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Performing *The Book of Esther* in
Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

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ERIC NICHOLSON*

William N. West. *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion: Playhouses and Playgoers in Elizabethan England*¹

Abstract

William N. West's *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion: Playhouses and Playgoers in Elizabethan England*, suited for specialists and non-specialists alike, is a boldly original and impressively versatile study of the discourses as well as experiences of the participatory entertainment offered at early modern London's commercial playhouses. Deftly coordinating rigorous historical research, analysis of numerous but always salient primary sources, and theoretically informed, convincing interpretation, West opens a variety of fresh perspectives on the topic. Beginning with a demonstration of the aptness of "Playing", rather than Theatre or Drama, as a descriptive and critical designation, he follows a propositional approach in the succeeding chapters on "Occupatio" through "Non Plus", via "Confusion," "Eating," and other common criteria, to articulate a new understanding of how Elizabethans spoke of playgoing, rather than identifying what it meant to them. This lucidly written and truly ground-breaking monograph offers an extraordinarily rich, diverse array of critical insights that promise not only to change and re-direct our knowledge of its subject matter, but also to pave the way for fruitful commentary and enlightened understandings to come.

KEYWORDS: playhouses; playgoing; Elizabethan England; poetic confusion; occupation; reoccupation; forms of life

To a certain extent, the adage "don't judge a book by its cover (or its title)" applies to William N. West's monograph on Elizabethan spaces and experiences of plays and their performances. The book's cover image might at first glance seem incongruous and randomly anachronistic, since it reproduces a detail from an 1860s engraving published in Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke's *Plays of William Shakespeare*: a group of six men and one woman in early modern clothing are seen conversing among themselves, while one of them points towards the feet and cloaked legs of a figure on a stage, next to a pair of ancient Hellenistic masks. What exactly is portrayed here? The back cover explains that this is part of an illustration accompanying the text of *Pericles* 5.3:

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pertinent enough, but why use this imaginative reconstruction of playgoing, from neither the Elizabethan nor our contemporary period, to appear beneath the title *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion*? And what is the sense of these four words, and their potential relationship to each other? At least at first glance, is the reader meant to undergo some confusion? Perhaps yes, and if this is the case, it is yet another admirable facet of West's boldly original and thoroughly illuminating study, suited for specialists and non-specialists alike, which lives up to the "exhilarating" and "dazzling" accolades given to it by Tiffany Stern and Jean Howard in their enthusiastic endorsements, quoted on the back cover. For as West demonstrates, "poetic confusion" accurately describes the creative process practiced by Shakespeare, Jonson, and their fellow playmakers in collaboration with their audiences (or "audients", and more on this term below) as a "pouring together" of the diverse elements enabled by the mingling at venues like the Curtain, Swan, and Globe playhouses of a rich, heterogeneous variety of words, gestures, plots, genres, costumes, foods, drinks, and people from nearly all walks of early modern life. This kind of transformative, multifarious collaboration, with its capacity to re-value the negative, primarily political connotations of "confusion" that prevailed outside Elizabethan playhouses, also modifies the usual sense of "common understandings" beyond association with either strictly intellectual-religious insights or punning ridicule of those who literally stand under a raised stage. Thus the cover image and title are themselves ingenious lures, since they show and denote a community of under-standers, as imagined by an artist from a later age, and invite an attentive, open-minded reading of West's book and its refreshingly innovative treatment of its historical subject matter.

In this same vein, employing a piece of a Victorian illustration is also fitting, because as West concedes, the effort to appraise a vanished theatrical culture and transmit a clear understanding of it is inevitably conditioned and limited by the circumstances and attitudes of a later time, be it twentieth century, twenty-first century, etc. A principal merit of the book is its recognition that in the 2020s "theatre", "plays", "acting" and other related terms can signify markedly different things than they did four to five hundred years ago. This awareness calls for interrogating, de-familiarizing, and re-articulating the ways in which Elizabethans likened and linked playhouse experiences to practices of confusion, understanding, occupation, eating, gaming, and competing. As West himself states, his approach does not aim to explain what playgoing and play-understanding exactly meant in late sixteenth-early seventeenth-century London, but rather it favors and respects what people at the time themselves said, and thus it "is also propositional, proposing those ways of speaking I pick out as ones that early modern players and playgoers would have recognized" (16). In this regard, he succeeds admirably, deftly coordinating a wealth of contemporary citations from a myriad of primary

sources including poems (such as satires by John Marston, epigrams by John Davies, and journalistic mini-epics by John Taylor the Water Poet), prose texts (some well-known, like Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*, Greene's *Groat's-Worth of Wit* and Heywood's *Apology for Actors*, others less familiar, for instance Robert Crowley's *Waie to Wealth*, and *This World's Folly*, by a certain 'I.H.'), treatises and diatribes (such as anti-theatrical tracts by Stephen Gosson, Philip Stubbes, and John Northbrooke), archival records, diary entries, accounts by visitors to London, language handbooks, and many more. In short, an exceptional range and breadth of research material enriches almost every page with impressively versatile erudition as well as lively and stimulating fascination. For as befits the book's subject, play-texts themselves – again, both well-known and obscure – furnish much of the quoted source material, which West applies to his appraisals with a rare, virtuoso gift for elucidating contextual phenomena through incisive analysis of texts, and vice versa. To offer two examples: citation is made of a dialogue between a player and a jig-maker in Robert Taylor's comedy *The Hogge hath Lost His Pearl* (1613) to ingeniously tease out the revealing popularity as well as pungent notoriety of the lost jig called "Garlic," while Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* and its inventive riffs on "deformed" and the thief named "Deformed" become a compelling demonstration piece for how "the language of information, deformation, reformation, like the practice of spelling by syllables, offers a way of understanding what happens through and during the playwrights' work as the reforming, or deforming, and performing of new forms from the matter of words and gestures" (178). This astute contention regarding Elizabethan players' dynamic capacities of transformation in turn gains support from the ensuing reading of Shakespeare's Richard Gloucester, "an indigested and deformed lumpe" (*Henry VI Part 3*, 5.6) who learns through Protean improvisation to "descant on mine owne Deformity" (*Richard III*, 1.1), and in so doing to change negative qualities into potentially advantageous ones.

Indeed, the question of Form – with the word's multiple senses, figurations, variations, and implications – is at the heart of West's study, pertaining to not only its material and historiographical concerns but also its theoretical approach. As is clearly set forth in the Introduction, the philosophers and social scientists who usefully inform the book are ones who have made the question a major element of their thinking and writing. These include Giambattista Vico, whom West avowedly follows "by seeking new experiences in new ways of speaking of them" (9) with reference to Vico's insights on the evolution of new forms of language; Pierre Bourdieu and his well-known theory of the habitus, aptly inflected here as a realized playing-in on the part of participatory stakeholders, in this case public playgoers and professional playwrights; Hans Blumenberg, with his identification of

absolute metaphors – one of these, crucially, is *All the World's a Stage* – that do not simply follow thoughts and perceptions but have the ability to orient them, and give shape to human engagements with reality; Raymond Williams, and his structures of feeling formulation, which diagnoses a social historical pattern of how experience shapes such seemingly individual but often shared structures, that in turn enable experience to happen in the ways it does, or at least is felt to happen in certain ways at certain times; and perhaps most importantly of all, Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose reflections on and investigations into forms of life, along with his pluralistic, flexible models of kinds of statement, possibilities of phenomena, and ways of speaking (*Sprechweisen*) are deployed with coherent aptness and precise nuance in many of the book's sections. In recent Shakespearean and early modern literary criticism, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on circulation (of ideas, of forms, of energies, texts, commodities, fabrics, etc.), to the point where the term has risked becoming a buzzword, but West rigorously demonstrates the “circulation in common” (15) of the ways of speaking and forms of life in the specific – neither universal nor particular – circumstances of playing and playgoing, and of both experiencing and commenting on these phenomena, in late sixteenth to early seventeenth century England. Hence the primacy of the term “common,” with its connotations both familiar and frequently encountered (as in “commonplace,” informed by structures of feeling), and of things collectively shared, recognized, and understood (as in “common grounds” and “common knowledge”) by often ephemeral but nonetheless attention-getting communities of players and playgoers. West persuasively asserts, and goes on to show, how experiences of “playgoing v of confusion, of understanding, of dislocation, of appetite and consumption, of contest – were the stuff of which plays were made” (6).

Given this theoretical as well as documentary historiographical perspective, West's field of inquiry and prime term of reference aptly becomes *Playing*, rather than the more conventional and less dynamic *Theatre* and/or *Drama* of previous studies. His approach and tone, however, are never polemical, and in fact he graciously and generously acknowledges the abundant scholarly literature of which he has an extraordinary command (too numerous to cite here, beyond important studies by Gurr, Mullaney, Orgel, Howard, Smith, and Lin). In some sense, then, *Playing* also becomes the book's protagonist, especially since it tends to be personified, even as it is disavowed as a master discourse and carefully distinguished as something that “sometimes posed as one” (28). West's convincingly argued and scrupulously supported readings, however, mitigate the potential dangers of personification, and justify his ways of using the term. By the end of the book, one does perceive how *Playing* – encompassing playhouses and playgoers – is the objectively accurate, suitably comprehensive designation for the complex, interwoven

sociological, material, somatic, ecological, culinary, artistic, and practical-ideational phenomena that the author traces. Disciplined thought and fine distinctions also mark West's coinage, or rather resuscitation, of a keyword for characterizing the paying customers/understanders at Elizabethan London's outdoor public performance venues (and it ought to be noted that the book does recognize a major experiential difference between outdoor and indoor playhouses, concentrating attention on the former and deliberately foregoing extended assessment of the latter). The word is "audients," introduced about a third of the way through the book, identified as "a homophone for a collection of individuals," "a dispositive assembly that is both collective and discrete," and explained as "a helpful irritant: it suggests how confounding and difficult it is to reimagine what audients did at a play" (109). The following chapters maintain "audients" as the preferred plural noun for the heterogeneous auditors/spectators of plays performed in public, and again one is persuaded that it is an especially insightful and salient term to use in its multivalent context. "Audients" is thus a dynamic component of the book's critical apparatus, advancing as well as focusing new, subtle, and diversified understandings of the often generic and sometimes trivialized notion of audience participation.

A smartly playful and engagingly interactive spirit pervades the sequence of chapters, from the very outset with a variety-pack preamble of headnote/guideposts, including Wittgenstein's observation that "a good likeness refreshes the understanding . . . A new saying is like a fresh seed which is tossed into the ground of discussion" (vii) and the following all-important exchange from Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (to which West returns, and interprets with originality and acumen):

BALTHAZAR But this will be a mere confusion,
 And hardly shall we all be understood.
 Hieronimo It must be so, for the conclusion
 Shall prove the invention, and all was good.
 (4.1.179-82; viii)

Following the Introduction, with its acknowledgment of new approaches to historical evidence and new discoveries of theatrical documents and archeological sites in London, and then its setting forth of the book's critical agenda and theoretical orientations, Chapter One nimbly visits and comments on a diverse spectrum of sources, including pro- and anti-theatrical ones, to show how Elizabethan Playing was above all an inclusive activity, a strongly physical form of action with the capacity to rouse motions and stimulate the senses. Audients at the playhouses were not passive consumers but active communicants, who in various ways were complicit with and responsible to

the enactments they beheld, heard, and smelled on raised stages. West provides his own new perspectives on the *theatrum mundi* trope, on playwrights' use of the Horatian defense of their practice as a usefully educational form of delight, and on the Puritan critique of playing as not only sinful in and of itself but essentially lacking in any utility at all. As plays like *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *Hamlet* themselves evoke, Playing, with its stimulating flood of sensations, could promote *Distraction*, which "is the means through which the play's action takes place: no distraction, no action" (50). Although some reference to Chaucerian *game* vs./and *ernest* tropes, and to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* study could be helpful here, West's pithy assessment directs attention to the interactively ludic quality of Elizabethan Londoners' experiences of the playhouses during a time of rapidly changing economic and institutional practices. This focus distinguishes Chapter Two, entitled *Occupatio*, where West poses and explores the crucial questions of how "did playing call attention to itself among other institutions within which it emerged and toward which it came to seem so irresponsible?", and "How did those other institutions first recognize the practices of playing as an intrusion or, as they often described it, an occupation?" (55). With acute critical skill, he pursues his inquiry through application of Blumenberg's model of *Umbesetzung*, or "reoccupation," as a process in which changed historical circumstances turn old questions and answers into problems that invite a search for solutions, but rather than attaining them keeps the questions open. West thus explains how, even if commercial public performance and its spaces were not actually new in Elizabethan England, the period's culture of playing became aware of itself as a new kind of problem, and strikingly "embraced this startling manifestation of its own novelty" (70). Connecting scripts like *New Custom* and *Sir Thomas More* to a contemporary self-consciousness of temporal as well as spatial *passages* (emphasis mine), he elucidates how a negatively political term like *innovation* could become, in the reoccupations made by Elizabethan playing, a motive and a cue for re-valuations of the past, and plural, suggestively innovative anticipations of the future.

The next two chapters, on "Understanders" and "Confusion," share an agenda of questioning, closely examining, and re-defining the familiar meanings often attached to these terms. Trans-valuation is a key leitmotiv here, as West first convincingly adjusts the usual twentieth-twenty-first century naming and evaluations of Elizabethan playgoers as "groundlings" or "spectators" or "audience members" to a recognition of them as *understanders*, and then unfolds the intricate and revealing implications of this term in its early modern context. For *understanding* meant literally to stand under, to be "physically sub-jected to the stage, thrown under it rather than independent of it" (83). At the same time, the word indicated the cognitive process associated with it today, but often with a connotation of a spiritual or even divinely

given insight. *Understanding* thus could refer to the highest form of cognition, yet it also suggested lapses of thinking into reactive physicality. Making this scenario even more complex and fascinating is the fact that in contrast to the prevalent definition in today's world, intellectual understanding was closely linked with physical experience, in the early modern world. Through judicious and nuanced readings of texts by Shakespeare, Marston, Beaumont, and especially Jonson, West again brilliantly clarifies the dense and intricate meanings of being an *understander* in the world of Elizabethan playing, showing how thought and feeling, cognition and sensation are bound together in their contextual *habitus*, enabling a similar give-and-take interaction between playgoers and players. While contemporary anti-theatricalists saw such circulations of energy in crowded, socially mixed playhouses as occasions for dangerously disordering confusion, the same term, in Chapter 4, takes on a new value as a signifier of the creative pouring together of mingled audients. Applying specific insights into such vivid, revelatory examples as the 1594 Gray's Inn attempted staging of *The Comedy of Errors*, which was interrupted and devolved into a Night of Errors, the book's central chapter demonstrates how this kind of theatrical Confusion can be understood as truly poetic, in the sense that it *makes* something.

West aptly and wittily identifies Shakespeare's Plautine comedy as "confusion's masterpiece" (115), before moving on to tease out the generative confusions in Christopher Sly's "Comontie" spin on comedy: these affirm the contingent and unpredictable qualities of Elizabethan playhouse experience. In a brief "Interlude" on "Playing, Thinking," he identifies such confusions as "a kind of thinking in common" (143), setting up Chapter 5, on "Supposes," which once more uses philological rigor and multi-disciplinary agility to explain how to *suppose* was a top priority task as well as recreational pleasure for audients. Whether playgoers were accused by opponents like Rainoldes, Gosson, and Stubbes of excessively supposing and thus succumbing to ravishment by plays and interludes, or in a kind of fan fiction pastime they acted out snippets of greatest hit speeches and actions of professional London players – as testified by the Cambridge *Parnassus* plays – or they were prompted by the Chorus of *Henry V* to suppose that the girdle of the Globe Theatre's walls confines two mighty monarchies, they continually engaged in a process of transformation. As West shows, this process could involve thorough training and exercise of the senses, carried out in such practices as teaching students to voice Latin by syllables before understanding the language, and then hearing/observing the multiple noises, utterances, and movements of players and fellow audients, ranging from whispering, sighing, weeping, standing still, walking slowly to running quickly, declaiming, bellowing, ranting, fleering, grinning, stamping, swaggering, and more. Also fittingly, this sensory workout was indeed global, as it comprised not only seeing, hearing, and feeling, but

smelling, tasting, and digestion: “Eating” is the title of Chapter 6, which eloquently confirms how “playing and food retailing in early modern London were spheres of activity entwined economically, legally, and (for lack of a clearer word) ideologically” (186). Once more West parses and illuminates the links and likenesses between playing/playgoing and related fields of experience, explaining how significant and signifying foods and drinks – among them nuts, gingerbread, bread, bottle ale, and especially apples – with their capacity to be cracked, guzzled, fizzed, thrown about, etc. could be transformed from objects of consumption to ones of active exchange. As documentary records testify, playgoers were known to use alimentary items in distracting ways – players risked being pippin-pelted – and when they did so they could alter theatre’s supposedly moral nutrition by making it an opportunity for aggressive communion, in a material and metaphoric hodge-podge. In both literal and figurative ways, audiences *hungered* (emphasis mine) for performances, and West cites references to wide open, gaping mouths as signs of this appetite, which could involve gasping, singing, and devouring, as in a passage from Robert Wilson’s *Three Ladies of London*, and in one of *Tarlton’s Jests*. Although the book could devote slightly more attention to music and related musical phenomena, such as the contrast perceived by some civic authorities and anti-theatrical polemicists between desired social harmonies and the cacophony of playhouses, its concluding chapter, “*Non Plus*,” resonantly stresses how playing tended to present itself as a contest. To avoid spoiling future readers’ learning and enjoyment, here I will limit myself to praising West’s outstanding scrutiny of the multi-layered links between bearbaiting and human playing, and his persuasive stress on the playhouse as a site of *encounter*, of in-process, competitive, and exciting acts involving challenges, provocations, and uncertain outcomes.

The book playfully ends by “holding its peace,” as the fitting flourish for its “Trying Conclusions” with a concise, magisterial case study of the raucously jesting, singing, caterwauling scene (2.3) of *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. Solidly building on previous scholarship – the nearly sixty small-print pages of meticulous, up-to-date, and exceptionally helpful endnotes could also be published independently, as an optimum guide to research and resources on the subject – this truly ground-breaking monograph offers an extraordinarily rich, diverse banquet of ideas and critical insights that promise not only to change and re-direct our knowledge, but pave the way for fruitful commentary and enlightened understandings to come. As an added bonus, the author writes with lucid precision, appealing wit, and eloquent flair. Well-turned, memorable phrases abound, and inventive humour spices his lively pages: to quote but one of numerous examples, West mentions Bruce Smith’s important study of *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*, and then posits that we “should attend to the olfactor as well”

(201). In short, it is a pleasure as well as an illumination to read West's book. Wittgenstein proposes that good likenesses refresh the understanding, but the intellectual verve and unique freshness of *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion* go beyond pertinent comparisons. For while its title and topic may involve the common, as a scholarly achievement it is singular, in the best sense of the word.

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