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Introduction: Space on the Early Modern Stage

Chloe Preedy and Laurence Publicover

Since the early twentieth century, research into the practical conditions of performance has been a consistently prominent and influential presence in early modern scholarship. With the discovery of the Rose Theatre’s architectural foundations in 1989, and the widely promoted opening of Shakespeare’s Globe in 1997, popular and academic interest escalated further. From the late 1980s, a significant volume of criticism has been published that addresses the physical layout, audience composition, and geographical placement of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English playhouses. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, such intense interest, the study of spatial representation in the early modern theatres has been a rather disparate affair. Some scholars, such as Andrew Gurr, have demonstrated how the physical construction of the theatres shaped dramatic performance; others, including Robert Weimann, have explored the impact of developing acting styles on plays’ spatial imaginings; while spatially orientated New World and Mediterranean criticism, though deeply concerned with playwrights’ representations of cultural difference, has tended to say very little about the production of geographical space within the theatre itself. Recent studies have given new momentum to and indicated fresh possibilities for this area of scholarship: one example is Tim Fitzpatrick’s Playwright, Space, and Place in Early Modern Performance, which examines the spatial codes of the early modern theatres. However, a great deal of work remains to be done before the study of space on the early modern stage reaches the level of sophistication attained by comparable work on twentieth- and twenty-first century drama. It is this lacuna that our special issue, ‘Space on the Early Modern Stage’, seeks to address.

The focus of this volume perhaps begins in 1576, the year in which England’s first purpose-built theatre opened for business. Known simply as the Theatre and located (due to opposition from the London authorities) in the unruly suburbs of Shoreditch, the building was a risky gamble by entrepreneur James Burbage. For modern scholars, however, Burbage’s playhouse is retrospectively viewed as a momentous event in the history of English theatre. The only comparable venture was the opening of the Red Lion in 1567, but this playhouse closed after just one season and offered little that the inns could not in playing terms; in contrast, the Theatre proved both successful and influential. Modelled upon the layout of contemporary bear-baiting arenas, but also looking back to the culturally prestigious theatres of ancient Greece and Rome, this purpose-built playhouse offered new possibilities to its share-holders, to its actors, and of course to the dramatists who wrote for the new commercial enterprise. Further theatres soon followed, including the Curtain in 1577, Philip Henslowe’s Rose in 1587, and the Swan in 1595.

The opportunities offered by these playhouses were quickly grasped and exploited by the men who came to write for the professional theatres. In particular, they forged innovative connections between the newly permanent space of the stage and the physical place of the theatre, experimenting with new fictional models and staging practices. Often, the play-texts that survive preserve traces of this interaction between the dramatic narrative and the physical layout of the building in which it will be produced. For instance, Juliet’s famous entrance on the playhouse balcony inspires Romeo to joke self-consciously about her being ‘o’er my head’ in Shakespeare’s tragedy (Romeo and Juliet 2.1.69), just as Hamlet draws attention to the fact that the ghost’s lines are delivered from below the stage with his own response, ‘Come on, you hear this fellow in the cellarrage… Well said, old mole!’ (Hamlet 1.5.159, 170); protagonists from Hamlet to Marlowe’s Faustus invite audiences to stare with them into the theatre’s painted heavens (Doctor Faustus A-text 2.3.1, 5.2.78). While critics and editors have been comparatively alert to such trace evidence, however, modern scholarship has nonetheless underestimated the extent to
which an awareness of stage-space pervades the dramatic writings of this period. Rather than simply acting as functional stage directions or performance indicators, these embedded references reveal a nuanced, self-aware and fluid engagement with how the early modern playhouse, as a physical and permanent place, relates to, interacts with, and even responds to the theatrical illusions staged within it. These playwrights did not merely comment on this relationship; rather, they shaped it. Thus, in performance, the language of their play-texts combined with the physical presence of the players and playgoers, the actual theatre building and the technologies of the playhouse to produce a new sense of space and place.

As our contributors demonstrate, the space fashioned by early modern drama was both sophisticated and fluid. The minimal scenery employed within these theatres meant that a sense of space or location was primarily constructed through speech, and this system allowed for various complex dramatic manoeuvres – ones that could fashion a sense of location, but also disrupt or complicate that sense of location in subtle ways. Our contributors are especially interested in how space in early modern performances is created through particular dynamics and relationships: how space on the stage depends upon and is shaped through off-stage spaces and an imagined ‘elsewhere’, and also how the fictional locations of these dramatic performances are informed by the physical site in which those locations are staged – whether purpose-built theatres, other buildings, or streets. Finally, several of our contributors explore the ways in which a sense of dramatic space is created in collaboration with the minds – and sometimes even the bodies – of audiences that are aware of and reacting to playwrights’ spatial codes and conventions. What an alertness to such issues demonstrates is that, while the meanings of these plays often depend significantly on their spatial operations, this does not mean that they construct a ‘locked down’ sense of location. Instead, as our contributors argue in various ways, these plays attain their nuanced spatial meanings by shuttling between the ‘there’ of the space they perform and the ‘here’ of the site within which they perform it, or through comparable spatial blendings and layerings.

**London and Performance**

The first section of our collection considers the relationship between early modern performances and the sites – be they indoor theatres, outdoor amphitheatres, streets, or other buildings – where they were staged, demonstrating the ways in which such relationships constructed dramatic meaning. In the first essay, “In the Friars”: The Spatial and Cultural Geography of an Indoor Playhouse’, Julie Sanders takes us on a walking tour of the Blackfriars precinct in order to demonstrate how that area shaped the drama performed within (in particular) the Blackfriars Theatre. Sanders offers a ‘thick description’ of this district of London, analysing the ways in which its sights, sounds, and smells impacted on playwrights including Shakespeare, Jonson, Dekker and Middleton, and on the drama they composed. Telling the ‘biography’ of the Blackfriars precinct, and attentive to the ‘lived experience’ of those who occupied it, Sanders is especially concerned with what she calls the ‘power of the proximate’ – the ways in which abutting spaces impact on one another. Remaining attentive to this power, she argues, allows us better to understand the wider experience of place in this period, and offers new insights into playwrights’ dramatic geographies. This methodology, with its focus on a particular district, also helps us to move beyond locational readings of city comedy that treat the diverse city of London as a unified whole.

The second essay in this section, Susan Anderson’s ‘Generic Spaces in Middleton’s *The Triumphs of Truth* (1613) and *Michaelmas Term* (1607)*, also moves between London’s streets and its theatres. Focusing on the work of a single playwright, but one with an extraordinarily diverse output, Anderson analyses the ways in which Middleton’s Lord Mayors’ shows and city comedies are shaped by the locations within which they were staged (in particular the St Paul’s district of London). In a wide-ranging essay, she demonstrates how the issues explored and the ideologies articulated through these overlapping genres – relating to commercial traffic, circularity and
connectivity — are remarkably spatial in their nature, and examines how the dramas’ own spatial operations inform their meanings and negotiations. In its analysis of the theatrical nature of shop-spaces in Middleton’s comedies, Anderson’s essay touches on an issue that occupies many of our contributors: the ways in which audiences help create location. And, in common with other pieces in this volume, her essay considers the importance of the ‘offstage’ in fashioning spatial meaning, arguing that ‘elsewheres’ relating to international commerce are evoked by Middleton’s Lord Mayors’ shows in order to shape the London in which they are staged, and exploring the relationship between the unstaged, wealth-providing lands in *Michaelmas Term* and the city-spaces actually staged by the play.

The third essay in this section, Gary Bowman’s ‘Transformations of Space and the Collective Enterprise in Marston’s Early Plays for the Paul’s Playhouse’, moves us more decidedly indoors, but not into a traditional playhouse. Instead, sharing Anderson’s concern with the St Paul’s precinct, Bowman offers spatial readings of three plays written around the turn of the century by the young John Marston for the Children of St Paul’s, and probably performed between the buttresses of the cathedral’s Chapter House. Considering the relatively small proportions of this playing-space when compared with the outdoor amphitheatres, and the proportionately diminutive size of the actors’ bodies, the essay shows how Marston’s plays, which often work through pastiche, ‘quote’ not only the popular plays performed within the commercial theatres (such as *Tamburlaine*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Spanish Tragedy*), but also those plays’ spatial codes; while stressing that these plays’ meanings were constructed through their site of performance and its usual function, in particular in their ceremonial and ritualistic episodes, Bowman also suggests the extent to which spatial codes in the early modern period were transferrable between different kinds of theatrical space. As his title suggests, Bowman is additionally concerned with the relationship between Marston, the Paul’s Boys, and their audiences, and how this relationship creates particular meanings and effects. Marston’s plays, Bowman demonstrates, are highly deferential to their audiences, and think carefully about what kinds of spectators would have been present at the Paul’s Playhouse; where (as Anderson argues) Middleton’s shows and plays stage – and are deeply interested in – commercial forces, Marston’s plays stress the non-commercial forces that have brought players and playgoers together.

The relationship between playwright and audience is also explored within the essay that closes this section, Chloe Preedy’s ‘Breaches in a Battered Wall: Invasion, Spectatorship, and the Early Modern Stage’. The purpose-dedicated space of the new London playhouses raised questions about the relationship between fictional spectacle and paying audience, questions which a number of Elizabethan playwrights engaged with through the medium of their own dramatic works. Preedy suggests that such self-conscious reflection upon Elizabethan spectatorship was crucially informed by and indebted to the martial discourse of popular war drama, which provided models of invasion and alliance that could also be applied to the relationship between the audience and the fictional dramatic world. Her essay focuses on three key instances of such engagement: Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* plays, Shakespeare’s 2 *Henry VI* (a play also discussed by Nicholas Collins), and Heywood’s 2 *Edward IV*. All three plays utilise a martial discourse of invasion and conquest to conceive of spectatorship, but from distinct perspectives that may chart diverging contemporary attitudes. Within Marlowe’s drama, audiences are seduced into entering an imaginative alliance in which they are implicitly subservient to but also supportive of the theatrical illusion. In contrast, Shakespeare’s early history play 2 *Henry VI* explores an adversarial relationship in which a potentially hostile audience must be contained, which is achieved by stressing the association between the theatre and the surrounding city of London. Heywood’s *Edward IV* similarly explores the connection between the playhouse and the London that surrounds it, again suggesting that to threaten the theatre is equivalent to a martial assault upon London. In 1 *Edward IV*, however, Heywood aligns his audiences not with the aggressors, but with the inhabitants of London, suggesting a nuanced but largely positive alliance between theatre-values and good citizenship. Preedy’s essay thus brings us further within the
playhouse, in many ways anticipating the essays that make up the second section, but remains concerned with the geographical position of the playhouses in which these scenes were performed, and how their situation on the outskirts of London inspired dramatic investment in a discourse of invasion that was used to explore the liminal experience of theatrical spectatorship.

Constructing Space within the Theatres

The four essays in the second section of the collection move away from considerations of London’s own geography, exploring instead the subtle, complex, and productive ways in which early modern playhouses stage – or imply – more remote locations. Andrew Duxfield’s essay, “‘Where am I now?’: The Articulation of Space in Shakespeare’s King Lear and Marlowe’s Dido, Queen of Carthage”, extends now-familiar discussions about the largely bare space of the Elizabethan stage, which the audience were invited to invest with their thoughts and imaginative projections, by demonstrating how Marlowe in particular actively exploited such conventions.

Focusing on Dido, Queen of Carthage, and discussing the kinds of theatres within which it may have been performed, Duxfield demonstrates how Marlowe put the mimetic flexibility of the stage to complex use in this early drama, in order to interrogate a related discourse of colonisation and imperial expansion. Specifically, he identifies the extent to which Marlowe’s protagonist Aeneas, charged with the divinely sponsored task of relocating Troy to Italy, repeatedly evokes his homeland and almost compulsively imagines it to be wherever he is. The effect, Duxfield suggests, is to render Troy a malleable, mobile entity; in this sense, Marlowe’s drama reflects the tendency of contemporary historical-political discourses to appropriate this myth as a legitimising ancestor for aspirant colonial powers like Elizabethan England. Duxfield’s essay reveals how a theatrically aware author such as Marlowe, newly familiar with the Elizabethan stage’s capacity to absorb multiple spatial identities, is thereby able to intensify the impact of his narrative and reinforce the play’s fictional staging of nation and empire – a move that anticipates Shakespeare’s own exploitation of the stage’s mimetic fluidity in King Lear. Duxfield concludes that the literal place of performance provides a uniquely apt setting for a play such as Marlowe’s Dido, which remains fascinated by the transplantation of physical space.

The second essay in this section shares Duxfield’s interest in the flexibility of stage-space and the role of playgoers in constructing location, but moves us from Marlowe’s exotic Mediterranean back to England – and more specifically Kent. Emma Whipday’s “‘Marrow-prying neighbours’: Staging domestic space and neighbourhood surveillance in Arden of Faversham” offers a spatial reading of an anonymous 1592 play that staged the 1551 murder of Thomas Arden by his wife, Alice, her lover, Mosby, and numerous accomplices. Stressing that this Elizabethan tragedy allows playgoers an unusual degree of access to domestic space, Whipday argues that the play’s audience take on the role of neighbours, prying into Alice Arden’s household and discovering her guilt. Analysing conduct literature in order to more precisely understand Alice’s offenses, many of which are decidedly spatial in nature, Whipday suggests that such transgressions render the interior spaces of her home visible – and thus stageable. Through these strategies, which make brilliant use of available stage resources (including the ‘discovery’ space), the play is able to contain the disruptive potential of staging domestic murder: rather than being corrupted by spectatorship, as anti-theatrical authors such as Stephen Gosson warned they would be, those who gaze on Alice and her home are instead involved in policing and discovering Alice’s own transgressions.

The relationship between players and playgoers is also central to the third essay in this section, Laurence Publicover’s ‘Clowning, Location, and Mediterranean Drama’. Moving through a series of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays set within the Mediterranean, Publicover explores the ways in which clowns enrich their dramatic geographies. These descendants of the medieval Vice, he argues, refuse to remain within fictional Mediterranean locations; instead, they refocus attention on the physical theatres within which those locations have been fashioned, whether through their close rapport with audiences, through their capacity to challenge their plays’
generic situations (and thus their ideological underpinnings), or through intertheatrical strategies. Even when they seem most interested in the Mediterranean locations they stage, he demonstrates, these plays can through clowning be drawn back into the London theatres; and remaining attentive to these kinds of spatial issues may complicate our sense of the cultural work they do: given the flexible and perilous sense of dramatic location they establish, we should hesitate before making claims about the plays’ capacities to ‘other’ foreign peoples and cultures.

Issues of foreignness and ‘othering’ remain significant in this section’s final essay, Nicholas Collins’s “This prison where I live”: Ireland takes centre stage. Dealing, like Duxfield, with the relationship between stage space and colonial space, Collins moves the focus of his discussion from the authorising myth of Virgilian empire-building to the realities of the Elizabethan colonial enterprise. He does so through a re-evaluation of Ireland’s presence in Shakespeare’s history plays, specifically 2 Henry VI and Richard II. Responding to and complicating Tim Fitzpatrick’s earlier work on the crucial role played by concepts of the offstage in early modern dramaturgy, Collins identifies the extent to which offstage, ‘obscene’ Ireland haunts the onstage action of Shakespeare’s histories. Identifying the ‘obscene’ as that which the authorities seek to exclude, and yet never fully succeed in banishing, Collins’s article characterises Shakespeare’s Ireland as an offstage, excluded and obscene presence. Yet, he argues, such absence augments rather than limiting Ireland’s dramatic significance. Inspired by Derrida’s discussion of ‘hauntology’ in Specters of Marx, Collins evaluates the interventionist authority that Ireland secures through its spectral offstage presence: for instance, in framing the deposition of Henry VI. Emphasising that Ireland can never be fully banished from Shakespeare’s stage, Collins points to its continued spectral and obscene presence in 2 Henry VI and Richard II; in these plays, he concludes, Ireland becomes the prison that surrounds and holds England captive, even while it is to be found at the heart of Englishness.

Modern Perspectives: Reconstructing the Renaissance Theatre

In the final section of this special issue are three essays which address a rather different version of theatrical ‘ghosting’: that is, the modern fashion for building reconstructed versions of the early modern playhouses. This recent phenomenon offers an intriguing opportunity to reflect upon and reassess the various questions raised by the relationship between the dramatic performances of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and the physical places in which they were staged. Earlier essays in this collection have explored the fluid and diverse ways in which early modern plays acknowledged and utilised their performance space, perhaps especially (though not exclusively) within the early commercial playhouses, both indoor and outdoor. Modern reconstructions of these buildings offer an invaluable testing ground for such ideas, while at the same time remaining informed (and sometimes restricted) by twentieth and twenty-first century concepts of what theatre might be or mean. Despite such important differences, however, modern reconstructions are also in many ways subject to precisely the same questions and concerns that the early modern playhouses originally experienced. For instance, the oft cited fact that modern audiences will not bring to the playhouse the same understanding and expectations as their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century counterparts may simultaneously be viewed as a fresh opportunity, providing a chance to reflect anew on the complex and flexible dynamics that can operate between an early modern play in performance, and the audience that pays to participate in this event. At other times, the reconstructed theatres can offer a close equivalent to the physical effects produced by and within the early modern playhouses. When it comes to the impact of stage tableaux, lighting effects, playhouse acoustics, or audience sightlines, modern reconstructions can further illuminate how the physical design of the early modern theatres contributed to and impacted upon the meanings and possibilities of early modern performances. Moreover, contemporary productions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dramatic works often encounter, in fresh and intriguing ways, precisely these issues.
within the modern context, as directors, set designers and actors negotiate the relationship between the playing space and the dynamics of performance.

Such modern reconstructions have become well known in recent years. While the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 1986 Swan Theatre gestured towards the architectural dimensions of the early modern playhouses, the trend was perhaps most famously inaugurated and consolidated by the Shakespeare’s Globe playhouse in London, opened in 1997. Additional reconstructions of early modern playhouses followed – among them Kingston’s Rose Theatre, discussed by Frank Whately in this collection. Further examples from the international stage include the University of Western Australia’s rarely discussed New Fortune Theatre, whose layout is based upon that of the Elizabethan Fortune (c. 1600), and the Blackfriars Playhouse in Virginia; opened in 2001, this latter theatre claims to perform Shakespeare’s plays ‘under their original staging conditions – on a simple stage, without elaborate sets, and with the audience sharing the same light as the actors’. Although we should be wary of accepting such statements at face value, as Tim Fitzpatrick reminds us in his essay, the marketing value of these claims is telling. While much has changed in the intervening centuries, the relationship between early modern drama and the space in which it is performed retains a commercial dimension. Beyond this fact, however, is the reality of that space itself; the place and structure of the theatre, and its spatial impact in shaping the possibilities of performance, remain absolutely central to making meaning of and from the early modern play.

The most recent of these reconstruction ventures, the 2014 Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, is the subject of the first essay in this section. In ‘Anticipating the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse’, Sarah Dustagheer explores the questions that this new South Bank venue has raised for the theatre and academic community, and reflects upon the current insights and possible future discoveries that the space facilitates. Her discussion is focused around the areas of theatre practice that she anticipates will become especially significant as the history of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse unfolds: lighting, music, and the actor/audience dynamic. Drawing upon play-sources taken from the surviving repertories of the indoor playhouses, Dustagheer unites such evidence with the early insights offered by the Wanamaker theatre’s 2014 opening season, demonstrating how staging plays such as *The Duchess of Malfi* in a modern reconstructed playhouse might shed new light on both past and present performance practice. As well as invigorating scholarly debate about the practices of the Jacobean indoor theatres, Dustagheer suggests that this 2014 theatrical reconstruction may also enable new discoveries about Shakespeare’s Globe, by revitalising academic consideration of how the King’s Men’s two original theatres operated in tandem. Dustagheer unites practice-based observations with a close reading of plays such as Francis Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and John Marston’s *The Malcontent* to anticipate some of the diverse trends in academic debate that are likely to be inspired by the opening of the Sam Wanamaker Indoor Playhouse. For Dustagheer, then, the opening of this space marks not a tangible end, but the rather more subjective beginning of theatrical experiment, and it is upon this aspect in particular that her essay reflects.

In ‘Actors’ Conversations at the Rose Theatres’, Frank Whately similarly considers the potential insights into past theatre practice that might be gained from modern reconstructions. His essay returns us to the outdoor playhouses of the 1580s, relating Henslowe’s 1587 Rose to Kingston’s reconstructed Rose Theatre. Opened in 2008, Kingston’s Rose was inspired by the archaeological excavation of Henslowe’s original theatre in 1988-89. As Whately emphasises, a significant outcome of this discovery was the revelation that the 1587 Rose’s stage did not thrust significantly into the yard; rather, the stage platform formed a ‘lozenge’ shape. Drawing upon personal experience of the performances staged at Kingston’s Rose, Whately (a founding director of the Kingston Theatre Trust) argues for a re-evaluation of the acting practices of Shakespeare and Marlowe’s day. Emphasising that the ‘lozenge’ stage of Kingston’s Rose produces a performance space which is, as director Peter Hall noted, ‘intimate yet epic’, Whately reflects upon the discoveries that modern actors have made while performing in this
space, including the effectiveness of ‘presentational’ acting; the fact that there is a strong positional area which facilitates the use of dramatic tableaux; and the diverse vocal possibilities offered by a theatre in which even a whisper can be heard by every member of the audience. This latter point, in particular, extends Whately’s reflections upon the reconstructed Rose into a consideration of the implications for scholarly assessment of Henslowe’s Rose. In particular, he argues for a reconsideration of Edward Alleyn’s acting style, noting that while ‘ranting’ may have been useful to the early modern actor on occasion, the Rose theatre space would have facilitated greater versatility in delivery than has previously been recognised by critics. While not suggesting that modern reconstruction can provide the full solution to ongoing academic debates about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century performance practices, Whately’s essay provides a valuable corrective to the homogeneity of contemporary assumptions about acting practice in the early modern theatre.

The re-evaluation of existing scholarly models is also the theme of the final essay in this special issue, Tim Fitzpatrick’s “The two doors’ traffic of our stage”: Developing and Testing “Spatial” Readings. In comparison with the two preceding essays, Fitzpatrick’s is rather less optimistic about the opportunities offered to early modern scholars by reconstructed theatres, and draws attention to some of the issues that have prevented an ideal synergy between scholars and practitioners in such venues. Amongst other things, Fitzpatrick discusses the likely differences between modern and early modern performance styles, and how these differences limit the extent to which modern productions can illuminate past performances; the shaky evidence upon which modern reconstructions were designed and built; the limitations of such buildings as ‘workshop’ spaces; and the differing priorities of practitioners and scholars – namely, the fact that the former need to keep an eye to financial imperatives. For Fitzpatrick, it is academic criticism that is primarily to blame for these issues. Scholars, he argues, have remained insensitive to the specific ways in which spatial codes operated within the early modern theatres, in particular due to their misplaced assumption that such theatres had three doors, rather than two. Developing the findings published in his recent monograph Playwright, Space, and Place, Fitzpatrick outlines his theory of relational stage-space: location was constructed, he argues, through a triangular relationship between the stage space and two offstage spaces, one which led ‘inwards’ and the other ‘outwards’. Pointing out that many directions for staging are embedded within dialogue rather than the stage directions themselves, and stressing that these codes could only operate because they were understood by playwrights, players, and playgoers, Fitzpatrick makes a case for the spatial coherence of early modern drama, and argues that it is only when scholars become attentive to such coherence that we can begin properly to test spatial readings. Such tests, he suggests, are likely to be most successful not in reconstructed theatres, which necessarily remain rigid in their structures and beholden to financial pressures, but instead in flexible, anonymous spaces, and involving students rather than professionals.

The final three essays are, then, in some respects at odds with one another, and in this sense they indicate something that we believe to be important about this collection. Rather than claiming to offer the final word on issues of stage space, we hope that these essays, by posing questions, positing ideas, and testing theories through consideration of individual plays, will open up many further discussions and debates around the matter of space on the early modern stage. Whether by challenging the underlying theories and methodologies articulated over the following pages, or by using those theories and methodologies to offer fresh readings of other plays, we very much hope that scholars will build upon the work to be found within this collection; as the articles that follow argue, an enormous amount of work remains to be done in this exciting field of scholarship.
Notes


10 Peter Hall, *Correspondence with the director*, 14 January 2003.