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FOUR ELIZABETHAN INTERMISSIONS!

JAMES H. CONOVER

Anyone suggesting that Elizabethan-Jacobean productions should involve four intermission periods would be met immediately with accusations of pedantry, and be told to come out of his dusty study into the living theatre. But the circumstantialist director who pleads a continuous-performance case is, for the most part, accepted. His theories, no less extreme, are met by no demurrers even though the burden of proof should be his. It is his because for the entire period of theatrical history for which we have relatively accurate proof of performance conditions regular intermissions or performance intervals are the rule, not the exception. The circumstantialist director—he who attempts to reproduce the details and effect of the Globe performance—seems to be introducing contrary rules for correct production on the basis of inadequate evidence of Elizabethan practice. What was intended as theory in the professor's classroom becomes precept on the director's stage.

The pendulum has swung from continually interrupted performance to the other extreme, and when an intermission is used in our college and university productions it is only a sufferance of our soft and weak-kidneyed modern audience. Debate on the point, however, has never abated in two centuries of research, though it might appear so

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on our university stages. Scholars have looked to two sources for evidence related to the controversy: the form of the play scripts themselves, particularly the question of five-act division; and documents concerning the performance information in the plays and other conditions, the amount of time involved and the use of music, for example.

In the latter area Malone attempted in the eighteenth century to brush aside an early continuous theorist with a footnote reference to several playhouse scripts calling for music between the acts.¹ The famous two-hours-traffic-of-our-stage quote along with others, has resulted in arguments that most Elizabethan plays could only be performed in two hours if played rapidly and without pause. In answer to this other quotes referring to three hours or more have been introduced.² George Fullmer Reynolds holds to the continuous theory partly on the grounds that the groundlings had to stand and consequently the theatres could not break continuous performance because that would prolong the ordeal in the pit.³ The alternatives here seem to be between a situation in which that group stood attending continually for two

¹ Edmond Malone, Ed., *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare* (London, 1821), III, p. 111, note 3.

² e.g. Fredson Bowers, Ed., *Thomas Dekker* (Cambridge, 1958), III, p. 212.

³ George Fullmer Reynolds, *The Staging of Elizabethan Plays at the Red Bull Theatre* (New York, 1940), p. 149.

hours, or one in which they stood for two and a half hours with occasional relaxations of attention. Neither interpretation offers very reliable or convincing proof.

Since some plays are known to have been written for specific use in either the public open-air theatres or private indoor theatres, the difference in performance conditions and procedures for the two types becomes important. Facts are, however, few and subject to various interpretations. Consider, for example, the induction scene added by a public company to a private theatre play, *The Malcontent*, in 1604. When questioned concerning additions to the play Burbage answers, "Sooth not greatly needeful, only as your sallet to your greate feast to entertaine a little more time, and to abridge the not received custome of musicke in our theater."⁴ Some have considered this to be proof that the public theatres did not use music during act intervals, but F. L. Lucas, editing this scene, notes that the meaning should be interpreted only to shorten the long musical intervals of the private theatres.⁵ He also notes that a chorus of musicians appeared between the acts in *Sejanus* at the Globe in 1603, the previous year.⁶

The use of the traditional five-act division which implies, or at least allows, a break in the flow of action is another matter, but once again there is no common agreement. The opposing points of view culminate on the one hand in T. W. Baldwin's *Shakespeare's Five-Act Structure*⁷ and on the other in the recently published dissertation by Wilfred T. Jewkes.⁸ The latter represents

the group that admits that sufficient evidence exists to grant the fact of intervals in plays written for the private indoor Elizabethan theatres, but holds the line for continuous performance in the public theatres for at least a certain period of years. Prompt scripts such as *The Welsh Ambassador*⁹ and *The Lady Mother*¹⁰ force such an admission. Mr. Jewkes' approach is in part statistical. He examines and tabulates early printings of plays through 1616 and then generalizes on his findings, concluding that although act division (and therefore performance intervals) certainly was practiced by all playwrights for the private theatres, act division was not practiced by playwrights for the public theatres for a period of years beginning about 1591 and ending sometime after 1607.¹¹ That isolated period of years, of course, includes most of Shakespeare's work. Despite the seeming illogic of this island of anti-tradition, the facts are impressive (though Ben Jonson's plays keep trying to upset the statistical balance). The conclusions, however, in this and other studies are silently predicated on three points: the absence of act headings indicates the absence of act units; the only true interval is an act interval; and all of the evidence has been examined.

It probably can be granted that when a playwright intentionally uses act divisions those divisions can, as indicating a kind of unit, allow for some kind of performance time interval—not must, but can. But is the reverse necessarily true? Can the absence of the formal indication of a unit be taken as a sign that some kind of unit, perhaps even an act unit, is not present? The expectation of the formal sign operates with-

⁴ F. L. Lucas, Ed., *The Complete Works of John Webster* (London, 1927), III, p. 303.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁷ T. W. Baldwin, *Shakespeare's Five-Act Structure* (Urbana, 1947).

⁸ Wilfred T. Jewkes, *Act Division in Elizabethan and Jacobean Plays* (Hamden, 1958).

⁹ H. Littledale, Ed., *The Welsh Ambassador* (Oxford, 1921).

¹⁰ Henry Glapthorne, *The Lady Mother*, ed. by Arthur Brown (Oxford, 1959).

¹¹ Jewkes, pp. 100-101.

in the context of a reading public, the same kind of public for whom the editors find it necessary to indicate "another part of the field." Frequently the same critic who disputes the formal five-act division elaborates on the idea that the popular playwrights wrote without publication in mind, wrote for their fellows in the playhouse with whom it was easy to discuss ideas for staging a particular play. The theorist could as easily envision the playwright pointing to a manuscript and saying, "I thought we'd take the first break there. Burbage always stops the show anyway."

Beyond this is the implication that if the act structure is proved non-existent the interval too must go, and that if there is not to be a ten-minute intermission in which to buy, peel and eat an orange the only alternative is continuous flow of action. An examination of Elizabethan plays, however, reveals a variety of interruptions of continuity: chorus, dumbshow, song and dance. Each of these represents in varying degree a pause or interval, a relaxation if you will. In terms of dramatic movement and rhythm any pause is a factor, whether its duration is twenty seconds or ten minutes, and the difference between no pause and twenty seconds is infinitely greater than the difference between twenty seconds and ten minutes. In both cases the impetus has been broken in some fashion, and upon resumption of the action the playwright has the option of rebuilding or redirection. If it was purposeful artistically the interruption was part of the effect, and the effect cannot be reproduced without the pause.

In addition many more pauses may have been included in performance than are recorded in the printed plays. The songs which are known to have been used between the acts in the private

theatres are not included in the printed versions of those plays, but their presence in performance cannot be doubted. All this says of course is that any interruption is significant and that we cannot know from the absence of formal act demarcations that no interruptions are called for in the play.

The third predication mentioned earlier was the question of thoroughness of investigation, and two types of manuscript evidence related to performance interval have been neglected. As hand-written manuscripts which were actually used in the Elizabethan playhouses they should represent the closest link to performance conditions; at any rate the printer and type-setters have been eliminated as possible corrupters. The manuscripts exist in two forms: prompt scripts and plots.

W. W. Greg describes fifteen extant used prompt scripts,¹² and Mr. Jewkes adds one more that had been relegated by Greg to a more tenuous category.¹³ They range in date from the early 1590's to the fourth decade of the seventeenth century, and in content from a few stage directions to detailed entrance warnings in *The Welsh Ambassador*¹⁴ and indication of interval length in Massinger's *Believe as you List*.¹⁵

The Welsh Ambassador (c. 1623), usually attributed to Thomas Dekker, was prepared in a fashion not unlike modern prompt scripts, in that marginal notes give advance warning of actor entrances; "bee redy Penda" anticipates by some twenty lines, "Enter Penda like a Comon soldier." These warnings are complete in the manuscript for every character entrance except those at the

¹² Walter W. Greg, *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 190-191.

¹³ Jewkes, p. 9.

¹⁴ Littledale.

¹⁵ Philip Massinger, *Believe As You List*, ed. by Charles J. Sisson (Oxford, 1928).

beginnings of the five indicated acts; in other words, no warning crosses an act interval.

The Massinger play (licensed 1631) is an autograph manuscript with some directions added by a playhouse adapter. Massinger carefully included all act and scene headings in the body of the manuscript, but interestingly enough the adapter ignored these, or considered them insufficient, and reinforced them by indicating only the act headings in the margin. In two places the adapter seems to have indicated the length of the interval desired. Before certain acts he has added "Act: 2: Long" and later, "long Act: 4:."

It is this type of evidence that has led to the acceptance of performance intervals in the later years of Elizabethan drama. Greg breaks down the division of the fifteen manuscripts to seven divided into acts only, five divided into acts and scenes, and three undivided as originally written. Two of the undivided manuscripts were given act headings by another hand and "*Sir Thomas More* is the only play that remains without division of any sort, perhaps because it never reached performance."¹⁶

But the critical conditions for Jewkes are the date of the manuscripts (between 1591 and 1607) and the company (public or private) that performed the play. Five of Greg's classification were within this period, as was the one added by Jewkes; not one of the six is known to have been performed by a private company, and of the only two known to have been performed by a public company one was originally divided and the other not. Of all six, two were originally divided, two had divisions added and two were undivided—an impasse. If it were possible to know the dates of the additions the informa-

tion would be useful, but the dates are speculative at best. The opinion of the editor for The Malone Society Reprint of *Edmond Ironside*, one with added divisions, is that the acts may have been added as late as the fourth decade of the seventeenth century;¹⁷ but the editor of the other, *Richard the Second or Thomas of Woodstock*, believes the acts to have been added at an early stage.¹⁸

The other pertinent documents are the plots reproduced by W. W. Greg in *Henslowe Papers*.¹⁹ Apparently the Elizabethan playhouses used at least three kinds of manuscripts for each play in their repertory: "parts" or what we now call "sides" for the individual actor; the prompt scripts discussed above; and "plots" which summarize in a sketchy way the action of the play, but indicate mainly the entrances of characters. "The plots are all written in two columns on paper mounted on pasteboard, and have a hole cut near the top to enable their being hung on a peg in the playhouse."²⁰ There are extant or in reproduction seven of these plots, two of which are in such fragmentary condition that they are not of use to this study. All are dated by Greg and others in the last decade of the sixteenth century except one, *The plott of the First parte of Tamar Cam*, which is assigned to 1602.²¹ It is believed that they were once owned by Alleyn's company, the Lord Admiral's Men.²² Their primary interest to the dramatic historian has been in the frequent mention of actors' names, associated with certain characters, but they also contain information pertinent to this study.

¹⁷ Eleanor Boswell, Ed., *Edmond Ironside* (Oxford, 1927), p. ix.

¹⁸ Wilhelmina P. Frijlinck, Ed., *Richard the Second or Thomas of Woodstock* (Oxford, 1929), p. xvi.

¹⁹ Walter W. Greg, Ed., *Henslowe Papers* (London, 1907).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁶ Greg, *Dramatic Documents*, pp. 210-211.

As was seen above most of the "books" or prompt scripts were divided into acts, but not scenes. The plots, perhaps because they served a different function, have no formal indication of acts, but do informally indicate the scene units by means of a line ruled across the plot. Of the five relatively complete plots four include intervals in the sense used in this study. Three, for example, employ chorus speakers, presenters or dumbshows in the normal position of the act unit. The only one for which we have a corresponding printed play, *The Battle of Alcazar*, duplicates the presenter and dumbshow which opens each act of that play in the printed version. Most important of all the plots for this investigation is *The plotte of the deade mans fortune*. At four points in the plot, which certainly correspond to the intervals separating the five-act form, the plot is divided by a row of crosses, and in each case the word "musique" is added in the left margin.²³

There are then eleven manuscripts for the period closely related to performance conditions in the playhouses. Four of these clearly indicate performance intervals or non-continuous action, two are divided into acts with the

inherent possibility of intervals, three are without division, and two have divisions added at an unknown time in a manner that strongly indicates performance intervals. In eight of the eleven, then, there are strong possibilities for performance intervals.

None of the evidence on either side of the question seems strong enough for generalization, but the evidence of the prompt scripts and plots should raise serious doubts about unconditional theories of continuous performance. It is possible that some plays were performed continuously, but it is probable that others were not, for the period and theatres concerned. And the scholar or director is left at the point at which he should have begun, the text of the particular play at hand. Each must be considered on its own characteristics, and the possibility of several intervals, thirty-second music bridges perhaps, should never be ignored.

It is assumed that no modern director would run together acts two and three of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, formal act headings and passage of time notwithstanding. The scenes on either side of that formal heading need to be separated on artistic principles, not typographical. The same principles should be applied to every Elizabethan play.

²³ Ibid., pp. 129-148.