

THE ELIZABETHAN PLAYER

Contemporary Stage Representation

David Albert Mann

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
RENAISSANCE DRAMA



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Volume 8

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DAVID ALBERT MANN

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Note on the woodcuts</i>	xiii
1 Introduction: a definition of the context of study	1
2 The itinerant player and <i>Sir Thomas More</i>	14
3 Evidence of players in <i>Hamlet</i>	41
4 Kemp, clowns, and improvisation	54
5 Clown as justice: <i>The Mayor of Queenborough</i>	74
6 Attacks on the common player	93
7 <i>The Poetaster</i> , the ‘War of the Theatres’, and the Children	101
8 University drama and <i>The Return from Parnassus</i>	128
9 <i>Histriomastix</i> and the Inns of Court	148
10 Apprentice drama and <i>The Hog Hath Lost his Pearl</i>	178
11 Heywood, Massinger, and the defence of playing	187
12 Ambiguities	198
13 Conclusion	217
<i>Appendix A: Henslowe’s inventory of properties, 1598</i>	225
<i>Appendix B: Henslowe’s wardrobe inventory, c. 1602</i>	227
<i>Appendix C: The Cradle of Security</i>	229
<i>Appendix D: Itinerant players at work</i>	231
<i>Appendix E: The articles of the ‘Purge’ from Satiromastix V.ii</i>	240

CONTENTS

<i>Notes</i>	241
<i>Bibliography</i>	258
<i>Index</i>	267

Preface

The initial impetus for this study began in the desire to collect and analyse play-extracts which featured professional players at work in recognizable situations. In the event this aim has had to be modified in terms of space and relevance. I have held to my determination to reprint from texts that are relatively obscure, believing there to be real virtue in associating a piece of text with its discussion. For too long a text like *Histrionmastix* has been cited by critics as straight evidence of players; libel passing quite happily as fact. I have not included the texts of Shakespeare's plays, which are readily available, and elsewhere I have had to operate a rule of thumb. In some cases such as *A Mad World, My Masters*, the player scenes were too diffuse for inclusion, and I have curtailed those in *The Roman Actor* as less authentic. *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* has been excluded because it is set in a Children's Theatre, and its burlesque of citizen taste impinges only very obliquely on adult playing. I have not included aristocratic performers in private theatricals, since their authenticity too is often dubious. I have modernized the spelling wherever possible to bring it into conformity with the way Shakespeare's texts are usually presented.

Only a partial chronology of player-representation is possible because several of the key texts cannot be dated accurately. Instead I have tried to arrange the texts by way of an argument. The first group of chapters deals with itinerance, clowning, and extemporization. In part they give evidence of nostalgia for a passing age, but they also exhibit a ground-base of non-verbal, non-textual elements in all Elizabethan performance. I have included *The Mayor of Queenborough* in this group, because although it is a much later play, it exhibits many of the same characteristics.

The second group of chapters deals with a number of derogatory stage representations of players, in which evidence of playing and

PREFACE

performance practice is often overshadowed by the contempt with which it is expressed. A brief coda to this section deals with the two principal defenders of playing. The attack upon playing is a complex matter, especially when it involves assailants who are themselves theatre practitioners and whose utterances often need to be interpreted in terms of the context in which they are voiced. It is also an important one, since the very nature of playing must have depended to a large extent on the estimation the performers and their audiences had of it. I discuss in the penultimate chapter some of the many ambiguities that underlie arguments on both sides, the controversy itself, and indeed the very act of playing which is their focus.

I have chosen to use the term 'Elizabethan Player', although a number of the texts stray into the reign of James, and one into that of his son. However as a short-hand term it seems to me preferable to 'Shakespearean', which is much over-used, as well as unfairly proprietorial, or 'Renaissance', which begs far too many questions. It is part of my argument that what the stage representations celebrate is a performance tradition, in the process of being modified, but essentially the creation of Elizabeth's reign.

I should like to thank Anne Barton, Nicholas Brooke, Michael Casey, R.A. Foakes, Andrew Gurr, Stephen Taylor, and David Wiles for reading earlier drafts and for their comments, J.R. Mulryne for his encouragement in the early stages of the project, my friend Michael Hattaway for his help and encouragement throughout, and Helena Reckitt of Routledge for her many kindnesses. My greatest debt remains to Carole, my wife, for all her support as well as her help with corrections. All the mistakes of course are my own. The book has been a long time in the coming, but lack of study-leave in the public sector does have its compensations. Whilst writing this book, I have, perforce, been involved in many years of teaching and practical experiment. I owe a debt of gratitude to the students who have worked with me on the many projects, particularly those involved in the seven-player touring version of *The Jew of Malta* and the private theatre replica production of *The Malcontent*.

E.K. Chambers' *The Elizabethan Stage* remains a marvel and a sourcebook of endless value. I would like to thank the British Library Lending Division at Boston Spa, without whose speed and resources the book could not have been written. Many of the works I have found useful are contained in the notes, but I should like to pay particular tribute to Muriel Bradbrook's *The Rise of the Common Player* and Anne

PREFACE

Righter's *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, both of which have long been a source of inspiration.

David Mann

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I am grateful to the following institutions for permission to reproduce material in their possession: Bodleian Library, Oxford (from the title page of *Kemp's Nine Daies Wonder*, showing Will Kemp, shelfmark 4 to L 62 (12) Art); the Syndics of Cambridge University Library (from the frontispiece of the English translation of Paul Scarron's *Romans Comiques* (1676)); Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, USA (from the title-pages of William Alabaster, *Roxana* (1632), Thomas Heywood, *If You Know Not Me, Part One* (1623), Robert Armin, *The History of the Two Maids of Moreclack* (1609), Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl* (1611), Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619), Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The World Tossed at Tennis* (1620), Thomas Middleton, *A Game at Chess* (1624), George Ruggle, *Ignoramus* (1630), Thomas Heywood, *The Fair Maid of the West* (1631), Edward Forsett, *Pendantius* (1631), and Henry Marsh, *The Wits* (1662)); the Marquess of Bath, Longleat House, Warminster, Wiltshire (the Henry Peacham drawing of *Titus Andronicus*).

Note on the woodcuts

None of the woodcuts in this book can be regarded as unambiguous evidence of performers in actual performances. At best they can only give some indication of how contemporaries saw their players. As the frequent time-lag between performance and publication indicates, and excepting the occasional revival, many of the illustrators must never have seen the plays in performance. In some cases we cannot even be sure that the block was made for the play in hand at all. In the particular circumstances of some illustrations however, such as *A Game at Chess*, there are indications of considerable authenticity, whilst others impress with the vividness of their portrayal. The authenticity of each illustration is discussed in detail in R.A. Foakes, *Illustrations of the English Stage 1580–1642*, London, 1985.



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Introduction

A definition of the context of study

An Excellent Actor . . . by a full and significant action of body, he charms our attention: sit in a full Theatre, and you will think you see so many lines drawn from the circumference of so many ears, whiles the Actor is the Centre . . .

(John Webster)¹

This study is concerned to examine a series of extracts from play-texts which feature players as characters for the information they provide about the nature of Elizabethan performance practice. In their formative stage these texts were hand-written ‘scripts’, copied in parts for the actors, and intended for the two hours’ traffic of the stage, and so they generally remained throughout their active life. In normal circumstances they were not printed, they did not become ‘literature’, until they had ceased to be of value in the playhouse.

‘Scripts’ too in the sense of being incomplete; only one element in a complex interaction between actors and audience, in which the desire for that interaction preceded, and, it might be argued, overrode, any specific text, however much it may have been revered subsequently. Too much attention to the text, in attempting to wrest from it some absolute, timeless, objective ‘meaning’, so often the purpose to which it is now put, can distort our view of its place in the performance. Although the scripts are virtually all we have to go on, we must learn to look through and beyond them to the centre of the activity itself, to which they give testimony only obliquely but which gives them their quality and their *raison d’être*. ‘The Actor’, says Webster, ‘is the Centre’, and this is a statement both literal and metaphoric. Positioned towards the front of the stage and in the very middle of the auditorium, the Elizabethan player commanded the theatre like the hub of a wheel and was the focus of attention, whether he spoke or not. As this chapter will go on to suggest, there are particular circumstances which led to

the special pre-eminence of the player on the Elizabethan stage and which justify a much greater attention to the characteristics of his performance style than they have generally received.

A play-text, however fine, can never be more than raw material, since the success of a performance depends upon the actor and audience achieving some significant shared perception of the human condition, and they do this by shaping whatever materials come to hand. This process involves therefore a fourth element in the interaction; the development of a common attitude towards the content of the script, and perhaps towards the way in which it is expressed by the playwright. A suggestion of some of the elements in this interaction is contained in the extract from *The Mayor of Queenborough*, which provides a double-role for the performer, assuming at one and the same time the role of foolish justice *and* the *persona* of the shrewd clown who plays him. In the tradition of Kemp, the performer shares with us his character's foolishness, inviting us to laugh both with and at the material; both distancing and then defining the comic world in which he lives, at once different from our world and from that of the serious plot. This process of distinguishing the actor from the material and commenting upon it is present, or potentially so, in all confrontations between performer and audience on the Elizabethan stage.

Rarely in modern criticism is the performer, as distinct from the character, recognized as a significant element in an Elizabethan play, and when he is the situation is regarded as exceptional. 'To some extent,' says Bernard Harris cautiously in his Mermaid edition, '*The Malcontent* is a play for an actor's theatre.' Martin Wine, in his edition of the same play, is more thoroughgoing: 'the frank confession of theatricalism is at the heart of the play's meaning.' It is no coincidence that such judgements are often accompanied by comparisons with modern theatre. P.J. Finkelpearl likens Marston's work to Expressionist drama, G.K. Hunter compares him to Beckett, and perhaps the most popular comparison, shared by Wine and invoked on a large scale by Michael Scott, is with Genet.² This use of contemporary parallels, helped by *The Malcontent's* Induction and frequent self-reference, allows us more readily to perceive how this particular play achieves its ends by theatrical means. Our failure to do this in the study of other plays, successful in their own day, is perhaps more an indication of our own limitations than of a qualitative difference in the plays concerned.

Part of the problem lies in the very process of reading a play. We are accustomed to filmed versions of Shakespeare's plays, which speak in their own, visual, language. The images in our minds as we read are

INTRODUCTION

often influenced by the paintings of Fuseli and Millais and others. We may still be hampered by nineteenth-century stage directions such as 'another part of the forest' which litter many editions. Modern productions of Elizabethan plays quite rightly address the expectations of their own contemporary audiences, often aiming for striking visual images, but generally performed in a post-Stanislavskian style of acting which deliberately fuses part and person. Hence the modern reader is likely to find the theatre-of-the-mind peopled not by actors, but by characters; and by literal, three-dimensional characters at that; real men and women, blackamoors and fairies in real woods or castles. In reading the plays it is difficult to take account of the dual apprehension, which the spectator is able to have, of actor and role as two separate, distinct entities; to which Hamlet's references to the clowns who speak more than is set down for them and to Lucianus's grimaces give ample, if negative, testimony. Instead many critics talk as though the central relationship were *character*-audience, rather than *actor*-audience. Even when actor/role disparity at its most extreme is thrust upon the critic, T.F. Van Laan, for instance, explains Cleopatra's reference to some quick comedian, who will 'boy' her greatness 'I' th' posture of a whore', as involving a momentary loss of what he calls 'her' identity, which, he says, is 'utter and absolute. But only for a moment . . .'.³

The seamless, delicate, evanescent worlds the texts can create in the mind, as well as study-bound misunderstandings about their dependence on theatrical illusion, need to be confronted by the rigour of actual performance conditions. Illusion, certainly of the sort available in the Elizabethan theatre, operated not through tricking the audience but through their active willingness to enter into the deception. An incident at a performance of *Periander* at Oxford in 1607/8 illustrates what happened when this was not invoked. One of the student actors pretended to be a member of the audience and hissed and shouted during the prologue, 'Pox: begin your play, and leave your prating.' An observer noted that:

The Chiefest in the hall commanded that notice should be taken of him, that he might afterwards be punished for his boldness, but as soon as it once appeared that he was an actor their disdain and anger turned to much pleasure and content.

(*The Christmas Prince*, p. 286)⁴

The spectators were angry whilst genuinely deceived, and indeed the heckler 'had like to have been beaten for his sauciness (as it was supposed)'. It was only when they were party to the deception that the

spectators' anger turned to pleasure. Furthermore, given that 'being deceived' is a voluntary process, it will be seen that breaking and then restoring the illusion, in calling forth more frequently the active early stages of audience participation, only serves to strengthen it.⁵

As many of the extracts show, the nature of the activity of playing is determined to a very large measure by the composition of the audience and its behaviour, both in the local outcome of the particular performance, and in the wider assumptions which the audience brings to the activity; it establishes the occasion and the 'rules' by which the performance operates. In the amateur, dramatic 'offerings' of dependants to their lords, depicted in Shakespeare's early plays, notwithstanding earnest sentiments of goodwill, the plays do not 'take', partly because of the ineptness of the performers, but mainly because the aristocratic auditors do not for one moment forget their own superiority.⁶ At the other extreme spectators such as Sir Bounteous in *A Mad World, My Masters*, and Simon in *The Mayor of Queenborough* are so taken up by the dramatic fictions that they allow themselves to be humiliated and robbed. Only the more discriminating auditors such as Theseus and Sir Thomas More are able to follow the advice of the Chorus in *Henry V* in 'Minding true things by what their mock'ries be', perceiving both the falseness of playing and its value.

Audiences are apt to be thought of as straightforward receptors, responding directly to what they see, taking things as they are meant, but often the stage audience in an Elizabethan inner play responds inappropriately, as when Polonius bursts out at the climax of Priam's slaughter 'This is too long', and Hamlet is provoked to describe his taste, reminiscent of that of Captain Tuca, as 'He's for a jig, or a tale of bawdry'. Hamlet dismisses 'a whole theatre' as 'unskilful', 'who for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise', whilst sometimes the pleasure taken by more sophisticated members of the audience is seen to have little to do with the matter of the play, as with the Courtesan in *A Mad World, My Masters*, whose interest lies in the actors themselves, and the Empress in *The Roman Actor* who has a similar penchant and the position to satisfy it with private theatricals.⁷ These observations, however contemptuously presented, testify to the importance of non-intellectual, non-literary aspects of a performance, and the love of dumb-shows and noise, or the attraction wrought by the persons of the performers, are not to be dismissed lightly. The theatre is in a large measure for itself and about itself; for its sensations, for the sound of the words, the shape of the stage configurations, the rhythms of the scenes, the process of

INTRODUCTION

enactment, the euphoria of collective participation. It is an art-form that speaks to us very largely through our feelings. Spectators are affected by the immediacy of the event, and by the effects of contiguity, here the primacy of the circle, multiplied by the rising galleries. Because a stage performance is of the here-and-now the audience has the sensation of witnessing something being summoned up in its midst, not unlike a religious experience or intimations from another world; uncertain and at least potentially upsetting. The extra devil that appeared at a performance of *Dr Faustus* in Exeter would have alarmed more than the performers.⁸ At one and the same time spectators both fear and crave for bodily change, that surge of adrenalin which is part shocking and part stimulating; hence much of the ambivalence expressed towards the spectacle, and towards the actor too. Performers of any kind stimulate both rapport and hostility in an audience, and their skill lies to a great extent in how they juxtapose the two.⁹ We can see this most clearly today in cabaret and club entertainers. Tarlton, their sixteenth-century equivalent, was by all accounts a past master at manipulating audience response; evinced in that special relief felt by every member of the audience who was not, for the moment, the victim of his witticisms. The extracts show too, in the antics for instance of Inclination in *Sir Thomas More*, and disastrously in Simon's contribution to 'The Cheater and the Clown', the survival of the medieval sense of the play as 'game', with the audience as in some sense participants, rather than merely observers.

It is very evident in the preparations for these inner plays, when the mechanics of a performance are laid out before us, how far the final product is the result of the physical processes that have led up to it, and in particular the organization and personnel of the troupe. As we grow more conscious today of the 'politics of theatre' we are beginning to discern in Elizabethan theatre a variety of aesthetic priorities consequent on differing production models. One of the most obvious of these is the four- or five-man itinerant troupe, so frequently illustrated in the extracts below, which reveal the effect of audiences, venues, and logistics on its dramaturgy and performance style.¹⁰ Aristotle reports that drama began in Greece with the separation of one actor from the chorus, followed by the introduction of a second actor and then a third.¹¹ With this, he thought, reporting in c. 330 BC on a festival theatre which had achieved its heyday a century or so earlier, the drama had attained its mature form. One actor must have reported his own death. Two actors could engage in dialogues independent of the chorus. Three actors allowed the development of this process with a

changing sequence of characters, and so on. Each change in performer resources affected the nature of the event and the relations between its parts. Four Tudor actors were presumably an answer to the conflicting priorities of how far their meagre rewards could be shared on the one hand, and the desire to sustain their sprawling, hectic, linear tales on the other. Four allowed a link man, the Vice, and encouraged the practice of each actor playing a number of parts rather than specializing in one, which had a distinctive and lasting effect on performance practice. The composition, organization, and reception of a troupe is therefore of more than incidental concern in any review of what can be learned from the evidence of the plays.

Itinerant troupes strolled the length and breadth of England in their hundreds during the century or so before the establishment of the first theatres. It is the performance practice that they evolved, with very little in the way of material resources and dependent almost entirely on their own persons and entertainment skills, which provided the basis for Elizabethan stage conventions, with remarkably little subsequent modification. Not only did itinerance continue in most years throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when the theatres were closed because of plague or other inhibitions, or simply, as *Histrionmastix* suggests, out of term, but all productions must have been prepared with travelling in mind. Even the most well-established company was ever ready to obey a summons to perform at court, or in some nobleman's or alderman's house.¹² *Bartholomew Fair* opened one day at the new Hope Theatre amongst the bears, 'the place being as dirty as Smithfield and as stinking every whit', and was performed the next before the King at Whitehall.

Few of the plays need much more than the staging requirements detailed by Quince at his rehearsal in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'here's a marvellous convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring house.' They needed somewhere to perform, and somewhere to change and enter from; and no doubt the 'houses', so often mentioned in court accounts as being specially constructed, served primarily these latter practical functions.

Recent scholarship has tended to reduce our view of the player's dependence upon even the most cherished features of the conventional image of the Elizabethan playhouse. The 'inner stage' as a miniature proscenium has long fallen into disfavour, there is little evidence for the use of flying machinery in the earlier theatres, and even the stage trap and balcony may not have been significant elements in most performances.¹³ Although there has been a strong rearguard action on

INTRODUCTION



PLAYERS IN FASHIONABLE DRESS

Figure 1.1 (top) Close representations of Marco Antonio de Dominis (played by William Rowley), Count Gondomar, the Spanish Ambassador (whose actual clothes were used) and Prince Charles, in Middleton's scandalous political satire, *A Game at Chess*, performed in 1624 and illustrated shortly afterwards.

Figure 1.2 (bottom) Aspatia, a girl in disguise, and Amintor, from *The Maid's Tragedy*, by Beaumont and Fletcher, performed 1611, illustrated 1619.

THE ELIZABETHAN PLAYER

behalf of free-standing scenic units, which are attractive to modern critics and directors alike as practical solutions to immediate problems, their provenance is often dubious.¹⁴ The sources or analogies offered for them mostly come from civic, religious, or courtly performances, in traditions which were repetitive and accretive, without immediate financial restriction, and designed to achieve or consolidate some kind of social cohesion, in which the provision of scenery was more often related to the status of the auditors than to dramatic considerations. Although Henslowe's 1598 property list (Appendix A) includes a few large properties, their relative scarcity should encourage caution in proposals for their use.

The dominant impression visitors leave of the Elizabethan open-air theatres was their non-representational elegance. De Witt remarks on the 'notable beauty' of the theatres he saw, and the wooden columns at The Swan which were 'painted in . . . excellent imitation of marble'.¹⁵ Though the curtains hung on the stage may sometimes have represented locations or even moods, such as black for tragedy, it is more probable that in general they were decorative rather than representational. The stage hangings during *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* are of either the Conversion of St Paul or the Rape of Lucrece, whilst a similar curtain depicting The Prodigal Son may be the object of a joke in *A Mad World, My Masters* (II.ii).

Three inventories of costume survive amongst Philip Henslowe's papers. One of these, briefly summarized in Appendix B, indicates a number of specialist garments, mainly for low-class characters. No doubt garments were occasionally made for particular characters, but the frequency and variety of performances and the widespread concentration on upper-class characters in the plays are likely to have encouraged the regular use of a stock of costumes of the sort contained in two much bigger and more detailed inventories, one of 1598 and the other, quoted in a modernized form in Appendix B, of c. 1602. These latter inventories are very similar, and indicate the richness of the main playhouse stock, with materials of velvet, satin, silk, and cloth-of-gold, decorated with gold, silver, lace, and ermine. The frequency of black, white, and red amongst their colours is a reminder that a subsidiary pleasure of many visits to the theatre was the opportunity to see the representation of state ritual, in which these colours predominated. Many of the costumes used on the stage, we are told, were handed down from the nobility to their servants and then sold to the players.¹⁶

Some indication of everyday wear for people at large in sixteenth-

INTRODUCTION



Figure 1.3 (left) Queen Elizabeth, from the title-page of Heywood's *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody*, performed 1605, this illustration of the same year, based on earlier non-theatrical engravings, but probably a fair indication of how the actor would have been dressed.

Figure 1.4 (right) Bess Bridges, from Heywood's *Fair Maid of the West*, written c. 1604 and illustrated in 1631, probably from an old block, but chosen to relate the character, as in the script, to Elizabeth.

THE ELIZABETHAN PLAYER



Figure 1.5 Moll Frith, heroine of Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, performed 1607/8 and illustrated 1611; probably a fair indication of the appearance of the performer. Note the sharp contrast between this 'breeches' costume, in silhouette and freedom of movement, and the others on the previous page.

century Europe is given by the paintings of Breughel; loose, durable garments cut broadly on the shape of the body and serving as protection, and, in some degree, modesty. With minor variations they can be seen in illustrations of ordinary people from the twelfth century almost until our own day. Elizabethan court costumes, in marked contrast, express the principle of conspicuous consumption; vastly expensive in materials and maintenance, and grotesquely cut, with ruffs, farthingales, and peascod bellies – fashions that hindered their wearers in any serious occupation, and were redolent with the aphrodisiac of power. It is fairly evident from the preachers' detestation of this phenomenon that one of the most exciting aspects of a performance was the player strutting in this actual court finery or imitations of it. Notwithstanding the occasional and perhaps limited attempts at period authenticity, indicated by the *Titus Andronicus* drawing and references in the inventories to 'Antik sutes', the general run of playhouse costumes, pandering to the period's sartorial obses-

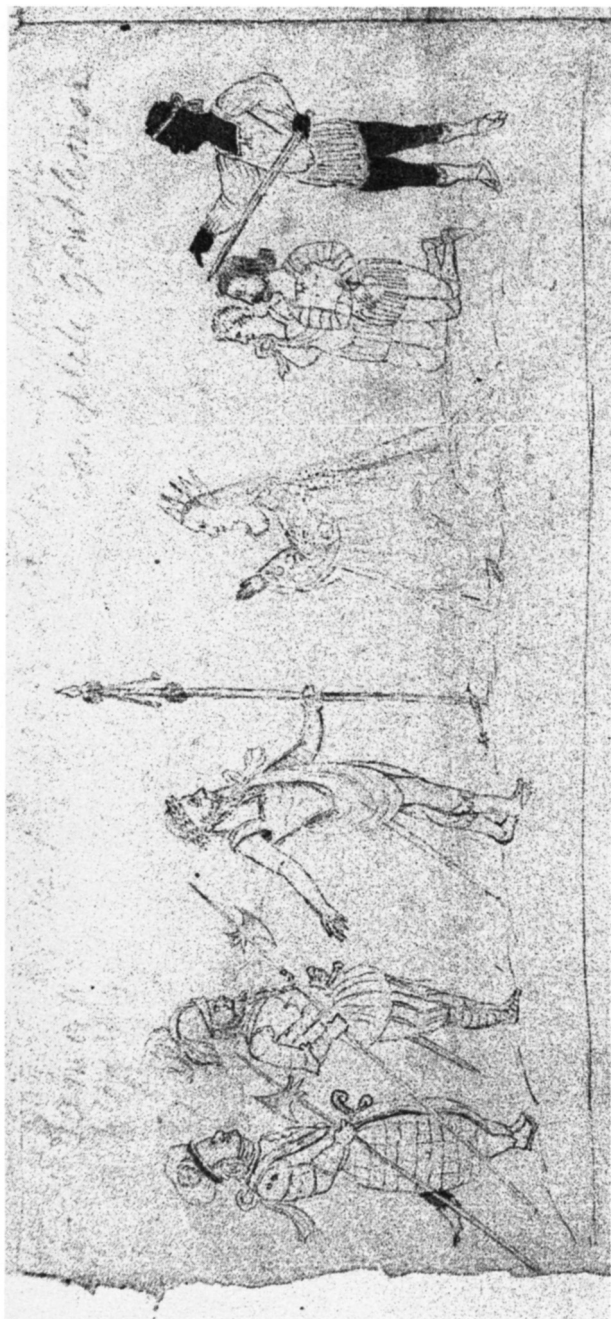


Figure 1.6 This drawing by Henry Peacham, c. 1595, is accompanied by selections from the text, which perhaps indicate that the figure of Aaron the Moor has been added to a tableau from I.i, in which Tamora, Queen of the Goths, sues to Titus for the life of her son. It is strongly suggestive of an actual performance, not least because it seems to indicate an attempt at authentic costuming on the sort of limited budget that would exercise a company more than it would an illustrator's imagination. The three figures on the right wear antique 'corselets', together with trunk hose in place of the strips of leather normally attached to a Roman breastplate. The costume of Titus also has an antique look, but his soldiers seem dressed somewhat at random from Elizabethan stock. The decorated garment of the huge kneeling Tamora defies classification.

THE ELIZABETHAN PLAYER

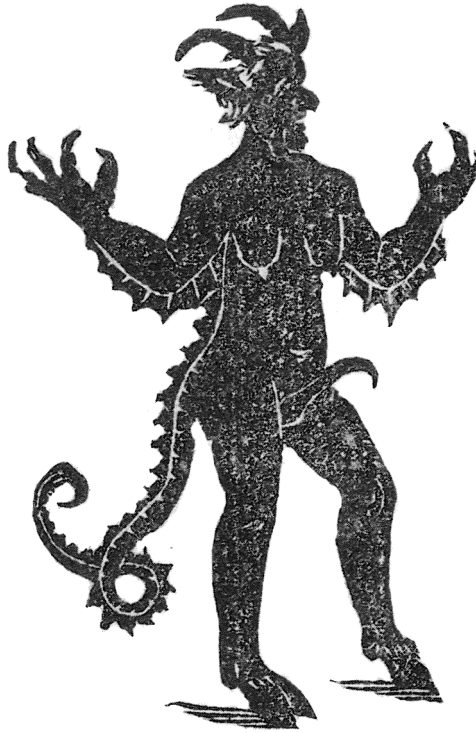


Figure 1.7 A fine Devil's costume from Middleton and Rowley's *The World Tossed at Tennis*, performed and illustrated in 1620.

sions, appear to have been worn rather for display than their appropriateness to particular characters.

The discussions of acting in the plays, as in the demands made on the *Pyrgi* in *The Poetaster*, and in what we hear of acting competitions in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* in which it is reported that Ralph 'should have played Jeronimo with a shoemaker for a wager', emphasize the semi-independent pleasures of skill for its own sake. Falstaff too introduces a competitive element into the rival representations of the King in *Henry IV Part One*, when he says, 'Judge, my masters'. Above all, *Hamlet*, that centrepiece in any discussion of the Elizabethan apprehension of playing, illustrates in the scenes with the players both a baroque, self-conscious artfulness, in which acknowledgement of the function of playing was a part, and clear evidence that this tradition