

Unruly Audiences and Dissenting Scholars

Natália Pikli

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The lively interaction between early modern audiences and actors in the playhouse as well as the self-reflexivity of early modern drama have been the subject of numerous studies. Lionel Abel's introduction of the term "metatheater" in the 1960s launched a long row of studies from James Calderwood's monographs in the 1970s to recent scholarly approaches. These current studies re-consider "metatheater" with an eye either on affect theory (Bridget Escolme) or cognitive sciences (Amy Cook). The close relationship between play and audience was also addressed in classic monographs by Robert Weiman, Tiffany Stern, Jeremy Lopez, and William Worthen. Studies by Louis Montrose, Tanya Pollard, and others on what Robert Ormsby called the "porous body of the audience" and corresponding "pathological" antitheatrical rhetorics (Ormsby qtd. in Dunnum 19) are positioned at the opposing end of the spectrum of scholarly views that Dunnum appears to occupy. These scholars (all duly referenced throughout the book) share one assumption: Shakespeare and his contemporaries, playwrights, actors, and orators alike, intended to affect the audience in a tangible way, to incite them to feel or do something, based on how they perceived what was happening on stage. Eric Dunnum's monograph goes against the grain and claims that early modern playwrights intended to control their audiences with metadramatic (that is, in-text metatheatrical) means, fearing that unruly theater crowds may ignite riots potentially leading to the closing of theaters, which in a few cases that are

appropriately and informatively mapped in the book, actually did take place. In short, Dunnum proposes that playwrights from John Lyly to John Webster and Richard Brome constituted the image of a “non-reactive playgoer” (5), favoring a certain anti-Brechtian audience in their dramas, in order to avoid kindling unruly behavior among theater crowds with the help of metadrama and consciously anti-mimetic representation.

Dunnum’s dissenting approach is laudable and promises new insights, even if the field he is charting does not always offer satisfying evidence for his claims. His knowledge of the vast corpus of early modern drama is profound and impressive. Nevertheless, this immense quantity of primary material is predominantly presented as an undifferentiated mass; that is, Dunnum does not seem to pay attention to how subsequent decades and differing contexts defined and altered drama production. He is not afraid to lump together John Lyly’s *Sappho and Phao* from 1584 with Richard Brome’s works from the 1620s and later, to analyze and compare them according to one aspect only, leaving significant performative and cultural-political contexts unmentioned. This way, although, for instance, the interpretation of metadrama in Ben Jonson’s *Epicene* (1609) and Brome’s *The Antipodes* (c. 1640) offers valuable and original insights regarding certain scenes, Dunnum’s collapsing of different time periods leaves much to be desired, and conforms to a “pick-and-choose” method of selecting sources rather than providing a comprehensive and historically informed view on how early modern playwrights imagined audience response.

Dunnum addresses the central question with his reading of a wide range of plays, among which some receive only a cursory glance, others are more thoroughly analyzed, and a few keep re-appearing and are revisited throughout the book. Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, Jonson’s *Epicene*, John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, *Eastward Ho!* (by George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston), Thomas Middleton’s *A Game at Chess*, and Brome’s *The Antipodes* and *A Jovial Crew* anchor the wide-ranging discussion of many plays between circa 1584 and

1640, and the reader can learn a lot about a good number of plays even from such brief analyses. The book does not offer full interpretations even in the case of the “anchor” plays but focuses on certain scenes in them, which provide opportunities for a metadramatic interpretation. One of the greatest merits of *Unruly Audiences* is the combination of the concept of metadrama with Austin-Searle’s speech act theory, and its differentiating between constative and performative language. Dunnun re-visits well-known scenes from such a viewpoint and gives sound reasoning for, for instance, the presence of the silent witness Cariola in the marriage scene of *The Duchess of Malfi* or Bellario’s letter in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The structure of the volume is well-conceived, logical, and easy to follow. First, Dunnun calls attention to the “alterity” of early modern audiences, accentuating the difference between a modern-day and a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century audience in the original and the reconstructed Globe Theatre. He also duly emphasizes that public playhouses and playgoing in early modern London presented new forms of cultural phenomena, as compared to earlier forms of theater, like mystery plays. Therefore, new frameworks had to be established, and playwrights did play a central role in shaping their spectators’ expectations and behavior. However, these valuable springboard ideas lead to less substantiated claims in the following chapters, which all argue for how “playwrights had to keep the audience from actively interpreting performances” and “limit the interpretative agency of the audience” (7).

The first chapter records the cultural anxiety and actual incidents related to theater crowds and riots, which may have been started by them, either directly or tangentially. Since early modern public playhouses catered for multi-layered audiences, the majority of which consisted of young people, from teenage apprentices to Inns of Court- or Oxbridge-educated young men, it is no wonder that unruly incidents often started if not in but around a theater. The first famous incident, the so-called “turn upon the toe” affair, happened in 1584, when a gentleman stepped on the belly of an apprentice after a performance, which ended in a fight

between not only them, but apprentices and gentlemen in general, which lasted for days. All this happened in Shoreditch, in the vicinity of two playhouses, The Theatre and The Curtain, which were therefore sentenced to be destroyed by the city council. However, only James Burbage, the owner of The Theatre was harassed for a couple of days, but the playhouses were never harmed; similarly to the 1597 *Isle of Dogs* incident, when the play was banned, and Ben Jonson went to prison, but the theaters were never closed down for real. The major exceptions to the rule were the three-month closure of the Southwark playhouses between June and September 1592, occasioned by a violent clash between felt-mongers and the Knight Marshal's Men, and the two-week closure that followed the unusually long run of nine successive performances of the "purposely provocative" (167) and highly political play, Middleton's *A Game at Chess* in 1624, besides some other instances which were mostly related to other forms of unruliness in London. Dunnun is correct in stating that such riotous behavior threatened the working conditions of theater-makers, actors, and playwrights, just like naturally occurring outbreaks of the plague. Closing down theaters for unruliness, however, was actually hardly ever executed. Neither the Master of the Revels' and royal censure, nor the city authorities' power over theaters proved strong and consistent as to support what Dunnun bases his claim on, that is, early modern playwrights' overarching fear of inciting unruly behavior in their audiences.

The second and third chapters employ speech act theory with success and focus on metadrama. The overview and examination of twenty-two "inset plays" produces both illuminative interpretations of certain scenes and dubious assertions about the "success" of metadramatic scenes in well-known plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Hamlet*. According to Dunnun, a play-within-the-play is only successful if it achieves what the on-stage director and performers wanted to achieve with it, which may or may not be true in each and every instance. The inset play in *The Antipodes* does cure the protagonist of his wanderlust,

however, to state that Bottom and Company were completely unsuccessful in their performances or that Hamlet accomplished everything he wanted with the Mousetrap scene, leaves much to be debated. The *Pyramus and Thisbe* playlet has an emotional effect on Hippolyta, which she expresses in words as well, and Claudius is clearly affected but never offers a public confession of his crime, which would crown Hamlet's efforts. Often, Dunnun's theoretical claims prove less persuasive than his interpretations of certain plays. For instance, his graph depicting the "triadic relationship of playgoing," indicating "institutional reality," "performance," and "audience" as corresponding angles (74) appear less clarifying and rather convoluted, standing in contrast with other parts of the book, where he devotes himself to close reading and offers informative and original re-considerations of well-known plays like Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* or John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, as well as inspiring views on less familiar plays, like *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, a play once falsely attributed to Shakespeare.

The fourth and fifth chapters, as well as the coda, complement the idea of controlling audiences with the concept of early modern drama as self-consciously anti-mimetic, and comment on the stability of both audiences and playtexts. Dunnun contrasts active readers and unstable early modern printed texts with stable performative texts and expectedly passive playgoers. However, both these clear-cut categories and his insistence on the desired passivity of early modern audiences and on the stability of playtexts leave room for doubt. These claims by Dunnun are not substantially supported either by his examples or by our knowledge regarding the instability of early modern performances and printed versions of plays.

In conclusion, Eric Dunnun's *Unruly Audiences and the Theater of Control in Early Modern London* is an interesting and informative read, however, the validity of his principal tenet is little supported by historical evidence. Nevertheless, his dissenting voice is worth being

noted, while several of his close readings contribute to present-day scholarly discussions of early modern drama in a meaningful way.

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

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