—his arms spread as if to embrace the void—that his upward rush loses momentum and the tumble back down to earth is about to begin. In a nice touch, the artist has painted the head and upper torso of a woman leaning out of the window beside him to empty a bucket which serves both to remind the viewer's eye of the correct geometrical perspective and to indicate the force of gravity that is about to reassert itself on the child's body. The slop from the bucket itself streams diagonally outwards, it too not yet fully subject to the direct vertical pull to earth, but, like the boy, on the very point of succumbing to that force. (Please remember this woman, we shall return to her later.)

Equally concerned with evocations of self-absorption, vertical and lateral movement, are the figures to the rear of the picture, under the arches: a group of boys furiously whipping their spinning tops. Both the gyroscopic motion of the tops and the downward action of the boys' whip-arms are brilliantly captured by the artist's deft strokes, and the image is made all the more memorable, and aesthetically complex, as Snow observes, by

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7 SNOW, 1997: 120-121 and 148.

the stasis of the figure of the young girl squatting above and behind them, who seems to be completely rapt in mute contemplation of her own act of urinating on the ground.<sup>8</sup>

What Snow identifies in his reading of all of these images, and of the many more that make up the prolific panorama, is the way in which the painter suggests the degree of utter, unselfconscious self-absorption and delight that each of these children seems to be experiencing in the moment of play—their complete involvement in their present actions, seemingly oblivious of the consequences that we observers, engaging kinaesthetically with the images, are all too aware will necessarily follow. The tugging rider will topple, the upward-rushing boy will stop, teeter, and tumble downwards, and the tops will run down and stop spinning. The moment will pass, life will, life *must*, go on. There are greater, stronger, forces at work in the world than these girls and boys dream of in their childish philosophy. But for now—for the eternal now that is the life of the painting—they continue to play, frozen forever in the pleasures of the lived moment. And it is in the relationship between the simple, physical absorption of the represented figures and the more sophisticated reading of the wider, seemingly inevitable narrative to follow that we as spectators of the image are cued to extract from it (and through which we read its significance), that the painting's affective and imaginative transaction with us resides.

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What do these images, and my discussion of them, have to do with clowns and fooling, or indeed with childhood? What is specifically childlike or foolish about such images of movement and arrest, present equipoise and imagined future calamity? It might quite legitimately be objected that plenty of paintings seem to capture motion, and even motion arrested at a moment of crisis. Indeed it might be argued to be a *sine qua non* of a certain kind of realistic art to do precisely that. But what I think Bruegel creates in these particular images—and what is relevant about them for an understanding of dramatic clownage—is a demand that we as spectators should attend pleasurably to bodies in motion that are never quite in full control of that motion. And this relates directly to clowns and clowning. For early modern stage clowns, like children of a certain age, are embodied beings whose movements are characterised by an apparent pushing of themselves to the very limits of their—self-evidently restricted—capacity (and often beyond it), a pushing motivated by a kind of self-absorption and self-delight out of sync with adult conceptions of the world and its demands. In Bruegel's image this tension between ambition and capacity, between the child's perspective and the viewer's, is in one sense the subject of the painting, and is

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8 SNOW, 1997: 115-117.



abstracted and foregrounded for the viewer's kinaesthetic pleasure. And the same is true, the surviving texts suggest, of many a Tudor scene of clowning.

The same kind of capricious, self-obsessed and self-absorbed quality one sees in Bruegel's children is, for example, captured in the antics of Fancy, one of the vices in John Skelton's early Tudor interlude, *Magnificence* (c.1519), who revels in his own inconsistency and excess, delightedly describing a physical and emotional volatility of which he seems to be more the willing victim than the master. He is, he claims,

Sometime too sober, sometime too sad,  
 Sometime too merry, sometime too mad.  
 Sometime I sit as I were solemn proud,  
 Sometime I laugh over-loud.  
 Sometime I weep for a gee-gaw [*trifle*],  
 Sometime I laugh at the wagging of a straw.  
 With a pear my love you may win,  
 And ye may lose it [again] for a pin.  
 I have a thing for to say,  
 (And I may tend thereto) for play,  
 But in faith I am so occupied,  
 On this half and on every side,  
 That I wote not where I may rest... (ll. 1006-1020)

Wantonness in Sir David Lyndsay's *Satire of the Three Estates* (ll. 1552-1554) shows a similar misplaced self-delight, until the recalcitrant materiality of his own body literally trips him up. Then he is thrown into panic by the thought that he has injured himself, only to discover that he is not hurt at all; at which point he forgets which of his legs it was that he thought he had damaged, and jumps back up like a toddler to carry on with his games:

I think this day to win greit thank;  
 Hey, as a brydlit cat I brank...  
 Alace, I have wreistit my schank!  
 Yit, I gang, be Sanct Michael!  
 Quhilk of my leggis, sirs, as ye know,  
 Was it that I did hurt evin now?  
 Bot, quhairto sould I spear at yow?  
 I think thay baith ar hail. (ll. 467-474)



[I think I'll be rewarded richly for what I have done today. I strut like a cat on a leash. Ouch! I have twisted my leg! Yet, I can still walk, by St Michael! Which of my legs was it that I hurt just now, sirs? But, why am I asking you? They both seem healthy.]<sup>9</sup>

The sense of their being a victim rather than the master of their own bodies;<sup>10</sup> the sense of being suddenly disoriented because they have tumbled over, have forgotten their errand, forgotten what they were going to say, or even forgotten their own names—the sense of being caught up in the pleasures and challenges of the moment—*always*, while oblivious to the wider forces and dangers that must surely follow from their immediate actions or inaction (forces and dangers of which the viewer or spectator is all too painfully aware); these are the characteristic markers of both what it is to be a child in Bruegel's painting and what it is to be a clown on the Tudor stage. Indeed, Fancy's sense of having a thing for to say, but of being so occupied in the moment that he does not know where to rest, could well characterise many of Bruegel's figures as well as provide a characteristic *gestus* of Tudor clownage.

The well-known theatrical maxim, "Never work with animals or children" is an only partly ironic recognition of the risks involved in working with individuals whose understanding of, and so commitment to, the representational enterprise at hand cannot be fully guaranteed. From the perspectives of their fellow actors and their audiences, child actors, like animals, are fundamentally unpredictable, unreliable, never fully contained within and so disciplined by the lines and plots of the plays in which they are asked to appear, never completely and consistently within what Robert Weimann terms the world-in-the play (the dramatic fiction being represented, as opposed to the "play-in-the world", the performance event of which the play is only a part).<sup>11</sup> And neither, of course, are clowns, for almost all of the same reasons. They too seem always liable to go off road, off-message, to ad-lib and address the audience directly, to pursue the lure of an extra laugh at the expense of the wider collective narrative enterprise.

9 The same sense of distraction by sudden, minor misfortune is there too in Skelton's Fancy, who is thrown into confusion mid-sentence by the thought that he has lost his hat: "Now I would... and I wist not what... / Where is my cap? I have lost my hat!" (ll. 1028-1029). The same capacity to be reduced to child-like desolation by minor injury is evident in a figure such as New Guise in *Mankind*, who runs crying to Mischief to be "cured" when Mankind hits him with his spade (ll. 422 ff). For all three texts, see WALKER, ed., 2000, spelling modernised here.

10 One thinks, perhaps, of Simplicity in *The Three Ladies of London*, and the succession of other clowns driven by constant, insatiable hunger, or A and B in Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrece*, Hodge in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, or the devil in the fifteenth-century morality *The Castle of Perseverance* (l. 2008), who are all unable to keep in their farts or faeces for fear. See WALKER, ed., 2014.

11 WEIMANN, 2000: 12.

Tudor fools and clowns were, as David Wiles suggests, creatures only half in the world-in-the play, speaking prose amidst the higher characters' verse, already half-way towards the vernacular speech of the audience, famed for improvising and spontaneity, for holding up the onward momentum of the narrative in pursuit of dialogue with spectators and pieces of signature stage business.<sup>12</sup> And spectators' attentiveness to the possibility of such spontaneity, and of the plot consequently faltering as the clown skipped and ad-libbed around the stage, meant that audience members too were themselves always kept sharply aware of the theatrical occasion, the play-in-the-world, and were indeed encouraged to retain a sense of it by the clown's delicate, precarious balance along the narrow divide between play-world and auditorium.

This was, of course, precisely what that most directorially-driven of theatre critics, Hamlet, says that he objects to in the clownage of his day—and by implication of Shakespeare's day too:

[...] let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be [some] of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quality of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. (*Hamlet*, III.ii.37-45)

Other texts reinforce this sense of the clown as dedicated to self-promotion and self-absorption over and above—even at the expense of—the requirements of the plot, introducing extra-textual material, mugging, pratfalls and other comic business into their performances at just the wrong moments. Richard Brome's *Antipodes* (1640), for example, observed how, in “the days of Tarlton and Kemp”, it was permissible for clowns to

...take license to yourself to add unto  
Your parts your own free fancy, and sometimes  
To alter or diminish what the writer  
With care and skill composed, and when you are  
To speak to your co-actors in the scene,  
You hold interlocutions with the audience.<sup>13</sup>

Joseph Hall's *Virgidemiarum* (1597) even pre-empted Hamlet's objections, and spoke of what the author called the clown's “self-resembled show” (a phrase on which Weimann bases an excellent discussion), his self-absorbed straying partly—or wholly—outside the

12 WILES, 1997: 101-102.

13 BROME, 1640: sig. D3<sup>v</sup> (spelling modernised).

role he is asked to play in order to entertain the audience with physical antics and gurning, which disrupt the decorum of the play as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

We seem to see just such a moment actually scripted into Ulpian Fulwell's interlude, *Like Will to Like* (printed in 1587), when the Vice, Nicholas Newfangle, is instructed to come on stage and improvise for as long as he chooses before the start of the next scene:

Here entreth Nichol Newfangle, and bringeth in with him a bag, a staff, a bottle, and two halters, going about the place, showing it unto the audience and singeth this: "Trim mer-chandise, trim, trim, / Trim mer-chandise, trim, trim". He may sing this as oft as he thinketh good.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, the Clown in the marvellously self-reflexive student drama, *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, was also brought on stage, seemingly to improvise in the absence of any lines set down for him—another routine built around the delivery of a comic song. Having been pulled onstage with a rope by a character named Dromo, he is given a refresher course in the kind of physical business that was the playhouse clown's stock in trade: "Why, if you can but draw thy mouth awry, lay thy leg over thy staff, saw a piece of cheese asunder with thy dagger, lap up drink on the earth, I warrant thee they'll laugh mightily." He is then "turn[ed] loose" to "say somewhat for thyself, or hang and be *non plus!*" Thus abandoned, he launches into a lamentation of his lot that seems only partly scored by the surviving printed text.

This is fine, i'faith! Now, when they have nobody to leave on stage, they bring me up, and, which is worse, tell me not what I should say. Gentles, I dare say you look for a fit

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14 "...midst the silent rout, / Comes leaping in a self-misformed lout / And laughs, and grins, and frames his mimic face, / And justles straight into a prince's place: / Then doth the theatre echo all aloud / With gladsome noise of that applauding crowd. / A goodly hotch-potch! When vile russetings / Are matched with monarchs and mighty kings. / A sober grace to sober Tragic Muse / When each base clown his clumsy fist doth bruise, / And show his teeth in double rotten row / For laughter at his self-resembled show" (HALL, 1863: l.iii.33-44). Indeed, merely the appearance of the clown's face through the rear-curtain might reduce the audience to narrative-arresting hysterics. Epigram 94 of Henry Peacham's *Thalia's Banquet* (1620) recalls how, "Tarlton, when his head was only seen, / The tire-house door and tapestry between, / Set all the multitude in such a laughter / They could not hold for scarce an hour after" (PEACHAM, 1620: n.p.; text modernised). Similarly, Wager's *The Longer Thou Livest* cues just such a moment of head-thrusting, gurning, self-revelation for the actor playing Moros, the sottish fool in that play. The "serious" characters Discipline and Exercita are onstage discussing Moros's moral failings, and a stage direction reads: "Between whiles let Moro put in his head" (WAGER, 1569: sig. Ci). This *gestus* was, of course, mined hugely successfully during the later twentieth century by the English comedian Eric Morcambe.

15 FULWELL, 1587: sig. Diii<sup>v</sup> (spelling modernised).

of mirth. I'll therefore present unto you a proper new love-letter of mine to the tune of "Put on the smock a' Monday", which in the heat of my charity I penned. (ll. 661-692)

When he has finished his performance, he asks the audience, "How like you that, masters? Has any young man a desire to copy this...? Now, if I could but make a fine scurvy face, I were a king! O Nature, why didst thou give me so good a look?" (ll. 700-704).<sup>16</sup>

An even greater degree of freedom to improvise was granted to the actor taking the role of the comic servant Ragau in *Jacob and Esau* (1568). A stage direction in that play notes, with no further elaboration: "Here he counterfeiteth how his master calleth him up in the morning and of his answers".<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the actor playing the foolish hero, Moros, in William Wager's *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art* (c.1569) is directed on entering to read aloud from the book he is carrying, "as fondly [i.e. foolishly] as you can devise".<sup>18</sup>

These were, of course, instances of *scripted* audience interaction, discreet "turns", some with a comic song attached, written into the drama to provide an interlude between scenes. What Hamlet, Hall, and Brome were objecting to, with varying degrees of irony, was the rather more disruptive—because unscripted and unpredictable—ad-libs that interrupted the play while other actors were onstage, and "some necessary question of the play...[was] then to be considered". From the spectator's position, though, the two things might not always have been easy to tell apart, and the pleasures they offered even less distinct from each other.

An earlier generation of critics of sixteenth-century theatrical disruption and indecorum had also dwelt upon audience uncertainty over what was real and what was performed, and the dangers of confusing the two. Thomas More and Erasmus, thinking no doubt of the religious and interlude drama of their native England and the Netherlands respectively, seem to have assumed that what Philip Butterworth has termed the "agreed pretence" between actors and audiences was the key to successful performance.<sup>19</sup> Spectators, of course, know that the men performing before them are actors dressed as kings and sultans and pretending to be them for the purposes of presenting a story, but they must never admit as much for the duration of the performance. For, if someone were to whip off the Prince's cloak to reveal the actor beneath, or if he were to "ken so little good [as] to show out of season what acquaintance" he has with the actor offstage, "and

16 *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, ed. Macray, 1886 (text modernised).

17 *Jacob and Esau*, 1568: marginal SD, sig. Aii (spelling modernised).

18 WAGER, 1569: sd, sig. Ciii (spelling modernised).

19 BUTTERWORTH, 2014: *passim*.

call him by his own name while he standeth in his majesty, one of his tormentors might hap to break his head, and worthy, for marring of the play”.<sup>20</sup>

What clowns do onstage, of course, is to continually threaten just such a calamitous “marring” of the play by keeping their own identities always partially visible beneath and through any role they are currently playing. As Wiles observes, such a clown as those imagined by Hamlet is “not trying to assume the inner reality” of a character. Rather, “his mannerisms exploit the fact that he is a known theatrical performer dressed up in [a costume]”.<sup>21</sup> This presence of the theatrical celebrity beneath the character must also have been partly evident in a lead actor such as Allen or Burbage in their more serious roles, but what the clown added to the equation was that spectators’ awareness of his meta-theatrical persona, his “self-resembled show”,<sup>22</sup> seemed to threaten to derail the play itself—although it never actually did so. A more modern equivalent would be a comedian such as Frankie Howard, Eric Morecambe, or Noel Fielding, who is always at least half out of role, always not quite wholly inside the world-in-the play, whenever they are onstage or on camera. Similarly, on the Tudor stage, regardless of their current role and costume, a John Heywood, a Robert Wilson, a Richard Tarlton, or a Will Kemp always remained at the same time also, in the eyes of the spectators, recognisably, insistently, themselves.<sup>23</sup> Their show was also always partly self-resembled, and in their artificial version of unselfconscious self-revelation, I suggest, they offered spectators similar pleasures to those offered by Bruegel’s representations of those childhood games.

This fear of a play falling apart through the puncturing of agreed pretence, of a moment of improvisation so distracting to the audience that they forget to pretend to believe in what was happening, causing the performance as a whole to grind to a halt, was always partly fictional, of course. There is no evidence of plays actually failing to finish owing to excessive clowning or ad-libbing. But the dangerous, enticing possibility that they might just do so was perhaps more real and powerful on the Tudor stage than it is today, partly as a result of Tudor performance and rehearsal practices. If scholars such as Butterworth and Tiffany Sterne are right in assuming that Tudor companies did not engage in substantial collective rehearsal but rather that each actor would largely learn their own part in isolation from their fellows from a roll or “part” that gave only their own speeches and limited cues to signal when to deliver them, then any failure to follow the expected sequence and deliver the necessary cues in place and on time might

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20 MORE, 1557: 66.

21 WILES, 1987: x.

22 WEIMANN, 2000: 98-101.

23 See, for example, VAN ES, 2013: 85.

well have threatened to torpedo a performance in mid-flow, as Flute the bellows-mender almost does in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when he speaks all of his part at once, “cues and all” (III.i.88-96).

Butterworth makes the case succinctly:

In present-day theatre, where players have access to and knowledge of the complete text of the play, if a player misses a cue, it is possible for the other players to compensate for the error either by jumping from one point of the text to another, or by improvising their way out of or around the problem. Since the medieval player only had access to, knowledge of, and apparent responsibility for his own part, it may be that he was unable to operate in this way. Memory and recognition of cues could almost be said to have been more important than memory of the part, for without the player's response to the cue, both the part and the player were effectively marooned.<sup>24</sup>

In such conditions the clown's ad-libbing and interaction with the audience might well have appeared all the more reckless, all the more irresponsibly, childishly self-indulgent and self-absorbed, and all the more pleurably risky in the eyes of certain kinds of spectator.

What I will do in this final section is draw together the two main elements of the preceding discussion. There is, on the one hand, physical movement—that sense, shared by Bruegel's balancing, tugging, almost-but-not-quite-yet toppling children and Tudor clowns, of being caught between compelling forces which they do not fully understand or register, but which they still somehow resist in moments of seemingly complete self-absorption in a task (whether it is spinning a top or chatting to spectators). Then, on the other hand, there is the claim that what clowns do is disrupt the flow of a narrative and threaten to mar the serious business of the stage, the “necessary question of the play” then in hand. For it seems to me that what a number—perhaps the majority—of Tudor scenes

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24 BUTTERWORTH, 2014: 71. The claim that Tudor actors had little or no collective rehearsal time remains contentious. As Butterworth acknowledges, scattered evidence of collective rehearsals survives from across the Tudor century, and not just of rehearsal to ensure that the actors had learned their lines by heart and were thus “without book”, but of rehearsal to practice “action”—what we might think of as blocking and transitions. Butterworth himself cites, for example, Peter Quince's declaration in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that the forest clearing provides “a marvellous convenient place for our rehearsal” where they can “do it in action as we will do it before the Duke” (III.i.5)—a particularly telling example, given that the play seems to parody conventional folk-drama practices. We might also note the observation of the German visitor to England, Johannes Rheianus, who in 1611 noted that “in England [the actors] are daily instructed, as it were in a school, so that even the most eminent actors have to allow themselves to be taught their places by the dramatists, and this gives life and ornament to a well-written play” (cited and translated from the German in KLEIN, 1962: 556).



of clowning do is script just such moments of arrested movement and plot development, precisely so that the clown's comic business, his physical movements, his gurning and jesting, his signature routines—are registered by audiences as resistance to the pull of the story, as a refusal to acknowledge the tug of narrative gravity at work on them. And, as a consequence, spectators are repeatedly cued in these clowns' scenes to feel pleasurable anxiety that the plot is not advancing, and a frustrated anticipation that something awful may happen as a consequence—not so much to the play-in-the-world (which is what More, Erasmus and Hamlet felt), but *within* it—to the necessary question of the plot that we are encouraged to feel that we should be focused upon at that moment. The plays, that is, *simulate* the sense that something disastrous is about to happen without the need to recreate an external threat to the performance in order to do so. So, like the broom-balancer and the stilt-walker in Bruegel's painting, Tudor clowns are characteristically presented as if caught in a moment of crisis, poised between their own self-absorbed sense of investment in the moment and *our* sense of impending calamity.

Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster describe the Tudor Vices, forerunners of the Shakespearean clown and fool alike, as showing “an extraordinary penchant for travelling”, always arriving onstage as if from a long journey. They cite Nicholas Newfangle in *Like Will to Like* (who goes on a “journey into Spain”) and Hick Scorner (who declares he has “been in many a country” [*Hick Scorner*, l. 300])—and we might add Merry Report in John Heywood's *Play of the Weather*, who, in a bravura speech of fifteen lines, lists the forty English and Continental towns he claims to have visited (from “Louvain [...] London, and [...] Lombardy” to “Ing Jing-jang Jaybird [in] the parish of Butsbury” [ll. 198-211])—<sup>25</sup>all during the five-line interval since we last saw him. Weimann and Bruster suggest that

This movement relates to the character's wayward and erratic disposition, which goes hand in hand with, but ultimately transcends, the agility of his own body. This nimbleness affects the language itself, unfixing given patterns of meaning and understanding. Thus, closely allied with images of kinetic energy and spatial motion, there is an element of unpredictable and other impertinent movement informing the process of signification itself.<sup>26</sup>

Still more pertinently for my argument, the clowns, while they are onstage, are often placed in situations where their sojourning there, their attempts to amuse audiences with ad-libs, nonsensical explanations of irrelevant matters, and songs, are presented as frustrating their departure *offstage* for somewhere else—as resisting a necessary impulse to

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25 WALKER, ed., 2014: 125.

26 WEIMANN and BRUSTER, 2008: 41.



exit. Clowns, that is, are strategically depicted, not only as having come from somewhere else, but as being always on the point of departing *to* somewhere else as well. The gravitational pull to exit is a fundamental part of the dramaturgy of clowning, and the clown's resistance to that pull is frequently presented as precarious, unwilling, and uncomprehending. Part of his folly lies precisely in his apparent inability or unwillingness to appreciate the seriousness of that pull—a pull which would, if he gave in to it, restore the literal and metaphorical gravity of the narrative events around him—a pull of which spectators are deliberately and pointedly cued by the dialogue to be fully and frustratedly aware.

A good example of this dynamic from the mid-century can be seen in George Wapull's *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (printed in 1576), in which the Vice, Courage, engages in extensive dialogue with spectators, the ostensible purpose of which is to get some or all of them to follow him offstage to his boat, his “bargeto”, which we are repeatedly told is on the point of sailing. He never quite manages to get anyone to do this, of course, partly because the script cues the audience *not* to do so, but also because he is himself repeatedly drawn to delay his departure by the urge to list and anatomise the kinds of people that are already on the boat, and those he sees all around him. The tension between his insistently scripted desire to leave and the equally attractive urge to remain provides Courage's tense *gestus* in the scene:

To the bargeto!  
 Come they that will go.  
 Why sirs, I say, when?  
 It is high tide, we may not abide.  
 The tide tarrieth no man.  
 If ye will go,  
 Why then tell me so,  
 Or else come away straight.  
 If ye come not soon,  
 You shall have no room,  
 For we almost have our freight.<sup>27</sup>

In all, Courage dominates the stage for nearly a hundred lines, adopting a range of voices and attitudes towards spectators, whether individually or collectively, cajoling, enticing, and chastising them for not following him, while making it perfectly clear why they should not do so (he eventually reveals that the barge is bound “to the devil of hell”)—all the while interspersing his speech with reminders of the urgency of his departure (“When come ye away? / Still do I say, / As loud as I can [...] / The tide tarrieth no man” [sig. Aiii]).

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27 WAPULL, 1576: sig. Aiii (spelling modernised).

This representation of the clown's time on stage as a digression from, and frustration of, a pressing call to be elsewhere is presented just as obviously, and even more delightfully, in the scene between Lance and his dog in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*,<sup>28</sup> where the play provides not just one but two recalcitrant and potentially off-message bodies onstage, the scripted recalcitrance of Lance (probably played by Will Kemp), and the unscripted and unpredictable intransigence of this dog, Crab (probably played by a dog of a different name). The two are presented as caught lingering at the very moment of departure ("I have received my proportion, like the prodigious son, and am going with Sir Proteus to the Imperial's court", Lance malapropistically informs us [II.iii.3-5]). Hence, every line that Lance speaks in the scene appears as a diversion from that mission, as his extended anecdote about his departure, using the props to hand to stand in for his family ("My mother weeping, my father wailing, my sister crying, our maid howling, our cat wringing her hands" [6-8]) delays the actual event in favour of what seems a potential *mise-en-abyme* of deferral and regression. Every mistaken detail requires an equally bungled correction ("I am the dog. No, the dog is himself, and I am the dog. O, the dog is me and I am myself..." [21-23]) or the addition of a prior detail in order to explain it ("This shoe is my father. No, this left shoe is my father. No, no, this left shoe is my mother. Nay, that cannot be so, neither. Yes, it is so, it is so, it hath the worsen sole. This shoe with the hole in it is my mother, and this my father" [14-18]). Hence, spectators are prompted to grow increasingly tense, more and more pleasurably frustrated as the story develops, or rather as it fails to develop, and Lance repeatedly fails to leave. That all this is a delay from the matter in hand, and that the offstage tide indeed waits for no man, is clear throughout the scene, but it is made manifest with the arrival of another character, Panthino, to hurry Lance offstage ("Lance, away, away, aboard. Thy master is shipped, and thou art to post after with oars" [33-34]). Like the woman emptying the bucket out of the window in Bruegel's painting, Panthino is introduced here precisely to remind us of the urgency of the forces pulling Lance to be elsewhere. But his arrival serves only to delay matters further when he unwisely asks why Lance is crying, which prompts further digressions and necessitates a further reminder of the necessary question of the play then to be considered—their departure for the court ("Away, ass, you'll lose the tide if you tarry any longer." [35-36]), before both can finally hurry offstage.

Lancelot Gobbo's extended discussion of whether or not he should leave his master Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is another example of this dynamic in action. The clown's stated desire to run, and so leave the stage, is continually frustrated by his rehearsal

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28 For an elegant discussion of this scene, see GHOSE, 2022: 83-85.

of reasons for not leaving, and his childlike desire to list all of the possible ways in which he might be addressed in his hypothetical discussions of the situation with “the fiend”:

The fiend is at mine elbow and tempts me, saying to me “Gobbo, Lancelot Gobbo, good Lancelot”, or “good Gobbo”, or “good Lancelot Gobbo—use your legs, take the start, run away”. My conscience says “No, take heed, honest Lancelot, take heed, honest Gobbo”, or, as aforesaid, “honest Lancelot Gobbo—do not run, scorn running with thy heels”. (II.ii.2-8)

Yet another, still more obvious, example is provided by Pompey’s filibustering performance before Angelo and Escalus’s court in *Measure for Measure* (II.i.82 ff). There, each trivial, irrelevant detail of the story, from the number of prunes in the dish being eaten, what that dish was made of (“a dish of some threepence; your honours have seen such dishes, they are not china dishes; but very good dishes” [90-92]), to who ate the remainder, where he sat when doing so, and when exactly his father had died, requires a lengthy digression, while the pressing matter in hand is repeatedly brought to our attention by the increasingly irritated interventions of the judges: “Go to, go to, no matter for the dish, sir” (93); “Come, you are a tedious fool. To the purpose. What was done to Elbow’s wife [...]?” (112-114); “This will last out a night in Russia, / When nights are longest there” (129-130).

The consistency with which Shakespeare uses this technique to characterise his clowns’ stagecraft is striking, and might also, in a less comic vein, throw a sidelight on his depiction of a number of other figures. It is there very obviously in Polonius in *Hamlet*, for example, whose every speech seems designed to appear a frustrating, digressive delay preventing something more important from happening. A good example is his seemingly endless advice to the servant Reynaldo about how to find out what Laertes is up to in France (II.i.1-75)—advice which repeatedly holds Reynaldo back from leaving. Another is his declaration to Gertrude that “since brevity is the soul of wit” he will be brief in telling her that Hamlet is mad, but then isn’t, as he gets drawn into a self-absorbed critique of his own description:

“Mad” call I it, for to define true madness,  
What is’t but to be nothing else but mad?  
But let that go [...]  
That he is mad, ’tis true; ’tis true ’tis pity,  
And pity ’tis ’tis true—a foolish figure,  
But farewell it, for I will use no art. (II.ii.94-96, 98-100)

And there is, of course, the well-known description of the actors’ abilities, offered in response to Hamlet’s simple request to tell him what they are good at: “the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pas-

toral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible or poem unlimited” (II.ii.398-401). Shakespeare even reworks the familiar “the tide tarrieth no man” routine, as Polonius talks to Laertes, warning him that he must hurry (“Yet here, Laertes? Aboard, aboard, for shame! / The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail, / And you are stayed for” [I.iii.55-57]) while preventing him from doing so for twenty-six lines before telling him again, “The time invites you; go. Go; your servants tend” (83).<sup>29</sup>

More strikingly still, the technique seems to underscore the King’s descent into pure folly and madness in *King Lear*. For, from about midway through the play, Lear too starts to exhibit this same curious, self-absorbed failure to leave the stage, despite a pressing need to do so, associated with the clowns. This begins, as Gary Taylor has noted in another context,<sup>30</sup> in Goneril’s house, even before Lear reaches the heath, when an almost palpable kinesic force that seeks to pull him offstage is established through his own oft-declared will to depart (“Saddle my horses, call my train together! / Degenerate bastard, I’ll not trouble thee” [I.iv.231-232 (Folio Text)], “prepare my horses” [236], “Go, go, my people!” [251]), while his determination nonetheless to curse his daughter and lament his lot keeps him onstage until he finally exits with a seemingly purposeful “away, away!” at line 269, only to re-enter four lines later to declare again that he will leave for Regan’s palace, which he finally does at lines 285 ff. Later, on the heath, this tendency becomes all the more obvious and urgent, as Stephen Booth has observed,<sup>31</sup> with the need for Lear to exit from the storm being set up as early as the Fool’s lines at III.ii.11-13: “Good nuncle, in, ask thy daughters blessing. Here’s a night pities neither wise men nor fools”. Yet he does not finally go indoors until two whole scenes later. He looks to be about to enter the hovel at the end of III.ii, but the start of III.iv finds him still outside and still failing to leave the stage for shelter elsewhere, despite the best efforts of a whole

29 A similar principle is at work on a more general level in *The First Part of Henry IV*, the whole plot of which can be seen as an exercise in deliberate deferral and frustration. The one thing that all spectators can be guaranteed to know about Prince Hal is that he will throw off his dissolute ways and become the military paragon, Henry V. Thus the play teases spectators by delaying that moment for as long as possible, making both an apparent unconcern about the passing of time and acute anxiety about exactly what the future will hold an insistent theme of the scenes between Hal and Falstaff. The play establishes the theme from the outset by following an opening scene in which the pressing urgency of events, times, and places dominates the conversation (“Cousin, on Wednesday next our Council we / Will hold at Windsor. So inform the lords. / But come yourself with speed to us again, / For more is to be said and to be done / Than out of anger can be utterèd” (I.i.102-106), with one in which an apparent obliviousness to the passing of time is the first thing discussed (“*Sir John*: Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?” [I.ii.1]; “*Prince Harry*: [...] I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day” [10-12]).

30 TAYLOR, 1981: 226.

31 BOOTH, 1987: 30-33.

succession of characters (the Fool, Kent, Gloucester, Edgar), who enter to him to try to draw him off.

The characteristic association at the centre of the clown's stagecraft, between, on the one hand, simple-mindedness, self-absorption, and vacancy and, on the other, a seeming inability to leave the stage despite a need urgently to do so, seems, then, to have provided Shakespeare with a ready means of transitioning Lear from confusion into something more obviously "mad", and of signalling that descent to his audiences. Other Shakespearean manifestations of this *gestus* in a tragic vein can be found in the ruminations of the gravediggers in *Hamlet*, or, perhaps archetypally, in the Clown in *Antony and Cleopatra*, wittering on about the qualities of his worm, while the heroine, and the play itself, insistently signal the need for him to leave her to her tragic designs.<sup>32</sup>

Shakespeare's clowns, then, like Skelton's Fancy or Wapull's Courage, are exponents of a particular kind of comic *gestus* designed to exploit a productive set of tensions between spectatorial expectation and its fulfilment, between progress and delay, the furtherance of design and its apparent frustration. Hamlet's advice to the players signals a seemingly seriously-intended hostility towards those clowns who hold up and disrupt performances with their self-indulgent improvisation—a hostility that echoes and develops a long tradition of anxiety about the vulnerability of dramatic fiction and performance to moments of spontaneity between actors and audiences. Yet Shakespeare himself was also, as we have seen, adept at generating versions of exactly that situation within his own plays, both comic and tragic, both those written as vehicles for Will Kemp and those written for Robert Armin. He did so by scripting moments of seemingly disruptive apparent improvisation for his comic actors which placed them onstage and seemingly preoccupied, while the other actors and spectators are cued to find their presence to varying degrees frustrating, irksome, or (delightfully) irrelevant to the question then in hand.

Clowns seem to be unaware of time passing, to run their lives by a different clock, or not to have a clock at all. Their presence onstage is constructed precisely to generate a sense of delay, to apparently slow the action to the point of stasis (even if what the clown is actually doing is frenetic, manic, or overly busy), while offstage that "necessary question of the play [...] then to be considered" is rushing onwards, leaving the clown, and us,

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32 An earlier, somewhat gentler example can be found in Skelton's *Magnificence*, where the vice figure Cloaked Collusion is left onstage, seemingly just to fill in time with inconsequential chatter, while the plot to defraud the prince proceeds apace offstage: "To pass the time and order while a man may talk / Of one thing and other to occupy the place, / Then for the season that I here shall walk, / As good to be occupied as up and down to trace / And do nothing..." (ll. 689-693).

behind. Play-time and Clown-time are thus very carefully set up as in opposition, the one necessary, urgent, pressing, the other trivial, irrelevant, ignorant of the wider needs of the play-world and the play. Like Bruegel's broom-balancer, Lance, Lear, Fancy, and Courage thus seem explicitly to teeter on the brink of dramatic failure in their scenes in ways that draw spectators kinaesthetically into a pleasurable, expectant relationship with their precariousness.

The most significant (and perhaps counter-intuitive) point to draw from this might be, then, not so much that this kind of clowning leans out of the world-in-the-play to engage spectators in distracting banter, as Hamlet and co. claim, but that it also cues audience members to lean across that divide in the other direction. It encourages them to engage (and identify) with the very play-world to which the clown seems at that point to be oblivious, paradoxically giving it an all-the-more pressing sense of verisimilitude as the result of his failure to acknowledge it. That sense of the boat about to leave, of the tide inexorably turning, and of the wider play-world it connotes, would not have been half as vivid to us had it not been for the clown's seeming indifference to it. That storm would not seem half so apocalyptic if Lear did not seem quite so oblivious to its more pragmatic implications for his health. What Hamlet castigated as an act of spontaneous, childish irresponsibility on the clown's part, was, then, when carefully used, an ingenious means of reinforcing the affective verisimilitude of scripted drama, and of making the necessary question of the play seem all the more necessary and pressing. In this sense, these scenes of child-like clownish "improvisation" have as much, or more to tell us about the fulfilment of theatrical design and the productive manipulation of "agreed pretence" between authors, actors, and spectators, as they do about the ways that these things might be spontaneously, disruptively, subverted, or "marred".



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