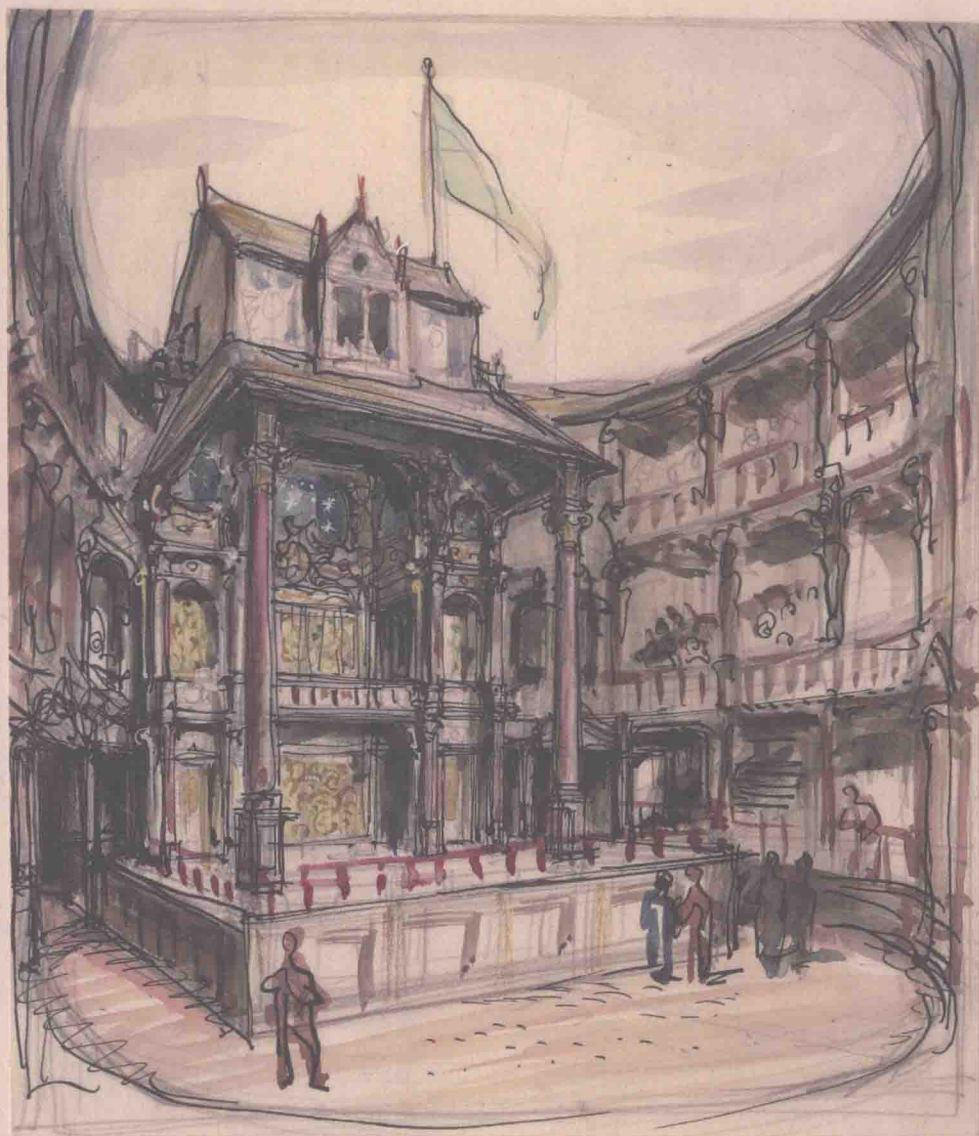
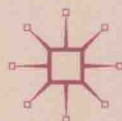


# SHAKESPEARE AND THE MATERIALITY OF PERFORMANCE



*Erika T. Lin*



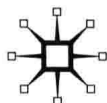
SHAKESPEARE AND THE  
MATERIALITY OF PERFORMANCE

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*ERIKA T. LIN*



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In memoriam  
Fouad Ahmad Siddiqi  
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## Acknowledgments

A book is a performance whose meanings, like those of stage plays, are produced in the interstices between its many actors and audiences. The process of writing, though solitary, is also a communal experience, one in which readers are implicit participants who actively shape the performance. This book represents many years of individual labor, but it comes into being only through an entire community of scholars and friends. In naming what Shakespeare's contemporaries would call the "principal actors of the play," I present only a small token—an indexical signifier—of the myriad ways in which the very substance of this book is shot through with their contributions.

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## Note on Texts

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from Charlton Hinman, ed., *The First Folio of Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 1968), with through line numbers (TLN) followed by act, scene, and line numbers from G. Blakemore Evans et al., eds., *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Excerpts from other early modern printed texts are drawn from electronic facsimiles of the originals in *Early English Books Online* (EEBO). In the case of plays, signature numbers from early modern texts are followed by act, scene, and line numbers from modern editions. Spelling and italics are retained exactly with the exception of the long *s*, which has been silently modernized, and tildes marking omitted letters, which have been lowered and italicized to accord with transcriptions of manuscript sources.

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Note on Texts</i>	xv
 <b>Part I Performance Effects</b>	
Introduction Materializing the Immaterial	3
1 Theorizing Theatrical Privilege: Rethinking Weimann's Concepts of <i>Locus</i> and <i>Platea</i>	23
 <b>Part II Theatrical Ways of Knowing</b>	
2 Staging Sight: Visual Paradigms and Perceptual Strategies in <i>Love's Labor's Lost</i>	41
3 Imaginary Forces: Allegory, Mimesis, and Audience Interpretation in <i>The Spanish Tragedy</i>	71
 <b>Part III Experiencing Embodied Spectacle</b>	
4 Dancing and Other Delights: Spectacle and Participation in <i>Doctor Faustus</i> and <i>Macbeth</i>	107
5 Artful Sport: Violence, Dismemberment, and Games in <i>Titus Andronicus</i> , <i>Cymbeline</i> , and <i>Doctor Faustus</i>	135
 <i>Notes</i>	 167
<i>Bibliography</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	227

# Figures

0.1	Eyeballs. Helkiah Crooke, <i>Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man</i> (1615)	4
1.1	Sketch of the view from the Lords' Rooms at the Globe (2012)	29
2.1	William Rogers, "A godly meditation day and night to be exercised" (ca. 1600)	48
2.2	Stage plans for Lucerne Passion Play (1583)	49
2.3	Detail of nineteenth-century additions to stage plans for Lucerne Passion Play (1583)	49
2.4	Draftsman drawing a nude (woodcut). Albrecht Dürer, <i>Vnderweysung [sic] der Messung</i> (1538)	55
3.1	"The Palace of Sleep." Michel de Marolles, <i>Tableaux du temple des muses</i> (1655)	77
3.2	Title page from Thomas Kyd, <i>The Spanish Tragedie</i> (1615)	91
3.3	Frontispiece to John Bulwer, <i>Philocophus: or, The deafe and dumbe mans friend</i> (1648)	96
3.4	Seeing with the ears and hearing with the eyes. Detail from frontispiece to John Bulwer, <i>Philocophus: or, The deafe and dumbe mans friend</i> (1648)	97
4.1	Tumbling, rope-dancing, and other feats of activity. Johann Amos Comenius, <i>Orbis sensualium pictus</i> (1659; rep., 1685)	108
4.2	Printed text as spectacular feat. <i>Maroccus Extaticus. Or, Bankes bay horse in a Trance</i> (1595)	118
5.1	Dismembered heads on pikes above London Bridge. Detail from Claes Jansz. Visscher's view of London (1616)	140
5.2	Sarah Onsager as Lavinia and Jim Peck as Marcus in an Atlanta Shakespeare Company production of <i>Titus Andronicus</i> (1994)	146
5.3	Sarah Onsager as Lavinia and Stuart Culpepper as Titus in an Atlanta Shakespeare Company production of <i>Titus Andronicus</i> (1994)	147

# Part I

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## Performance Effects



# Introduction

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## Materializing the Immaterial

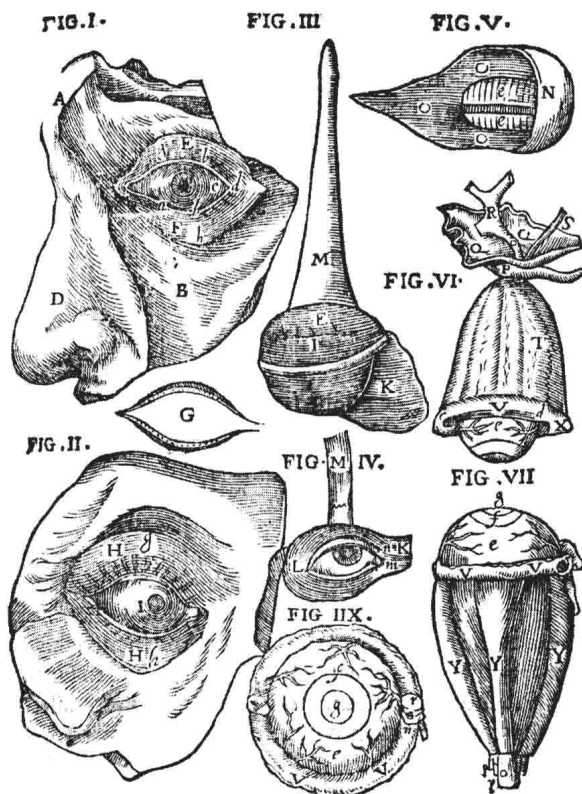
In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, after Gloucester is viciously blinded by Regan and Cornwall, he is turned out of the house to wander comfortless and alone. Deceived by Lear's children and by his own bastard son, Edmund, he recognizes the full extent of their treachery only when his eyes are brutally destroyed. Gloucester cries out that he has no more need for mortal vision: "I haue no way, and therefore want no eyes: / I stumbled when I saw" (TLN 2199–200; 4.1.18–19). Bloody mutilation is here presented as potent reflection on the play's larger themes: it is only when Gloucester's eyes are ripped out that he can finally "see" the truth. Modern theatrical productions underscore this convergence of the literal and the figurative when they creatively stage the episode to avoid showing the blinding itself. Directors often present Gloucester bound to a chair that is then tipped back for the gruesome act. Just as the obliteration of physical vision ultimately enhances his perceptions, spectators who cannot literally view the violent action see its representation all the more clearly in their "mind's eye."

When *King Lear* was originally performed in Shakespeare's day, the theatrical strategies for presenting this scene were startlingly different. In the outdoor amphitheatres of early modern London, playgoers surrounded the stage on three—or sometimes even four—sides. Hiding the blinding by tipping back Gloucester's chair would have been difficult. Yet early modern evidence indicates no such attempts at theatrical subterfuge. English records of the technologies used for onstage blindings are scarce, but sources from the European Continent point to extremely graphic forms of stage violence. The contracts for the 1580 Modane Antichrist play, for example, describe how actors must "put out the eyes of the catholic with pointed skewers (*brochettes poignantes*), and to this end they shall make the necessary eyes and false faces or some alternative as skillfully as they can."<sup>1</sup> In the 1536 Bourges Acts of the Apostles, fake eyes were mounted on augers so that they emerged from the tools when Saint Matthew was blinded.<sup>2</sup> Such references underscore not so much the transcendent power of tragedy as the crude corporeality of vision. Eyes are treated as gross matter, akin to the fleshy substances described in anatomical

treatises such as Helkiah Crooke's *Mikrokosmographia* (figure 0.1). In early modern stage performance, the figurative meanings of sight take a backseat to the gory physicality of eyeballs dripping with blood and spitted on sharp pokers.

Shakespeare's dialogue, too, curiously foregrounds the materiality of vision when it transforms metaphors of sight into bodily action. When interrogated as to why he sent the King to Dover, Gloucester defiantly declares, "Because I would not see thy cruell Nailes / Plucke out his poore old eyes" (TLN 2128–29; 3.7.56–57), and vows that "I shall see / The winged Vengeance ouertake such Children" (TLN 2137–38; 3.7.63–64). The word "see," which Gloucester uses figuratively, is made literal when Cornwall promptly responds by putting out one of his eyes: "See't shalt thou neuer. Fellowes hold y<sup>e</sup> Chaire, / Vpon these eyes of thine, Ile set my foote" (TLN 2139–40; 3.7.65–66). The immediate trigger for Gloucester's mutilation is the word itself. This pattern continues when Cornwall's servant tries to end the torture and dies,

### TABVLA.I.



**Figure 0.1** Eyeballs. Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (London, 1615), 539 [Zz6r]. Courtesy of the Horace Howard Furness Memorial (Shakespeare) Library, University of Pennsylvania.

saying, "Oh I am slaine: my Lord, you haue one eye left / To see some mischeffe on him" (TLN 2156–57; 3.7.78–79). The word "see" here becomes the pretext for blinding the second eye: "Lest it see more, preuent it; Out vilde gelly: / Where is thy luster now?" (TLN 2158–59; 3.7.80–81). Unlike modern productions that try to conceal the violent act so as to enhance its tragic force, Shakespeare's dialogue consistently guides the spectator's gaze back to its horrifying specifics.

Rather than naturalizing the artificiality of the blinding, *King Lear* bizarrely foregrounds it by drawing attention to that which cannot be real: onstage mutilation. In doing so, it highlights theatre's special effects and flaunts the technical resources required for staging such a scene. In addition, the play does not simply perform the blinding; it also narrates the performance of the blinding. Having the bloody deed prompted by the immediately preceding dialogue, the episode constructs the act as curiously motivated not by character or theme but by the presentationality of rhetoric: the immediate pretext for the violence is the fact that a certain word is spoken at a certain moment onstage. The perfunctoriness of the local impetus for the blinding within the representational frame here complements the artificiality of the presentational action. Drawing attention to stage technologies, the play reminds spectators that what they see is *not* a blinding but a simulation of one.

Why would actors have gone to the trouble of offering such spectacular displays of violence only to undercut their believability? How did playgoers respond to such gruesome acts? What cultural resonances would blinding have had in early modern England, and how did they shape its onstage representation? When we read Shakespeare, it is easy to project our own modern theatrical practices and cultural meanings back onto an earlier era. When we consider his plays on their own terms, however, the answers to these kinds of questions are markedly different. Every time and place has its own particular style of performance and a set of unspoken assumptions taken for granted by players and spectators alike: a boy actor may play a female character, unbound hair may indicate madness, a trapdoor may represent hell, the color white may signify death. To those within a culture, this theatrical language is so obvious as to require no explanation; to those on the outside, it is ripe for misinterpretation. In our own theatres today, we do not need to be told explicitly that illuminated emergency exit signs are not part of the set, nor do we wonder at the dimming of house lights at the start of a show. We can well imagine how confusing such features might be for an early modern viewer magically transplanted to our own time—yet we easily forget just how foreign and opaque *their* theatrical standards might be to *us*.

This book reveals the unique and often surprising assumptions that governed theatrical performance for Shakespeare's original audience members. It analyzes the cultural attitudes and practices that conditioned typical ways of thinking and feeling, and it demonstrates how these familiar interpretive and experiential modes permeated the medium of performance. To uncover such intangible, yet crucial, aspects of early modern theatre, I survey a wide range of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, from learned discussions of epistemology to popular accounts of violent sports, from religious treatises on visual perception to legal records of holiday festivity. Reading between the lines of these myriad forms of evidence, I reconstruct the underlying principles that framed the perception, interpretation,



and phenomenological impact of early modern performance: the historically specific markers that distinguished meaningful theatrical signifiers from undifferentiated “background noise”; the interpretive paradigms that circumscribed audience understandings of mimesis; the affective responses generated by spectacle; and the dynamic interplay between theatre’s representational strategies and presentational effects. My study moves beyond the cultural genesis of specific stage conventions to expose the fundamental assumptions that were constitutive of early modern theatrical literacy and that rendered performance intelligible. Any given individual may have deviated from these practices: actors could devise new styles of entertainment, and audience members could respond in a range of ways. Without detracting from the agency of individuals and their heterogeneous actions, however, this book aims to lay out the commonalities that tied them together, the shared habits of mind that circumscribed performance and the cultural logics that undergirded these collective understandings.

## The Materiality of Performance

The paradigms that structured the production and reception of early modern performance grew out of a dynamic cultural field. Since the New Historicism of the mid-1980s, scholars have produced a significant body of work analyzing how plays both reflected broader cultural discourses and produced them. The same was true of the material practices through which these discourses were disseminated. As scholars of book history have shown, print was not merely the inert medium through which verbal content was conveyed but itself participated in the process of meaning-making. If these studies focus on “the materiality of the text,” my project might rightly be called “the materiality of performance.” Textual scholars have explored how printing and reading conventions actively constructed meaning rather than merely transmitting it; I demonstrate the ways in which cultural attitudes and practices were mediated through performance. Because performance is not a concrete object, however, it reveals aspects of materiality that we might miss in the case of printed texts. Performance’s materiality cannot be reduced to the nuts and bolts of stagecraft that have long interested historians of early modern theatre: costumes and properties, playing spaces, technical resources, and repertory schedules.<sup>3</sup> Nor can its processes of production and reception be equated simply with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century acting and spectatorship.<sup>4</sup> Performance is, moreover, not the same as early modern theatre as a commercial entity, whose economic transactions constituted the institutional preconditions of performance but not performance itself.<sup>5</sup> All of these material objects and practices made possible the ephemeral experiences that took place in the theatre, but that experience is marked primarily by its *immateriality*.<sup>6</sup>

In order to understand the cultural implications of early modern theatrical performance, then, we must develop a more capacious sense of what materiality is and how it functions. In recent years, early modern scholars have been particularly interested in studying everyday objects, such as handkerchiefs, mirrors, furniture,