Framing Not-Shakespearean Performance

In a characteristically playful essay, Terence Hawkes reflects on the relationship between the beginning and the ending of *Hamlet*, questioning when, exactly, the play can be said to start:

> We can even ask, as amateurs in playhouse dynamics, and in respect of the experience of a live audience in the theatre, when does the play *effectively* begin? Is it when the first sentry walks out on to the stage? Or has the play already begun in our mind's eye as we enter the theatre, leave our house, get up on that morning, buy our ticket some days/months ago? In our society, in which *Hamlet* finds itself embedded in the ideology in a variety of roles, the play has, for complex social and historical reasons, always already begun. And on to its beginning we have always already imprinted a knowledge of its course of action, and its ending. (1986: 94)

Underscoring the point, Hawkes gives his essay the title *Telmah*, defamiliarizing Shakespeare's famous play by reversing its name. As the above quotation indicates, Hawkes chose *Hamlet* as his subject because of its canonical centrality, its embeddedness in the 'ideology'. But not all of Shakespeare's plays are as socially entrenched as *Hamlet*. The point Hawkes makes would not have worked in the same way if he had chosen a different play as his subject, if he had entitled his essay *Selcirep*.

Perhaps it would be stretching things to claim that *Pericles* is 'always already begun' or that it is 'imprinted' on its audiences in the same way as *Hamlet*. But while audiences might not necessarily have a play like *Pericles* firmly in their mind, Shakespeare's cultural status affects the way audiences approach his plays. As Stephen Purcell notes, 'ideas about Shakespearean spectatorship circulate widely in culture more broadly, and audiences will inevitably arrive at a Shakespearean performance with certain preconceptions about what their role is likely to involve' (2013: 147). These preconceptions can take many forms, for many reasons, and may be undeclared or unexamined, but they begin to form before the lights go down or the actors enter. So, while Hawkes imagines that *Hamlet* may begin when the theatregoer buys their ticket, perhaps that point is much earlier. In her work on Shakespearean playbills and posters, for

example, Carol Chillington Rutter argues that 'the Shakespeare play begins on the street, when the bill – or poster – smacks you right in the face' (2007: 269).

Early modern plays not by Shakespeare might also begin before they have begun. Theatregoers come to any play with preconceptions, regardless of how well they know the play they are seeing. Drawing on Hans Robert Jauss's reader-response theory of the 'horizon of expectation' (1982) Susan Bennett develops the idea of inner and outer theatrical frames to account for the process by which audiences develop preconceptions and through which theatre companies might cultivate expectations. For Bennett, the inner frame is constituted by the performance and its playing space; the outer frame is 'concerned with theatre as a cultural construct through the idea of the theatrical event, the selection of material for production, and the audience's definitions and expectations of a performance' (1990: 1-2). Shakespeare's privileged status in elite and popular culture imbues him with cultural meaning in a way that other dramatists and plays are not, but audiences can build impressions of any play they go to watch, whether it be *Hamlet* or Henry Chettle's *Hoffman*. My aim, then, is to expose some of the cultural assumptions that attend the performance of early modern plays not by Shakespeare and to show how attempts to frame such productions can affect audience responses.

Ironically, one of the main ways in which audiences are invited, or compelled, to anticipate not-Shakespearean drama is through the ghostly presence of Shakespeare himself. The terms often used in academic writing and media reviews, 'not-Shakespeare' or 'Shakespeare's contemporaries', figure early modern drama specifically in relation to Shakespeare. Some scholars and theatre practitioners have found the category of the not-Shakespearean productive, using it to challenge ingrained, conservative ideals about culture enshrined in Shakespeare's canonical identity. In her influential discussion of the 'Jacobean', Bennett argues that the revenge tragedies and city comedies of early modern

England transgress social expectations, offering 'disruptive and occasionally emancipatory' (1996: 95) possibilities. Extending this work, Pascale Aebischer argues that filmmakers like Derek Jarman draw upon the Jacobean aesthetic Bennett details to 'communicate an alternative cultural memory' (2013: 4) that contrasts with conventional, Shakespearean modes of performance. Peter Kirwan also addresses the oppositional potential of not-Shakespearean performance modes, focusing not only on plays which 'react explicitly against the canonical edifice' (Kirwan, 2017: 89) by embracing their not-Shakespearean status, but also gesturing towards the utility of the Jacobean aesthetic for Shakespeare producers seeking to jolt Shakespearean performance out of a perceived conservative malaise. In these readings, 'Jacobean' performance can subvert the expectations of Shakespearean performance.

But embedded within Bennett's argument about the transgressive power of the not-Shakespearean is an acknowledgement that Jacobean modes of performance risk collapsing into 'radical chic' (1996: 83), offering only the veneer of dissidence. Jem Bloomfield addresses this concern in his discussion of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the archetypal 'Jacobean' tragedy. Bloomfield observes that *The Duchess of Malfi* has become a safely canonical play, which offers 'comfort' (38) rather than disruption. Over several decades, he argues, scholars and practitioners have enabled the play's canonization by situating it in opposition to Shakespeare, but what once seemed like a fruitful frame of reference may have come to feel staid. While Kirwan's essay points towards the continued power of the Jacobean aesthetic, he, too has reservations about what (following Marvin Carlson) he calls the haunting of the not-Shakespearean by Shakespeare. The habitual and perhaps inevitable comparison of the early modern and the Shakespearean can result in enjoyable burlesques of Shakespearean authority, as Aebischer and Kathryn Prince note in their discussion of the RSC's 2011 Swan production

of Philip Massinger's *The City Madam*, which 'good-humouredly sen[t] up its own conferral of royal status on Shakespeare' (2012: 10) through cross-casting and cross-marketing. But it can be restrictive and unhelpful too, forcing not-Shakespearean plays to conform to a supposed Shakespearean standard.

In this chapter, then, I aim to call attention to some of the other frames of reference which may inform the performance of not-Shakespearean plays. It may not be possible (and it may not even be completely desirable) to avoid the kind of Shakespearean haunting Kirwan describes, but it is possible to identify other competing influences and to investigate what these alternative frames might afford to producers and consumers of early modern drama. Focusing in particular on the RSC's 2014 Roaring Girls season of early modern plays, I examine the frames through which the productions and their advertising materials explicitly or implicitly invited their audiences to look, and the professional reviews by mainstream theatre critics which both interpreted the productions through those frames and constructed new frames for their readers. Finally, I turn to the more ephemeral media of blogs, tweets, and newspaper comments to gauge a sense of how audiences responded to the productions, in some cases corroborating and, in some cases, challenging the verdicts of prominent professional reviewers.

As not-Shakespearean plays are, on the whole, much less regularly performed than Shakespeare plays, their framing seems especially important, and the terms used to frame them peculiarly adhesive. Given the relative infrequency with which most not-Shakespearean plays are performed, expectations cultivated for a production of an early modern play and the judgements made about that production can come to define the play for decades. Jeremy Lopez laments that the canon of early modern dramatic texts 'subject to and available for scholarship, pedagogy, and appreciation has shrunk considerably since the eighteenth century' (2014: 14). This point is also true of the theatrical repertory. Those

noncanonical plays that are performed may be subject to damaging criticism. Massinger's *The City Madam*, which the RSC produced at the Swan in 2011 and John Ford's *Love's Sacrifice*, which was performed at the same theatre in 2015, were judged harshly by some newspaper critics. In *The Guardian*, Michael Billington declared that Massinger was a 'scattergun satirist' and that *The City Madam* 'falls well short of a masterpiece' (2011); Dominic Cavendish of *The Telegraph* condemned Ford's 'crude dramatic contrivance', while the review's headline described the play as 'second-rate Shakespeare' (2015). Not all reviewers agreed with these negative assessments, but what is striking is that critics frequently make judgements not about (or not only about) the success of the production, but the quality of the play. Judging a play is of course, part of the job of a critic reviewing a newly written play, but rarely performed not-Shakespearean plays are placed in a particulatly invidious position because they are liable to be judged in Shakespearean terms, rather than being treated on their own terms. Perceived faults in productions of rarely performed early modern plays are usually attributed to playwrights when they may as well be the cause of direction, acting, or audience expectation.

A small band of plays by better-known authors such as Christopher Marlowe have had more fortune on contemporary stages, but they too fall victim to the frames which are created for them. *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, for example, has received mainstream attention for productions at the Globe Theatre in 2003, the National Theatre in 2009, and the RSC's Swan Theatre in 2017, but was advertised by the RSC as a 'rarely told story'.[1] The rarely performed marketing tag casts the RSC, and their audience, as intrepid adventurers, rediscovering a lost classic, but it also elides a rich recent theatrical history, re-inscribing the play as marginal. The 'rarely told' claim was in turn reiterated by several

[1] The play also received a site-specific performance at the House of St Barnabas in central London, in 2006 and was performed by the Globe Young Players at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in 2015. On the site-specific performance, see McCutcheon and Thom, 2012.

reviewers. Billington argued that ‘one of the joys’ of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* ‘lies in discovering a virtually unknown play’ (2017). Billington made this argument by referring to the ‘dreadful’ 2003 Globe production which, he thought, completely misjudged the play. Thus, the 2017 RSC production seems effectively an entirely new play, when, to the reviewer’s mind, performed properly. This reading, however, entails a convenient omission of information about the intervening production at the National Theatre, a production that Billington favourably reviewed, noting it was ‘inspiring to see a forgotten dramatic landmark rendered with such style and dignity’ (2009). Billington’s review is not merely an oversight, but rather a reiteration of one of the production’s explicit frames. The marketing and reviewing of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* therefore collaborate, intentionally or otherwise, in the marginalization of the play. Even though several reviewers deemed both the play and its production a success, the terms used to frame them have had an arguably injurious impact on the play. But these terms also serve as an example of the power of the outer frame and the importance of attending to its effects on not-Shakespearean drama. In what follows, I will consider the varying frames applied to not-Shakespearean plays performed alongside each other in a single season at the RSC’s Swan Theatre.

Advertising the RSC Roaring Girls Season

In 2013, the RSC announced that its 2014 summer season would include a special programme of early modern plays, thus creating a set of expectations long before the plays had been cast, let alone performed. In her introduction to a special issue on the 2014 season, Kate Wilkinson quotes some of the salient details of the announcement (2015: 242), but the full press release is worth further consideration. The document begins by detailing the summer productions in the company’s main house, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, focusing for its first two paragraphs on Gregory Doran’s dual productions of the

two parts of *Henry IV*. The announcement lists the main cast members, Antony Sher (Falstaff), Alex Hassell (Hal), Jasper Britton (Henry IV), and Paola Dionisotti (Mistress Quickly), situating all four actors in relation to their previous RSC roles. The second paragraph reveals that these two productions will be cross-cast and that they will transfer to the Barbican, in London, 'after runs in Stratford, Newcastle upon Tyne's Theatre Royal and a five week UK tour of Number One theatres'. The press release takes particular care to stress the significance of the Barbican transfer (which gave the RSC a regular London home for the first time since 2002) and its related activities which includes collaborations between the RSC Education and Barbican Guildhall Creative Leaning 'to engage new and existing audiences with events, workshops and special projects in east London schools and communities'. These opening statements confer canonical precedence on the *Henry IV* productions: they are the headline news as suggested by their performance on the main stage, on tour, and in a special 'Live from Stratford-upon-Avon' screening, broadcast throughout the world and free to UK schools.

The other RST production, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, directed by Simon Godwin, is implicitly secondary. It occupies the third paragraph in the press release, which is itself briefer than the previous two paragraphs. The announcement describes the play as 'Shakespeare's early exuberant romantic comedy' and it is possible to read the word 'early' as an implicit comment on the play's artistic naivety. This sense of aesthetic immaturity was remarked upon in several reviews. In *The Financial Times*, Ian Shuttleworth commented explicitly on the play's earliness, noting that 'it has its full share of tyro flaws' (2014), while in *The Evening Standard* Fiona Mountford wrote that *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is 'packed with all sorts of devices that Shakespeare would go on to employ more profoundly elsewhere' (2014). The press release then moves from the noteworthiness of the play's earliness to its comparatively sparse performance history. The

main selling point seems to be that the Godwin's production is the first on the RST stage for 45 years. David Thacker directed the play in a 1991 Swan production that transferred to the Barbican, Edward Hall directed the play at the Swan in 1998, and Fiona Buffini directed it at the Swan in 2004 ahead of a national tour, but the decision to emphasize the fact of its being performed on the main stage underscores the canonical importance attached to the RST while also hinting at the play's canonically fringe position. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* had a shorter run of performances than the *Henry IV* productions and did not tour, but it was nonetheless played at the main house and received a live screening that broadened its audience significantly. It therefore occupies a liminal position between the canonically central *Henry IV* plays, directed by the company's Artistic Director and starring the celebrated Sher in the role of the 'infamous' Falstaff, and the obscurer works performed by the RSC at their other venues.

Having detailed the Shakespearean productions at the RST, the press release turns its attention to the Swan's 'Roaring Girls' season of 'three rarely performed Jacobethan plays.' This season is already, then, framed by Shakespeare, and this framing is reiterated by the marketing statement that the Swan Theatre was returning 'to its original purpose as a home for the plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries'. The three advertised plays, *The Roaring Girl*, *Arden of Faversham*, and *The White Devil* (at this point *The Witch of Edmonton* had not been announced) are explicitly linked to and therefore ripe for comparison with Shakespeare. At the same time, the Swan was presented as a not-Shakespearean space (unusually, given the readiness of marketing departments to promote dubious Shakespearean connections, *Arden of Faversham* was not marketed as Shakespearean, despite recent claims that Shakespeare had a hand in its authorship). Moreover, the theatre was also figured as a female space, given that the season was led by Deputy Artistic Director Erica Whyman and that the plays, each directed by a woman, are

said to contain ‘some of the great parts written for and about women’. Drawing on Bennett’s theory of the radical potential of the ‘Jacobean’, Emma Whipday notes that the ‘Roaring Girls’ season was presented as a transgressive ‘alternative’ to the cultural prestige of the male-directed Shakespeare plays in the main house (2015: 282). In fact, Shakespeare was not entirely absent from the Swan Season, which also featured a production of *The Rape of Lucrece*, adapted for the stage by Elizabeth Freestone and Feargal Murray and performed by Camille O’Sullivan. But this production was afforded a more marginal position within the press release, a point underscored by its limited run. Its female-centred story, coupled with its status as a Shakespearean poem, which required adaptation for the stage, arguably made it easier for the advertisers to present it as not-Shakespearean (or not-fully Shakespearean) and therefore suitable for inclusion in the ‘alternative’ space of the Swan.

But while the RSC’s programming and marketing decisions celebrate the performance of not-Shakespearean drama, and the representation of female experience, while providing a platform for female directors and performers, they also frame the season as ultimately secondary to the main, male, Shakespearean business at the RST. The marketing materials therefore strike an uneasy balance between promoting their subjects and presenting them as marginal or marginalized. *The Roaring Girl*, *Arden of Faversham* and *The White Devil* are described as rarely performed, but the press release seeks to situate each play in relation to its previous RSC productions. Each earlier production authorizes the current production. *Arden of Faversham* is publicized as having ‘only been performed twice by the RSC’ but those productions were each directed by RSC grandees. The document notes that Buzz Goodbody produced the play in 1970 at the Roundhouse and Terry Hands directed it at The Other Place in 1982. *Arden of Faversham* is figured here as both curiously marginal and yet illustrious. Similarly, *The Roaring Girl* is

advertised as having only been performed once before at the RSC, but the fact that Helen Mirren, a well-known and highly regarded actor, played the role of Moll, serves as an endorsement of the play. This dual instinct to balance the attractions of obscurity (which promises a new theatrical experience) and canonicity (which reassuringly affirms the quality of the dramatic material) encapsulates the challenge of advertising early modern plays. The RSC marketing department apparently invite audiences to encounter the Roaring Girls season through these two ostensibly contradictory frames.

The initial RSC announcement reveals how the company's marketing department first publicized the 2014 season, but once the announcement was made it was left to other media groups to decide how best to disseminate and frame that information. Some outlets published the announcement in full, while others summarised the press release, reordering the announcements to suit whatever story the reporter thought might appeal most to their readership. The BBC, for example, ran with the story about the RSC's three-year deal with the Barbican, highlighting the previously announced transfer of Doran's production of *Richard II*, starring David Tennant (who was also the subject of the article's photograph). The forthcoming *Henry IV* productions were thus presented as secondary, in turn pushing the 'Roaring Girls' season further into the single sentence of the antepenultimate paragraph. But if the BBC presentation of the season managed further to marginalize the not-Shakespearean productions, Hannah Furness in *The Telegraph* capsized canonical expectation by leading with not-Shakespeare, relegating *Henry IV* to the final paragraphs. The canonical politics of this decision were vexed further by the decision to additionally foreground the RSC's gender-roles reversed *The Taming of the Shrew*. Directed by Michael Fentiman, and aimed at 8-13-year olds, the production did not occupy a particularly prominent position in the RSC's announcement, but Furness, linking it explicitly to the 'Roaring Girls' season, perhaps drawing on the frisson of gender

controversy, thought it was of greater interest to her newspaper's readers. The article draws on the pulling power of Shakespeare's name, but its focus is the Swan season: the not-Shakespearean plays are the main subject under discussion.

The already complex framing of the season was made even more complicated by the changing nature of the RSC's programming. When the first press statement was released, *The Witch of Edmonton* was yet to be announced, while the 'Midsummer Mischief' festival of new plays by and about women, at The Other Place, existed only in embryonic form. Whyman's Artistic Director Statement near the bottom of the press release gestured towards the 40th anniversary of the recently reopened theatre and a planned celebration of its founder, Buzz Goodbody. At the time of this statement, Whyman was not able to provide specific details about the focus of this celebration, but when the Midsummer Mischief season was announced in February 2014 she stated that it 'responds directly to the Roaring Girls season' (2014) by exploring the feminist politics of dissidence. This new frame carried with it the potential to alter audience expectations about the Swan season. As Kirwan observes, the Mischief Festival rendered more explicit the otherwise more 'diffuse' feminist principles of the 'Roaring Girls' plays (2015: 251). The addition of *The Witch of Edmonton* extended the season further into the autumn, offering another version of a 'roaring girl' in the form of the titular witch, Elizabeth Sawyer, and employing the same core cast as the other plays in the season, although as the only play directed by a man (Doran), it departed from one of the season's principal advertised practices. These additional frames, however, ultimately serve to enshrine the season's feminist motivations, perhaps also implicitly coding Shakespeare as male-centred and non-feminist.

In addition to the broader framing of the Swan season, the individual productions came advertised with additional material, much of it online. *The Roaring Girl*, *Arden of*

Faversham, and *The White Devil* had two teaser trailers each, plus short director and/or lead actor interviews and brief videos of audience responses.[2] These materials tended to stress the subversive Jacobean-chic of the productions. Maria Aberg's *The White Devil* was the most obvious exponent of this and the online adverts emphasized its bloody excesses. A trailer, which came with a warning that viewers may find some scenes 'disturbing' (Trailer: White Devil, 2014) consisted of a close up of Vittoria (Kirsty Bushell) and Bracciano (David Sturzaker) locked in an intimate embrace, smearing each other in a glutinous gold substance which then turns to the claret of blood. The image of the gold-smeared pair also served as the cover for the programme and was the main promotional poster. These images stressed a relationship between violence and decadence which aligned the production with stylishly violent films and television shows. In one of the production's promotional videos, Aberg likens the play to *The Sopranos* and *Natural Born Killers*, emphasizing its messiness, bloodiness, and sexiness ('Interview with Maria Aberg'). Aberg reiterated her sense of the play's contemporaneity in another interview, explaining that she chose to set her production in a 'luxury, harsh, wealthy, contemporary world' ('Maria Aberg Interview'). The filmic references resounded throughout the production, which made extensive use of video projection to accentuate 'the theme of performance' in Aberg's words, but also to point up comparisons between the seventeenth-century world of Webster's play and the production's twenty-first century context ('Interview with Maria Aberg').

Neither Polly Findlay's *Arden of Faversham* nor Jo Davies' *The Roaring Girl* drew quite as readily on the Jacobean framing of the Aberg production, but both plays were presented as subversive challenges to gendered and or generic expectations. In one video, Findlay, describes *Arden of Faversham* as 'a bit like a kind of Coen Brothers movie set in

[2] *The Witch of Edmonton* had no such additional video material.

the 1590s. There's that same sense of a completely bewildering, slipping moral framework' (Findlay, 2015). Other videos seek to identify the play not as a domestic tragedy but as, in the words of an audience member interviewed for a promotional video, a mix of 'comedy and murder mystery' (Audience, 2014), which seems in keeping with the Coen Brothers aesthetic. Indeed, the production itself most vividly recalled the woodchipper scene in *Fargo* when Arden's body was suspended above the stage in a makeshift coffin. The production's performance choices, and the terms used to market it, mixing murder and humour, tied in with the broader Jacobean approach of the season. *The Roaring Girl* advertising materials also displayed a hint of the Jacobean-chic, perhaps most strongly in the representation of Moll (Lisa Dillon) as a character ahead of her time. While the production was set in the Victorian era, Moll wore modern clothes. In the production's poster, she is shown wearing a rolled-up shirt and tie, with a tattoo on her forearm, while in another online trailer, she is seen playing an electric guitar before turning to the camera and roaring (Trailer: Roaring, 2015).

The RSC used a different set of tactics to advertise *The Witch of Edmonton*. The production aimed to capitalize on the star status of its lead performer, Eileen Atkins, whose face, displayed in close-up, adorned the programme and production poster. Atkins gave two interviews with the *Guardian* newspaper in the lead up to the production's opening and, although neither explicitly focused on *The Witch of Edmonton*, both advertised the production. Susannah Clapp opened her 18 October 2014 interview with Atkins by asking her whether being cast in an RSC title role was 'typical casting for a mature actress?' but the line of questioning moved away from the specifics of the production and towards a broader discussion of Atkins's life and career, traversing such topics as paedophilia, social class, rapping, and sex (2014). In another *Guardian* piece, published on the production's opening night, Atkins recounts a humorous early-career

story of the time she had to escape a knife-throwing act who wanted her to 'dance enticingly' to get people in to see their show (2014). The implicit suggestion of both pieces is that *The Witch of Edmonton* will be worth watching because Atkins is in it and because Atkins is not only an exceptional actor but also an exceptional person. The articles (and the production they advertise) present Atkins as an abnormally interesting and publicly intimate figure, of the type described by Joseph Roach in his work on theatre and celebrity (2005: 16-17). Although *The Witch of Edmonton* was not as insistently advertised as a 'Roaring Girls' play, Atkins effectively acts as a modern roaring girl (or perhaps, roaring woman) able to transcend ordinariness.

The production's most public-facing materials focused largely on its most bankable performer, but Atkins was not the production's only framing device. While the *Guardian* interviews historicized Atkins' career, offering insights into her extraordinary life, the programme for *The Witch of Edmonton* set about historicizing the play, emphasizing its real life genesis and implicitly justifying Doran's decision to set the play in an early modern context, unlike the other productions in the Roaring Girls season. As Lucy Munro notes, the production 'invit(ed) spectators to historicize their experience of the Dog's invasion of Edmonton' (2017: 76) by including in its programme an extract from an early modern pamphlet about the appearance of a black dog at Bungay. The production therefore asked its audiences to balance an understanding of the play's early modern origins with an awareness and enjoyment of contemporary celebrity. Combining historical intrigue with a gesture to contemporary relevance, the programme in this regard arguably followed the lead of the other 'Roaring Girls' plays.

The 'Roaring Girls' tagline then provided an overall frame for the season, but the individual productions were marketed in several ways, drawing out different interpretations of the broader season's themes. My intent is not to try and capture all of

their potential resonances, but to suggest that, in addition to the inevitable Shakespearean haunting described by Kirwan, the RSC sought to highlight the perceived contemporaneity of the female-centred plays they performed, while also drawing attention to the real life stories which inspired each play's creation. The various materials, produced in a range of different media, grapple with the challenges of advertising not-Shakespearean drama, in the process inviting their audiences to experience less immediately familiar plays through familiarizing frames. Whether the frames offered by the promotional material accurately reflect the productions themselves and whether the frames open productive new ways of encountering drama, or close down potential meaning by forcing the plays to fit particular paradigms, is ultimately a matter to be decided by their audiences. It is to one of those audiences that I now turn.

Reviewing the Roaring Girls

The marketing materials used by the RSC to advertise its 'Roaring Girls' season show how the company attempted to frame its productions, but, as we have seen, agencies beyond the RSC reframed the productions for their audiences. Nowhere is this more evident than in theatre reviews. Helen Freshwater rightly notes that reviews do not reliably record audience reception and that studies which privilege theatre reviews often end up simply relaying the opinions of reviewers (2009; 36). But while reviews cannot stand in for audience experience, they can help to create the conditions by which audiences experience theatre, consolidating the existing frames offered by the productions themselves or constructing new ones for their readers. Recent interest in Shakespeare reviewing, perhaps best encapsulated by the work of Paul Prescott, has shown that journalists 'have the potential to exert a strong influence on contemporary theatregoing and production' (2013; 16). There is no reason to think this is any less true of not-Shakespearean plays. In this section, then, I focus on newspaper reviews of the

productions in the 2014 Swan season, examining the ways in which reviewers accept, challenge, or augment the frames offered by the RSC's marketing department. I will then consider the potential consequences of the reviews, not merely for the productions, but for the reputation of the plays themselves. Reviews become part of the official record of productions. They are the most visible and easily locatable traces left by ephermal performances. What critics say about rarely performed plays therefore has significant ramifications for later generations, as well as contemporary theatregoers.

Peter Holland observes that scholars frequently occlude the circumstances of consumption for which reviews are written. Theatre reviewers write for particular audiences; they are not a homogenous group. Holland even notes that, despite seeing each other regularly at press nights, reviewers rarely talk to each other in anything other than politely reserved conversation (2010: 297). The varying political and cultural sensitivities of theatre review audiences is demonstrated in reviewer responses to the Roaring Girls season. Reviewers for more politically conservative newspapers tended to question the value of a female-centred season of plays. Quentin Letts of the *Daily Mail* displayed a subtly dismissive attitude to the idea; his audience can read between the lines of his relatively benign statements to access a more cutting subtext. For example, his review of *Arden of Faversham* claims that the production fails despite its 'topicality and interest to feminists' (2014). The point of such comments is to mark the feminist leanings of the productions as trendy, ephemeral, niche concerns; when Letts says that Findlay's production will interest feminists, the obvious implication is that it will not interest anyone else. Charles Spencer in the *Telegraph* similarly trades in coded barbs about the feminist framing in his review of *The Roaring Girl*. His claim that 'gender politics are also at work' (2014) makes the word 'work' do a lot of work. His sentence acts as an eye roll to the regular reader who understands and perhaps shares his distrust of feminist 'positive

discrimination' as his review goes on to call it. In contrast, Cavendish, Spencer's colleague at the *Telegraph*, takes a more receptive stance on what his review of *The White Devil* terms 'challenging feminist-framed questions' (2014). Cavendish's review offers an important reminder that reviewing practices can differ even among reviewers writing for the same audience.

In general, reviewers of the Roaring Girls season tended to avoid the more disdainful attitude expressed by Spencer and Letts. The execution of the feminist politics was a frequent topic of concern for several critics, but the concept of a women-centred season often generated praise or seemed at least a potentially worthwhile endeavour. Billington's reviews for the *Guardian* are a case in point. In his review of *The Roaring Girl* he praised the 'bright idea' (2014) of the Swan season even as he queried the logic of its modern updates, and reiterated his enthusiasm for the season concept in his review of *Arden of Faversham*, the second production in the Swan season. By this point, however, Billington allowed a greater note of frustration to creep into his review: 'Much as I welcome the idea of a Swan season devoted to female protagonists, I am increasingly puzzled by the approach' (2014). Once again, he took issue with the decision to set the play outside of the early modern period. Strikingly, however, these reviews are at pains to suggest sympathy for the feminist project of the season. By registering the value of the project, Billington can make criticisms of individual productions without seeming unenlightened. But the feminist framing of the RSC season is a clear barrier for him, forcing him constantly to hedge his critiques. What Billington sees as directorial decisions (the setting of the productions) are not so easily extricated from the feminist rationale he claims to admire. Billington begins his review of *The White Devil* by quoting Aberg, implying that her 'strong agenda' – 'to explore and explode ideas of misogyny, power and female identity' – results in a production that is 'high-concept, director-driven theatre'

(2014) which muddies and confuses Webster's decidedly seventeenth-century artistry. Billington's gripe is not with the notion of feminist theatre *per se* (unlike Spencer's criticism of *The Roaring Girl*) but his objection to the production's 'agenda' (a loaded word) is perhaps more telling than he might like to imagine. At once welcoming and sceptical, Billington's *Guardian* reviews offer an ambivalent perspective on the feminist-framing of the Roaring Girls season.

Although his approach is different to that of Spencer and Letts, Billington forms part of an old guard of influential, mostly white, mostly male theatre critics. This older generation of reviewers is not necessarily the ideal audience for the declaredly dissident approaches of the Roaring Girls directors, so the nature of their criticism is perhaps unsurprising. In 1994 Penny Gay noted that the 'male, white, middle-class Oxbridge-educated bias' (1994: 11) of newspaper theatre reviews underscores much mainstream theatre criticism and this remains the case decades later. Indeed, mainstream female reviewers express similar reservations about the efficacy of the Roaring Girls productions. In the *Observer*, Susannah Clapp offered a withering assessment of the 'sloppiness' of the RSC *Roaring Girl*, which she saw manifested in the desire to 'put anything female together' (2014). In her review of *The White Devil*, Clapp claims that Aberg 'undermines her feminist message – making it look imposed not innate – through anxious updating and overemphasis' (2014). Kate Bassett of *The Times* found Aberg's casting of Laura Elphinstone in the role of the male character Flamineo 'confusingly strained' (2014) and worried that the production lost the sense of the play's hierarchy of political power. In the *Financial Times*, Sarah Hemming was more positive, praising the production's 'bold approach' and the 'peculiarly disturbing' (2014) effect of the Flamineo casting although, like Bassett, she worried that the production was less strong on its representation of social stratification.

Taken together, mainstream reviews of the Roaring Girl season show that while critics acknowledged the RSC's feminist framing, they did not necessarily think that it served the productions well. Similarly, reviews of *The Witch of Edmonton* regularly commented on the celebrity casting of Eileen Atkins, but in ways that arguably backfired on the production. Cavendish is among several critics frustrated by the 'marginal' (2014) nature of the character Atkins plays. In the *Daily Mail* Patrick Marmion praised Atkins for her performance but said that her role was 'not much of a part' (2014) while in the *Financial Times* Ian Shuttleworth lamented that Atkins was 'too seldom' on stage' (2014). The production's advertising arguably set the play up for a fall, encouraging it to be judged against unreasonable expectations, promising a fuller part for Atkins than the play, or the production, was able to allow. M.J. Kidnie observed a similar strategy at play in Doran's 2003 Swan Theatre production of *All's Well That Ends Well*, one of Shakespeare's less frequently performed and celebrated plays: the casting of Judi Dench as the Countess generated a response similar to that of *The Witch of Edmonton* (2009, 49-50). Perhaps this is one reason for the generally poor response the play received from mainstream reviewers. While some critics took issue with the production's staging choices – Henry Hitchings of the *Evening Standard* called it 'unadventurous' (2014) – most reviewers turned their ire towards the play rather than the production. The success of the role of Mother Sawyer was attributed entirely to Atkins, rather than to the playwrights, and Atkins's brilliance was seen by many reviewers to emphasize the comparatively poor quality of the rest of the play. In the *Observer* Kate Kellaway praised the 'outstanding' (2014) Atkins but concluded that the play is ultimately a bit of a mess. Billington similarly commended a 'richly textured performance' from Atkins while condemning the play as a 'rum piece' (2014).

The performance of Atkins became a stick with which to beat the play, but it was not the only stick. *The Witch of Edmonton* is a collaborative play, as promotional materials made clear, and reviewers seized upon this fact to make grander pronouncements about the play's quality (or lack thereof). For Kellaway 'too many playwrights spoil the plot' (2014) resulting in generic confusion. Shuttleworth similarly reckoned that the collaboration is 'obtrusive' and that sections of the play are 'overwritten' (2014). Michael Arditti of the *Sunday Express* accounted the play 'a gallimaufry' (2014) because of its co-authorship, while Marmion termed it a 'mongrel' (2014) and Billington claimed that its 'mixed authorship gave it a strange switchback quality' (2014). Reviewers of other collaborative plays in the Swan season sometimes made similar judgements in their reviews. Reviewing *The Roaring Girl*, Henry Hitchings observed that the 'collaborative efforts of Middleton and Dekker weren't exactly seamless' (2014). In a related vein, reviewers of *Arden of Faversham* frequently referred to the play's uncertain authorship to explain perceived problems with the production even though the RSC chose not to emphasize potential Shakespearean connections when advertising *Arden*. Letts compared the play unfavourably to 'proper Shakespeare' (2014), Spencer found the blank verse 'too workaday' (2014) for a writer like Shakespeare or Marlowe, and Dominic Maxwell in the *Sunday Times* attributed his favourite parts 'where good ideas coalesce and matter' to Shakespeare but thought the play overall to be distinctly 'middling' (2014). Authorship evidently mattered to a significant degree to many critics.

Authorship matters to reviewers of infrequently performed early modern plays because it offers a means by which they can ground their assumptions, making them seem more convincing or factual. It is a fact that *The Witch of Edmonton* is a collaborative play; it is an opinion that it is a poor one. But the format of the newspaper review, which neither requires nor allows the reviewer to offer a detailed explanation of their statements, makes

opinions that are linked to facts appear more convincing. Using a similar strategy, Clapp casts aspersions on the quality of *The White Devil* by noting the fact of the play's poor reception when first performed. Clapp draws on the authority of the historical archive to bolster her opinion that the play is not particularly good: it failed then, no wonder it fails now. It is a highly debatable point, but it is a pithy and entertaining one. Claims based on authorship or historical evidence give critics a handle on unfamiliar material, a way of succinctly explaining oddities. Reviewers sometimes attribute perceived faults to theatre producers – in his review of *The Roaring Girl*, for example, Spencer suggests that a different directorial approach 'might have yielded richer rewards' (2014) – but unfamiliar early modern plays are easy targets for arch critics, skilled in the art of the uncompromising putdown, and they bear the brunt of criticism in many reviews. Reviewers commonly invoke received knowledge, or common assumptions, which can very easily override whatever set of expectations a theatre production attempts to offer its audiences.

Theatre critics occupy a privileged position of authority. But they do not get to speak for everyone, and while their words can carry weight with their readerships and in the theatre industry more broadly, their writing is increasingly subject to public critique. Eleanor Collins has argued that the kind of reviewing discussed in this essay, which showcases the singular voice of its author and which is 'vested in the authority of print' is 'now outmoded' (335). Prescott writes that blogging and below-the-line comments in reply to theatre reviews pose a 'challenge to the authority of the critic' (177). Online responses can undercut the apparently confident assertions made by reviewers while also allowing critics brave enough to read below-the-line further space to clarify their remarks or to engage in the kind of debate that print newspapers cannot foster. The *Guardian* review of *Arden of Faversham* generated one such discussion, with some readers taking

exception to Billington's claim that the play 'reeks of documentary realism' and should be treated as a 'fascinating historical document' (2014) rather than modernized, as in Findlay's production. One commenter, Bressy, asked 'Why criticise the contemporary setting of Arden when this criticism is not extended to the vast majority of Shakespeare plays?' before adding 'This is a play not a documentary'. Billington replied: 'Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, such as Arden of Faversham and A Yorkshire Tragedy, are domestic dramas originating in relatively recent, real-life events. They are also rarely seen and gain from being treated as localised studies of the threat to middle-class security. Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies […] transcend time and place and are susceptible to multiple interpretations'. Billington did not explicitly engage with the suggestion that the play is nonetheless not a documentary and although some commenters agreed with him – Favershamian called the play 'something of a documentary' – several more contested the point. One respondent, rorycalvadez, had their reply deleted by a moderator for violating *Guardian* 'community standards', but various replies to that comment, including one by Billington, make clear that it aggressively rejected Billington's claims about documentary realism. A reader, jamesharthouse, endorsed the basic point of the response, if not the tone, adding

> while [Billington] and I may disagree about whether the play should or shouldn't be clothed in the "fashionable present", I couldn't see why the director had done something wrong or against the text in her handling of the play. She's just done something that Michael Billington and Kinewald [another commenter] apparently personally don't like (for no terribly obvious reason).

The comment by jamesharthouse appeared nine days after Billington's response to rorycalvadez. By this point Billington had, not unreasonably, moved on to other things, so this remark did not lead to a debate, or occasion further reflection from the *Guardian*'s chief theatre critic. But it is a useful riposte to the authority of the reviewer and a

tantalizing glimpse of an alternative audience reception not covered in the printed pages of the *Guardian*.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the framing of a production can have a significant effect on the ways in which not-Shakespearean early modern plays, generally much less frequently performed than Shakespeare plays, might be understood by their audiences. The fact that not-Shakespearean plays is much less well known than Shakespearean drama arguably makes the framing even more important. Many audience members watching the RSC productions of *The Roaring Girl* and *The Witch of Edmonton* were likely to have been seeing the play for the first and last time. For many audience members, their impressions of the play are likely to be lasting. Framing a play is a difficult and skilful task. The RSC's primary objective when advertising their productions is to appeal to potential audience members, to persuade them to pay money to see the production. In that respect, making *The Witch of Edmonton* a celebrity vehicle was probably a smart business decision. But while the casting and marketing of the production brought with it benefits, it arguably led to problems too and the play bore the brunt of these criticisms in theatre reviews. How much theatre reviews influence or reflect wider audience opinion is uncertain: tweets, blogposts and below-the-line comments attest to a variety of audience responses, many of which challenge or complicate the judgements of professional critics. But it would be naïve to think that theatre critics do not have power when it comes to the construction of the theatrical canon. Their judgements do matter: they are able to frame, or reframe plays, productions, and authors. Reviwers are, of course, entitled to dislike any given production, or play (not everyone needs to share the same taste for early modern theatre as the author of this chapter) but the terms they use to articulate their complaints reveal a wider problem about framing the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Such critical pronouncements can negatively affect the fortunes of rarely-performed plays, making it less likely that they will be revived again or perhaps discouraging theatremakers from taking on plays by the same author, or of a similar dramaturgical style. But in addition to affecting not-Shakespearean plays, the critical approaches documented in this chapter also do harm to Shakespeare by endorsing a particular idea of Shakespeare against which the implicitly inferior not-Shakespearean drama can be set. The authorial status of several plays in the RSC Roaring Girls season was used as a justification for a negative review: reviewers commented unfavourably on the anonymously authored *Arden of Faversham* and the collaborative *Roaring Girl* and *The Witch of Edmonton*. These observations help prop up the old-fashioned idea of Shakespeare as a solo-author of singular genius. Authorship studies have debunked this notion, detailing the varying ways in which Shakespeare collaborated throughout his career, but mainstream reviewers still gravitate towards outdated assumptions about Shakespearean singuarlity (as, on occasion, do theatre marketers: for example, the 2012 National Theatre *Timon of Athens* was not advertised as co-authored). Reviewers often comment negatively on Shakespeare's collaborative plays: Billington, for example, wrote that the 2010 Shakespeare's Globe production of *Henry VIII* 'lacks stylistic unity' on account of Shakespeare's collaboration with Fletcher (2010). Another frequent tactic, exemplified by Spencer's review of the same production, is to blame the perceived faults on the not-Shakespearean collaborator (2010). When Shakespeare's collaborative drama is well-received it is often because it is treated as solo-authored, as in Clapp's review of the 2015/2016 Sam Wanamaker Playhouse *Pericles* which makes no mention of George Wilkins' involvement in the play.

The uninterrogated (and, given the length of theatre reviews, impossible to interrogate) assumptions of mainstream reviewers are subtly dismissive and damaging, but

in fairness to these critics, their claims are not totally out of kilter with some Shakespearean scholarship. Scholars cannot be expected to change the reviewing practices of established critics, who as arbiters of theatrical taste, have more influence and cachet than an academic can conventionally muster. But it is incumbent on those working on Shakespeare in performance not to propagate the kinds of dismissive claims detailed in this chapter. In future work, scholars might aim to identify methodologies for discussing plays that are not regularly performed, helping to articulate more clearly an alternative to mainstream approaches. Shakespeare performance scholarship has engaged in greater critical examination of fringe critics, bloggers, and social media responses: not-Shakespearean performance scholarship would benefit from a similarly close and serious engagement with such voices. For as this chapter has argued, not-Shakespearean plays are in a particularly vulnerable position. The ways in which they are framed (by theatre companies, theatre reviews, but also, by scholarship) matter. An unsuccessful framing can have a long-lasting detrimental effect in a way that is arguably less likely with a Shakespeare play.

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