



Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre

By Richard Preiss

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To early modern audiences, the 'clown' was much more than a minor play character. A celebrity performer, he was a one-man sideshow whose interactive entertainments - face-pulling, farce interludes, jigs, rhyming contests with the crowd - were the main event. Clowning epitomized a theatre that was heterogeneous, improvised, participatory, and irreducible to dramatic texts. How, then, did those texts emerge? Why did playgoers buy books that deleted not only the clown, but them as well? Challenging the narrative that clowns were 'banished' by playwrights like Shakespeare and Jonson, Richard Preiss argues that clowns such as Richard Tarlton, Will Kemp, and Robert Armin actually made playwrights possible - bridging, through the publication of their routines, the experience of 'live' and scripted performance. *Clowning and Authorship* tells the story of how, as the clown's presence decayed into print, he bequeathed the new categories around which theatre would organize: the author, and the actor.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Original, sophisticated and deeply researched."

The Times Literary Supplement

Review

"Preiss's study is distinguished by a sharp and original argument about the relationship between clowning, authorship, and economic control... masterfully elaborated... highly persuasive... a convincing account of the dynamics of early modern clowning, painting a vivid picture of its role in marshalling the energies of its audience in a playing culture very different from our own... an important intervention not merely in the study of early modern clowning, but also in the scholarship of audiences and authorship." —Simon Purcell, *Review of English Studies*

"Traditional accounts of the evolution of English theatre have held the terms "clowning" and "authorship" – the key terms [of] Richard Preiss's original, sophisticated and deeply researched book – in opposition: as the playwright grew in status (appearing more often on the title pages of printed plays and acquiring greater control over performance), the clown (by nature an extemporizing, uncontrollable figure) grew ever more marginal... Preiss's book complicates this narrative." —Bart Van Es, *Times Literary Supplement*

About the Author

Richard Preiss is Associate Professor of English at the University of Utah, where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on Shakespeare, early modern drama, and Renaissance literature. He has edited *The Tempest: Shakespeare in Performance* (2008), and his essays have appeared in publications including *Renaissance Drama*, *Shakespeare Yearbook*, and *From Performance to Print in Shakespeare's England* (2005). He is also a contributor to the forthcoming collections *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare* and *Early Modern Theatricality*.

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