“To move the spirits of the beholder to admiration”: Lively Passionate Performance on the Early
Modern Stage

Abstract: This article examines the meaning of terms such as “lively” and “to the life” in early modern plays and in commentary on dramatic performance. Scholars have tended to interpret these terms as praise for a naturalistic acting style, one that values actors’ realistic portrayals of their characters. Conversely, this article argues that liveliness meant *energeia*, an Aristotelian term for the aspect of language that moves an audience. Early modern poets and playwrights frequently expressed a strong desire to move their audiences, and the playwright Thomas Heywood claimed that drama was particularly well suited to achieve that goal. By attending to new research on Renaissance emotion, the article considers how a revised understanding of the passions should affect our understanding of dramatic performance. It goes on to demonstrate that liveliness required excessive passion, and though a performance could go too far and, as Hamlet says, “tear a passion to tatters,” the calibration of passion required of actors encouraged excess nonetheless. Not all acting was excessive because not all acting was lively, and it was possible for a performance to become too passionate. But acting was frequently praised as lively, and lively performance required an excess of passion that was considered unnatural.

Introduction

Performances of plays during the early modern period were often praised with terms like “lively” and “to the life.” In his *Apology for Actors*, Thomas Heywood advocated the power of the theater to inspire an audience: “[S]o bewitching a thing is lively and well spirited action, that it hath power to new mold the hearts of the spectators and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt” (B4r). But what did Heywood or any other early modern writer mean when they described action as lively? Understandably, scholars have tended to interpret such terms as praise for a naturalistic acting style, one that values actors’ realistic portrayals of their characters. In 1984, a

prominent theater historian described a long-running debate over early modern acting styles between “formalists” and “naturalists”: “The formalists point to the logical impossibility of creating an illusion of reality on a stage that is bare, unlit and in an unhealthy proximity to the audience, and with a cast that includes boys playing the women’s parts. The naturalists have accumulated an impressive body of contemporary comment on the lifelikeness of the acting” (Holland 43).¹ The words “lively” and “to the life” frequently appear in that body of contemporary comment, which provides much of the evidence for another theater historian’s more recent argument “that ‘Stanislovskian’ ideas of characterization, spontaneity, and emotional realism have a considerably older heritage than has been proposed” (Stern 99).² Liveliness, then, remains a key concept for research on early modern acting styles, research that informs how we understand the first performances of plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Little evidence of early modern acting styles has survived, which is why the present essay is neither formalist nor naturalist. Yet scholars tend to agree that dramatic performance was inextricably tied to contemporary understandings of emotion. Consequently, new research on Renaissance emotion that revises our understanding of it should similarly change how we perceive performance. Liveliness meant *energeia*, an Aristotelian term for the aspect of language that moves an audience.³ Early modern poets and playwrights frequently expressed a strong desire to move their

¹ For more on the debate between formalists and naturalists, see Roach 30-57; Menzer, “That old saw,” 29-32; and Tribble 87-110.

² Stern’s article is part of a collection on Shakespearean characterization, and her argument extends far beyond Shakespeare’s characters to suggest that emotional realism in the performance of drama is a timeless concern (109).

³ The concept of *energeia* has received little attention in recent early modern criticism. Katharine Craik presents one of the few exceptions in her monograph, *Reading Sensations in Early Modern England*. “The most moving passages in literature and rhetoric were those marked by *energeia*, or energy, a textual property connected to *kinesis* or movement” (5). She is primarily interested in how *energeia* was thought to affect readers: “Literature’s singularity depends upon its ability to elicit a response from men’s minds and bodies, and reading poetry becomes a restorative experience thanks to the rhetorical principle of *energeia*... which

audiences, and the playwright Heywood claimed that drama was particularly well suited to achieve that goal. Liveliness required excessive passion, and though it was possible to go too far and, as Hamlet says, “tear a passion to tatters,” the calibration of passion required of actors encouraged excess nonetheless.⁴ Bridget Escolme’s recent monograph “contends that the early modern theatre is a place where audiences went to watch extremes of emotion and to consider when those extremes became excesses” (xvi). The present essay builds on Escolme’s work and departs from it by claiming that lively performance was, by definition, already excessive.

Escolme persuasively highlights the emotional extremes that saturate early modern drama, but she argues “that the theatre was a place for pushing at the boundaries of what society regarded as the legitimate expression of emotion, for interrogating and debating those boundaries” (xviii). I would distinguish passions performed in the theater from those that society regarded as legitimate expressions. Passions performed on stage did not push the boundaries of what was acceptable because at the same time that they were excessive they were also feigned. Surviving documents frequently suggest that an actor’s feigned, excessive passion could move an audience even more effectively than a real passion could. Not all acting was excessive because not all acting was lively, and it was possible for a performance to become too passionate. But acting was frequently praised as lively, and lively performance required an excess of passion that was considered unnatural.⁵ Thus, I argue that lively performance was in no way naturalistic by early modern standards.

Liveliness as *Energeia*

persuades listeners by evoking passionate feeling in them” (136). This essay offers a similar argument for how *energeia* in performance was perceived to affect theatergoers.

⁴ By excess, I mean overflowing and beyond normal parameters.

⁵ According to Nigel Wood, we can see a similarly unnatural excess in Shakespeare’s use of *spleen*: “I stress ‘an excess’, for we do not understand Shakespeare’s ‘spleen’ by recourse to humoral explanations” (122). Wood concludes that the unnaturalness of the extra-humoral spleen disrupts, among other things, character: “Far from framed and ‘placed’ by its context – a linear narrative or any consistency of character – attacks of the spleen display their own irrational power, a challenge to norms of linguistic range and unitary meaning – and also a strictly humoral explanation of human behavior” (125). Excess is unnatural, but it makes good drama.

In the Aristotelian tradition, *energeia* was the aspect of language that allowed a sufficiently passionate orator or actor to move an audience. Philip Sidney supplies a definition of *energeia* while describing the ineffective poetry of many love poets: “so coldly they apply fiery speeches, as men that had rather read lovers’ writings..., than that in truth they feel those passions, which easily (as I think) may be betrayed by that same forcibleness or *energia* (as the Greeks call it) of the writer” (Sidney 49).⁶ *Energeia* moves people by conveying passion, which makes it synonymous with Scaliger’s use of the Latin term *efficacia*: “There is also such *efficacia* in apostrophe and interrogation, so that it makes the spirit of the listener leap up. When these are joined, the highest vigor is produced” (as qtd. in Rudenstine 155). This vigorous aspect of language and art is most commonly called liveliness in early modern England. It is usually associated with a kind of excess, such as when the poet responds to the painter’s work at the beginning of *Timon of Athens*: “I will say of it, / It tutors nature. Artificial strife / Lives in these touches livelier than life” (1.1.36-8). Liveliness exceeds life, going beyond the realistic to show something truer and more beautiful.

Scaliger’s association of *efficacia* with apostrophe and interrogation parallels Aristotle’s explanation of *energeia* that links it with some metaphors. Aristotle invited confusion by connecting *energeia* with the similar-sounding *enargeia*,⁷ but the examples he offers further clarify his definition: “the phrase ‘having his prime of life in full bloom’ is *energeia*, as is ‘you, like a free-ranging animal’

⁶ Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy* includes the Greek term *energeia* only once, but it offers a similarly revealing description of liveliness, a word that frequently appears in the *Defence* and elsewhere. According to Sidney, the poets’ “naming of men is but to make their picture the more lively and not to build a history. Painting men, they cannot leave men nameless.... The poet nameth Cyrus or Aeneas no other way than to show what men of their fames, fortunes, and estates should do” (35). So for Sidney, liveliness does not build a history, but instead helps facilitate the poet’s ability to depict what people in certain social groups should do.

⁷ *Enargeia* is typically translated as “vividness” or a quality of being “before the eyes,” whereas *energeia* means “actualization,” “activity,” “vivification,” or less commonly “personification” (Kennedy 222n). However, in *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines *energeia* as both actualization and bringing-before-the-eyes: “But it is necessary to say what we mean by bringing-before-the-eyes and what makes this occur. I call those things ‘before-the-eyes’ that signify things engaged in activity” (3.11.1411b). See also 301. The connection between before-the-eyes and activity in the second sentence has encouraged much confusion, but the examples that Aristotle goes on to offer clearly refer to *energeia* rather than *enargeia*.

and ‘now then the Greeks darting forward on their feet.’ *Darting* is actualization and metaphor, for he means ‘quickly.’ And [*energeia*] as Homer often uses it, is making the lifeless living through the metaphor” (3.11.1411b). Recent scholars have tended to discuss *enargeia* as ekphrasis and realistic description, but *darting* is neither.⁸ It is evocative because it possesses the power to move a listener.⁹ Nigel Wood argues that Horace’s oft-quoted phrase *ut pictura poesis* (a speaking picture) has been similarly misunderstood by early modern critics: “his original sense was more to plead for an expressive power in poetry itself, less that it should offer just a graphic quality, linked perhaps to *ekphrasis*. As such, it is more a gloss upon the needs of Aristotelian *energeia*, a goal of stylistic vigour” (120). The well-known impact of Horace on early modern poets like Sidney and Ben Jonson further attests to the perceived significance of *energeia*.

George Puttenham’s distinction between *enargeia* and *energeia* suggests a privileging of the latter particularly suitable for poets concerned with moving an audience. He uses the terms to identify two sorts of poetic ornamentation: “one to satisfy and delight the ear only by a goodly outward show set upon the matter with words and speeches smoothly and tunably running; another by certain intendments or sense of such words and speeches inwardly working a stir to the mind. That first quality the Greeks called *enargeia*. . . . This latter they called *energeia* of *ergon*” (Puttenham

⁸ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses bringing-before-the-eyes as an important element in the composition of tragedy: “One should construct plots, and work them out in diction, with the material as much as possible in the mind’s eye [*pro ommatōn*]. In this way, by seeing things most vividly [*enargestata*], as if present at the actual events, one will discover what is apposite and not miss contradictions” (*Poetics* 17.20). If the playwright vividly imagines a scene while composing dialogue, the playwright will more effectively avoid improbabilities. *Enargeia* facilitates decorum rather than realism.

⁹ The connection between liveliness and the moving of an audience or reader received additional support from Seneca, who explicitly makes this connection in regards to drama: “That first mental shock . . . which moves us after we have formed the impression (*opinionem*) of injury . . . steals over us even in the presence of plays upon the stage and readings of past events” (*De Ira* 2.2-3 qtd. in Staley 55). Like reading history, drama can move members of an audience despite their awareness of its artificiality.

227).¹⁰ Puttenham later clarifies what it means to work “a stir to the mind” by further defining ornamentation that does not do this: “And so long as this quality extendeth but to the outward tuning of the speech, reaching no higher than the ear and forcing the mind little or nothing, it is that virtue which the Greeks call *enargeia*, and is the office of the auricular figures to perform” (245) *Energeia* is a quality of language to stir and force the mind.¹¹ After quoting Puttenham, Stephen Greenblatt points out how difficult it is to pin down *energeia*: “We identify *energeia* only indirectly, by its effects: it is manifested in the capacity of certain verbal, aural, and visual traces to produce, shape, and organize collective physical and mental experiences” (6). Greenblatt’s description of the term’s slipperiness helps explain why it continues to be so often confused with modern interpretations of *enargeia*, and such confusion parallels how critics often mistake early modern liveliness for post-nineteenth-century lifelikeness.

Energeia can help create liveliness, but *energeia* *is* liveliness. Despite the ease with which the distinction between the terms can collapse, Puttenham’s somewhat idiosyncratic definitions demonstrate that it was important to maintain a distinction. After surveying early modern and baroque criticism from England and the continent, Barbara Niebelska-Rajca explains how common it was to confuse *energeia* and *enargeia*: “Despite the wide use of both terms it is difficult to extract a stable definition of *enargeia* and *energeia* from their early modern interpretations. Sixteenth and seventeenth century theoreticians who adapted the terms from classic rhetoric provided conventional explanations but identified *enargeia* with *energeia* and used the terms almost interchangeably” (300). As I have already suggested, Aristotle is to blame for much of the subsequent confusion. Niebelska-Rajca shows how prevalent such confusion was in Europe as well

¹⁰ Modern scholars often comment on the peculiarity of Puttenham’s association of *enargeia* with the ear rather than the eye, but his definition and appreciation of *energeia* as a forceful energy fit well with other writers during the period, including Scaliger, Sidney, and Heywood.

¹¹ For more on Puttenham’s interest in *energeia*, see Craik, “The Material Point of Poesy,” and her *Reading Sensations in Early Modern England*, esp. 41 and 136.

as England: “Torquato Tasso as well as various Polish Renaissance authors associate visual description with the Greek term *energeia* (instead of *enargeia*)” (300-1). However, most of the surviving texts correctly associate both terms with their classical definitions: “In the majority of interpretations, the concept of *enargeia* and the suggestiveness of the verbal image are distinctive features of the so called *poetic of presence*, whereas the *energeia* serves to illustrate the idea of liveliness” (her emphasis, Niebelska-Rajca 301). *Enargeia* was a highly valued rhetorical concept, but *energeia* was necessary to move an audience.

Lively Passion

Heywood’s *Apology* helps clarify the relationship between liveliness and passion, and it offers revealing distinctions between oratory, acting, and other art forms. Heywood claims that current rulers can best learn from their historical predecessors by seeing them represented on stage: “Why should not the lives of these worthies, presented in these our days, effect the like wonders in the Princes of our times, which can no way be so exquisitely demonstrated, nor so lively portrayed as by action” (B3v). Other types of art can be lively, but for Heywood, action in the theater is the liveliest art form. He considers the question of whether the painter can also depict the worthies in such a way as to inspire current rulers to greatness: “may we not as well by some curious Pygmalion, draw their conquests to work the like love in Princes towards these Worthies by showing them their pictures drawn to the life.” Here again, being drawn to the life refers not to the fidelity of the representation but rather to its ability to affect the audience. Heywood offers the following response to his own hypothetical question, explicitly connecting lively performance with emotion: “A Description is only a shadow received by the ear but not perceived by the eye: so lively portraiture is merely a form seen by the eye, but can neither show action, passion, motion, or any other gesture, to move the spirits of the beholder to admiration” (B3v). Lively portraiture is inferior to lively drama because only drama can show action and passion.

As part of his discussion of the advantages of drama over other types of art, Heywood includes a now oft-quoted description of the relationship of the personator to the personated.

[W]hat English blood seeing the person of any bold English man presented and doth not hug his fame, and honey at his valor, pursuing him in his enterprise with his best wishes, and as beeing wrapt in contemplation, offers to him in his heart all prosperous performance, as if the personater were the man personated, so bewitching a thing is lively and well spirited action, that it hath power to new mold the hearts of the spectators and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt. (B4r)

Leonore Lieblin points out the “as if” in Heywood’s construction, “as if the personater were the man personated,” persuasively arguing that the simile maintains a careful distance and distinction between personater and personated (129).¹² But we should also notice the passion implied by Heywood. Lively action, effective drama, molds hearts and moves people to action. Spectators can become so moved by a performance that they cheer for an actor as though he is the bold character portrayed. Heywood makes no suggestion that the portrayal is particularly faithful or realistic, but he does describe it as lively and well spirited.

Understanding liveliness as *energeia* requires a reconsideration of much of the conventional evidence for early modern naturalism. Peter Holland has suggested that naturalistic personation had become commonplace by the 1620s, but the passages he cites convey a very different meaning when lively is not read as lifelike. Thomas May’s *The Heir* includes the following description by Polymetes of an actor’s performance of Hieronimo:

By th’masse, ‘tis true, I have seen the knave paint griefe

¹² See also Syme’s discussion of “as if” in English translations of Quintilian (129).

In such lively colour, that for false
And acted passion he has drawne true teares
From the spectators eyes. (as qtd. in Holland 48)

Polymetes describes an explicitly false passion moving an audience to tears. The lively color of the actor's painted grief lacks naturalism or authentic passion, and the speech goes on to only slightly complicate that with a simile: "Ladies in the boxes / Kept time with sighes, and teares to his sad accents / As had he truley bin the new man he seemed" (qtd. in Holland 48). As with Heywood's personater and personated, a feigned passionate performance can move an audience to feel actual emotions. In the anonymous play *Nero*, the titular character asks, "how did you like my acting?... Did I not doe it to the life?" Epaphroditus responds, "The very doing never was so lively / As now this counterfeyting" (qtd. in Holland 48). The term *counterfeyting* suggests artifice, which makes sense when "to the life" and "lively" are understood as *energeia*.

Part of the classical tradition that early modern writers drew from, Quintilian invited his readers to "draw a parallel from the stage, where the actor's voice and delivery produce greater emotional effects when he is speaking in an assumed role than when he speaks in his own character" (6.1.26). The mention of "greater emotional effects" suggests that feigned emotion is more powerful than actual emotion. Stern cites Quintilian as evidence that "[c]lassical practice, propounded in the early modern period, promoted the exploitation of genuinely previous or imagined sources of emotion in order to create 'real' moments that happened on stage as if for the first time—or even actually for the first time" (Stern 105). Stern's reading, though, seems to collapse Quintilian's occasional insights about drama with his larger purpose of instructing the reader in effective judicial rhetoric. As she puts it, Quintilian had

"often seen actors, both in tragedy and comedy ... after going through some distressing scene, quit the theater weeping," advised orators to locate "truthful"

emotions in their lives and then re-remember them when “performing” their speeches. (Stern 104)

The passage from Quintilian is supposed to offer a classical example of advocacy for what we might now think of as authentic or naturalistic emotional performance; however, the quotation is incomplete. Immediately after Quintilian states that he had often seen actors “leave the theatre still drowned in tears after concluding the performance of some moving role,” he goes on to say, “But if the mere delivery of words written by another has the power to set our souls on fire with fictitious emotions, what will the orator do whose duty it is to picture to himself the facts and who has it in his power to feel the same emotion as his client whose interests are at stake?” (6.2.35). Thus, Quintilian’s discussion of actors’ powerful performances is meant as a foil for the distinctly authentic and higher stakes rhetorical situation that orators encounter in the courtroom. Drama can still possess the power to move people, but that power involves “fictitious emotions.”

Is It Not Monstrous

Of all of Shakespeare’s plays, *Hamlet* is one of the ones most commonly used as evidence of early modern acting styles because the characters offer a variety of comments on the performances of the acting company that comes to Elsinore. Early modern actors were called players, and Hamlet asks the first player for “a passionate speech” (2.2.424). The first player delivers the speech until Polonius interrupts a second time: “Look whr’er he has not turned his colour, and has tears in’s eyes. –Pray you no more” (2.2.510-11). Hamlet offers no response to the speech until he is alone on stage, when he addresses the audience directly:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his whole conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,

Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? (2.2.539-48)

When Hamlet's reaction to the first player's speech begins with "Is it not monstrous," it sounds as though he is critical of the performance. Yet as Hamlet's own speech progresses, he clearly approves of the first player's emotional performance and reproves his own lack of (e)motion. The performance is excessive and inspired by the mere fiction of Hecuba, but that is what makes it effective.

In his response to the first player's "passionate speech," Hamlet offers his own description of an actor's ability to "set our souls on fire with fictitious emotions." Just as Quintilian uses theatrical performance as a point of comparison for the more authentic exigency of the courtroom orator, Hamlet reflects upon the first player's passion to contrast it with his own lack of action in a more authentic and high-stakes situation:

What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears. (2.2.548-54)

The first player would “drown the stage with tears,” and Quintilian claimed that he had seen actors “leave the theatre still drowned in tears.” Hamlet calls himself “A dull and muddy-mettled rascal” (2.2.555) because he has not been as moved by passion as the first player has been even though the inspiration for his passion, his father, means more to him than Hecuba does to the first player.¹³ The motive and cue for Hamlet’s passion is far more authentic, and yet he has not acted accordingly. Players’ passions are more exaggerated and excessive than real passions, which makes Hamlet realize that he has been insufficiently passionate.

The emphasis of fictitious emotions to move an audience to experience real emotions is a central element to the art of early modern acting. In addition to the above examples from Quintilian and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, we might consider Ben Jonson’s translation of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*: “If thou wouldst have me weep, bee thou first dround / Thy selfe in teares, then me thy losse will wound” (B4r).¹⁴ In William Hemings’ *The Fatal Contract*, one character compares her own performance to that of a professional actor:

As a good Actor in a play would do,
Whose fancy works (as if he waking dreamt)
Too strongly on the Object that it copes with,
Shaping realities from mockeries. (D4r)

Like *Hamlet*’s First Player, good actors’ fancy works too strongly. John Weever approvingly claimed that “Actors make sighes a burden for each sentence: / That he may sob which reads. he swound with heares” (F3v). One of the clearest examples of the feigned passion of an actor moving an

¹³ Cf. Steven Mullaney claims Mullaney’s claim that “[t]he point of comparison between the two expressions of grief is not the tears that Hamlet does or doesn’t shed, but the revenge he hasn’t taken. For Hamlet, revenge is the equivalent of the player’s tears, the only apt embodiment and expression of his own grief” (*The Reformation of Emotion* 60).

¹⁴ Jonson’s translation was not published until 1640, but he started working on it decades earlier.

audience to feel real emotions comes from a commendatory verse for the 1647 Beaumont and Fletcher Folio. Thomas Stanley wrote,

And in each mov'd spectatour could beget
A reall passions by a Counterfeit:
When first Bellario bled, what Lady there
Did not for every drop let fall a teare?
And when Aspasia wept, not any eye
But seem'd to wear the same sad livery;
By him inspir'd the feign'd Lucina drew
More streams of melting sorrow then the true. (B4v)

Stanley credits the authors rather than the actors for counterfeit passions that beget real ones. Not only can a feigned passionate performance on stage be moving, we see again that it can be more moving than an actual passion.

When it was real, excessive passion was considered dangerous.¹⁵ Erin Sullivan has demonstrated how dramatic characters that die from overwhelming sorrow, such as Enobarbus in *Anthony and Cleopatra* or King Lear, offer fictional examples of what was thought to be an actual cause of death.¹⁶ One might wonder, then, how risky it was to be an actor in a theater that constantly required dangerously passionate performances. In 1654, Edmund Gayton claimed that “some passions counterfeited long, whether of grief or joy, have so altered the personaters, that players

¹⁵ As Erin Sullivan has argued, “many different people in sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England understood all excessive emotion (or passion, as it was then known) to be physiologically dangerous, but none so much as sadness, which not only damaged the body but was also known to kill” (160).

¹⁶ Sullivan uses a variety of historical evidence to make this claim, including surviving copies of London bills of Mortality: “Although the exact number of deaths from grief listed in the bills is difficult to calculate, mainly due to the fact that these ephemeral documents do not survive in great numbers, extant weekly and yearly bills from the years 1629-1660 show that at least 357 deaths in London were attributed to the pains of grief and sadness” (170).

themselves... have been forced to fly to Physick” (144). This account suggests that extreme passions (“high-penned humors... too passionately and sensibly represented”) sustained for extended periods could prove dangerous to the actor. But most texts advising against extreme passion lack the dire consequences suggested by Gayton. As part of Hamlet’s famous “advice to the players,” he says that if their passion becomes too excessive, if their whirlwind gets out of control, they will offend his soul, but there is no suggestion that such an excess could harm the actor. Allison Hobgood’s recent work suggests otherwise when she claims, “Lady Macbeth’s sinister ‘us’ not only voices fearful concern for her own part in Macbeth’s bloody violation but might have provoked real anxiety in playgoers who already knew their bodies as susceptible to infectious fear” (50). Here is a version of Gayton’s concern over the dangers of acting, but this is also an extension of modern thinking about the humors that assumes early modern theatergoers were very anxious about their own emotions. Gayton’s account is certainly anxious, but that’s what makes it unusual.

Inhibition vs. Excess

The notion that lively means naturalistic has been prevalent among scholars for decades. Andrew Gurr defines “natural acting” as “‘counterfeiting’ nature and playing a part ‘to the life’ or with ‘lively action’” (119). He contends that naturalism was not a perennial concern for actors but rather emerged as a significant shift in acting styles around 1600, coinciding with the emergence of the word *personation*.¹⁷ However, Paul Menzer provides a rebuttal by showing how alternative terms to personation persisted after 1600, and by arguing that personation differed from terms like *imitate* by degrees rather than by kind (“That old saw” 35).¹⁸ Yet he goes on to argue that actors always

¹⁷ For more on Gurr’s argument regarding personation, see also Jacalyn Royce, who expands the argument by associating this supposed shift in style not only with Burbage, but also with the different playing space that the Globe afforded the Lord Chamberlain’s Men.

¹⁸ Gurr also points out that “personate” first appeared in the Induction of Marston’s *Antonio and Mellinda*, but that conversation describes personation as a passionate performance: “Who cannot be proud, stroke up the

competitively communicate that difference in terms of naturalism: “One searches the annals of pre-modern drama in vain for a recorded enjoinder that a player act ‘artificially’ or ‘excessively’” (“That old saw” 31). He may be right that play texts lack speeches encouraging actors to perform artificially, but plenty of early modern dramatic and non-dramatic texts offer descriptions of excessive acting. For Menzer, such descriptions emerge as responses to a crisis of authenticity: playwrights and actors lay claim to naturalism by describing how other actors overdo it. In another article, he offers stillness as a solution to this crisis: “Literary and cultural scripts that idealized a suppressed—but not absent—passion provided early modern players with an efficient means to relay a powerful affective experience with little evident effort” (“The Actor’s Inhibition” 85). However, the dominant scholarly narrative of early modern emotional suppression has been challenged by more recent work.

A great deal of recent research on early modern emotions discusses them more in terms of excess than suppression. Escolme argues that one of the main appeals of the early modern theater was as a site of passionate extremes: “people regularly came to the theatre to watch people laugh inappropriately, get murderously angry, fall madly in love, and grieve inconsolably” (xvi). She cites Richard Strier’s *Unrepentant Renaissance* (2011) as a major influence on her analysis because it suggests that early modern Londoners took pleasure in emotions rather than feared and suppressed them. Strier focuses primarily on plays and poems, but his analysis begins with Reformation texts such as English translations of Martin Luther’s writings: “Luther has only reprehension for what he calls (in the Elizabethan translation) the ‘imagination’ that ‘the monks and schoolmen had of their saints, as though they had been very senseless blocks, and without all affections’” (Strier loc 700). Similarly, in his recent work on religious history, Alec Ryrie demonstrates that early modern English Protestantism “went beyond the medieval, scholastic view of the emotions as appetites to be bridled,

hair and strut?” (Induction 14). As my later examples will reinforce, strutting or stamping frequently appears in descriptions of excessively passionate acting.

and beyond the Aristotelian view of them as passions brought into harmony with the higher faculties. Certainly the affections had to be disciplined, but they ought not be restrained: rather, the point was to direct and to heighten them” (18-19). The discrepancy between Aristotelian moderation and this Protestant focus on directing and heightening emotion offers a parallel to the calibration of extreme passion that I suggest was expected of professional actors. Ryrie offers a compelling counter-narrative to the conventional wisdom that English Protestants sought to suppress their emotions: “Far from being suspicious of the emotions, Reformed Protestants exalted them. They were too valuable and powerful to be neglected. Admittedly, in order to use that power correctly, they needed careful control, but in practice this usually meant nurturing and directing them, not suppressing them. They were more alarmed by too little emotion than by too much” (19-20). The actor’s inhibition, then, might have simply involved sustaining an excess of passion without tearing the passion to tatters.

According to Menzer, excessively passionate acting is sometimes mentioned in plays in order to set up a straw man that helps “establish authenticity” (“The Actor’s Inhibition” 88). Much of his argument hinges on the idea that authenticity is desirable in dramatic performance. He cites the following example to illustrate this idea:

[I]n John Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge*, a boy player refuses to make a show of his grief, dismissing physical habits conventionally associated with great passion: “would’st have me... / Stampe, curse, weepe, rage, & then my bosom strike? / Away, tis apish action, player-like.” Marston’s player here does not distinguish between good and bad acting; showing his grief would simply look like acting, period. (88)

In other words, anything that looks like acting, even good acting, is undesirable because it is inauthentic. However, if we disregard any concern for authenticity, then the suggestion that all acting

during the period was in some way excessive becomes much less complicated. We can take the player's claim at face value without assuming that he sets up a straw man. At this moment, the player refuses to perform passionately at the same time that he defines acting. His performance will not look apish, but it will also not be lively.

The idea that early modern acting depended on the actor's ability to contain, channel, and suppress emotions has been prevalent at least since the publication of Joseph Roach's influential monograph, *The Player's Passion* (1985). In his chapter on seventeenth-century acting, Roach synthesizes Hamlet's advice to the players with quotations from Heywood's *Apology* and Thomas Wright's *Passions of the Minde*. According to Roach, Hamlet's advice implies that the torrent and whirlwind of passion "lay within reach of anyone who could summon up a strong mental image; the player's art was to keep the resulting passion within the bounds of what Heywood called "a smooth and formal motion" (*Apology for Actors*, 29) and what Thomas Wright called a 'prudent mediocritie [which] best may be marked in stage players'" (Roach 52). Modern grammar would lead us to believe, as Roach suggests, that Wright offers stage players as examples of men who perform prudent mediocrity.¹⁹ However, as Wright continues the paragraph, his comparison of stage players to orators suggests that players are not the prudent ones.

The first is, that we looke upon other men appassionate, how they demeane themselves in passions, and observe what and how they speake in mirth, sadnesse, ire, feare, hope, etc. what motions are stirring in the eyes, hands, bodie, etc. And then leave the excess and exorbitant levitie or other defects, and keepe the manner corrected with prudent mediocritie: and this the best may be marked in stage plaiers, who act excellently for as the perfection of their exercise consisteth in imitation of

¹⁹ Roach's reading of Wright's passage as support for the idea that acting required prudent mediocrity has been followed by several other scholars, including Menzer, "That old saw," 35, and Tribble 91.

others, so they that imitate best, act best. And in the substance of externall action for the most part oratours and stage players agree: and onely they differ in this, that these act fainedly, those really; these onely to delight, those to stirre up all sorts of passions according to the exigencies of the matter; these intermingle much levitie in their action to make men laugh, those use all gravitie, grace, and authoritie to persuade: wherefore these are accounted ridiculous, those esteemed prudent. (179)

So Wright clarifies his views on the similarities between players and orators by saying that players act feignedly and are accounted ridiculous.²⁰ But how can a reader make sense of the claim that orators, not players, are esteemed prudent when Wright suggested a few lines earlier that players act with prudent mediocrity? Wright's next sentence tells his reader how orators can benefit from watching ridiculous actors: "But a discreet orator may see in them [stage players] what he may amend, and what he may follow" (179). Players, says Wright, "intermingle much levitie in their action to make men laugh." This fits with his earlier advice to his reader, "leave the excess and exorbitant levitie or other defects, and keepe the manner corrected with prudent mediocritie." For Wright then, stage players are not the ones who practice prudent mediocrity; rather, orators must correct the manner of players. Orators, not players, are esteemed prudent, and players intermingle much levity whereas orators are advised to leave the excess and exorbitant levity. What may be best marked in players is passion, not prudence, and Wright characterizes players' passions as excessive.

²⁰ This fits Steven Mullaney's observation that "[t]here is an anti-mimetic character to the play of human emotions on the Elizabethan stage.... Most Elizabethan authors who wrote about the induction of emotion in an audience have an oratorical, Ciceronian model in mind.... But theater is not oratory, and Elizabethan theater is quite often anti-Ciceronian in its affective practices" ("Affective Technologies" 83).

Marston and Jonson offer additional examples of speeches that describe the excessive passion of acting.²¹ As with the boy player's speech from *Antonio's Revenge*, Marston associated acting with passionate rage and stamping the ground in a similar speech from *Sophonisba* (1605).

I should now curse the Gods

Call on the furies: stampe the patient earth

Cleave my stretched cheeks with sound speake from all sense

But loud and full of players eloquence (4.1.23-6)

Violent action does not interrupt or undermine an eloquent speech; passion and eloquence are mutually beneficial rather than mutually exclusive, and the effective passion of a player exceeds even that of a skilled orator. In *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) Amorphous instructs the other boy players to practice "language and behaviours, and not with a dead imitation: act freely, carelessly, and capriciously, as if our veines ranne with quick-silver" (2.3; qtd. in Gurr 117). That such advice is again directed toward boy players suggests the importance of training actors to perform passionately. In some plays, actors are cautioned against overacting, but this advice usually accompanies requests for lively performance. Such performance requires a calibration of passion that must be excessive without becoming extreme.

Descriptions of passionate acting were not confined to plays performed by the boys' companies, and excessively passionate performances by adult actors were also associated with liveliness. As Stern states, the playwright John Quarles "suggested that actual passion could seem paltry compared to actors' passions, at the very same time asserting that actors perform their

²¹ There is no way of knowing to what extent Jonson did or didn't agree with Thomas Wright's views on acting and oratory, but it is worth noting that Wright was likely responsible for converting Jonson to Catholicism in 1598 (Donaldson 140). The final commendatory verse at the beginning of Wright's *Passions of the Minde*, signed "B.I.," is attributed to Jonson (Donaldson 141).

passions ‘really’ or ‘to the life’: ‘Judge Ladies, judge, if ever grief could be / More acted to the life then ‘tis in me’” (107). Similarly, Quarles’ *Virgin Widow* offers the following conversation:

For. *Commodes*, What eye did ere till now behold

Folly and madness acted to the life?

Co. I wonder *Formidon*, the King could bear

Such saucy passion with so clear a brow. (as qtd. in Stern 107)

This leads Stern to claim that “‘Sawcy passion’ performed ‘to the life’ was what, to Quarles, acting a character was” (107). Quarles, according to Stern, is an exception because performing to the life ought to be naturalistic rather than excessive: “That the ‘reality’ of early modern performance was based on the reality of the ‘passions’ felt enabled John Quarles to complicate the paradigm” (107). However, considering a variety of evidence from early modern plays and commentary, it seems more likely that Quarles’ linking of actors to excessive passions was the norm rather than the exception to it.

When Quarles and other writers from the period described acting as “lively” or “to the life,” they drew on a rich history of commentary and criticism that was unconcerned with anything that we might now recognize as naturalism or dramatic realism. Hamlet does not offer the only criticism of overly excessive acting from the period, and his criticism is typical insofar as it suggests a potentially difficult calibration of acting that should be passionate, lively, moving, but not too extreme. Yet various accounts of acting in the period suggest that it was passionately excessive, and many of those accounts describe such acting as praiseworthy. That does not mean that acting was necessarily formal, nor does it mean that acting had to be excessive. But if an actor was to give a lively performance, he needed to amplify and exaggerate passion beyond what was considered natural. As scholarship on early modern emotions continues to expand and complicate our understanding of the passions, theater historians and literary critics need to continue to reassess our

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interpretations of acting styles. When we let go of anachronistic notions of authenticity, descriptions of actors' excessive feigned passions become more legible.

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