Emotion, cognition and spectator response to the plays of Shakespeare

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Our understanding of the material conditions of early modern theatre and theatre-going has grown rapidly over the past hundred years. We now know a good deal about the different kinds of theatre building that existed in Shakespeare’s time, and their various uses of space, lighting, sound and special effects. We know something of how individual theatre companies worked, how actors were trained, and how they rehearsed. We also know a reasonable amount about the demographics of theatre audiences, and spectators’ behaviour within the playhouse.[[1]](#endnote-1) Yet knowing these facts does not get us very far in understanding what it was actually like to be a spectator of early modern drama, and how spectators thought and felt while watching a play. This matters for a number of reasons. An understanding of the emotional responses of a Renaissance spectator would give us further insight into the theatre of the time: for example, why some plays were popular and others less so; what the appeal of drama was for playgoers. More than that, though, it might also help us to think critically about the kinds of emotional experiences that individuals would have had within other kinds of large-scale public gathering, such as at a public execution or a cockfight. It might offer us a clearer sense of the relationship between individual and collective emotion within a crowd setting, and help us to consider the complex ways in which social, religious and political contexts affect the act of spectating.

However, recapturing spectator experience at the early modern theatre is difficult. Very few eyewitness accounts from the period exist, and while those that do are valuable, they cannot tell us either how the average spectator (assuming such a thing exists) might have responded to the drama or even with certainty how the individual writer of the account did. The astrologer Simon Forman, for example, recalled seeing *The Winter’s Tale* at the Globe in 1611:

Remember also the rogue that came in all tattered like colt-pixie, and how he feigned him sick and to have been robbed of all that he had, and how he cozened the poor man of all his money [….] Beware of trusting feigned beggars or fawning fellows.[[2]](#endnote-2)

However, the fact that Forman chose to make a note of the Autolycus plot and the moral that might be taken from it does not necessarily show that he principally watched or enjoyed drama for its life lessons; it may only show that the life lessons were what he felt was worth recording. We still do not know how he responded emotionally to the play, or the extent to which his emotions may have correlated with those of others in the audience.

Moreover, the problem scholars face is compounded by the fact that we are speculating about the responses of spectators separated from us by over four hundred years. Discussing the responses of modern spectators to drama is hard enough, given both the variety within theatrical audiences and the impossibility of any one spectator even remembering precisely how he or she felt from one moment to the next during the course of a performance, let alone being able to record those feelings. Analysing the audience becomes even harder when we are considering the possible responses of those who inhabited a very different culture from our own—a culture which at least potentially affected all kinds of things about spectator response, from what they found funny to what they found morally abhorrent. The debate about the extent to which specific emotions are purely the product of culture or, alternatively, are in some sense ‘hardwired’ into all human brains is a contentious one, which I will not go into here[[3]](#endnote-3) but, regardless, even if at least some emotions may be universal, what disgusts or frightens a modern playgoer may not be the same as what disgusted or frightened a Renaissance one. Overall, then, as Myhill and Low point out in *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama* (2011), the actual emotional and intellectual experience of Renaissance spectators ‘has proved remarkably resistant to examination.’[[4]](#endnote-4)

Nevertheless, critics have tried. Scholars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries suggested a variety of approaches that might allow us to get closer to a sense of what early modern audiences felt while watching a play. Some, for example, posited the idea of the dramatist as a kind of choreographer of audience response, who controls all that spectators see and hear on stage, and so is able to lead them through a specific, planned set of emotional and intellectual responses as the play develops. By this argument, the spectators can, ‘to a great extent, only play the role and be the creature the playscript and the actors allow’, and so the critic must examine that playscript in order to work out what emotional response the author intended at each stage of the action.[[5]](#endnote-5) Others have approached the question of audience response through the issue of demographics, pointing out how individual spectator response may be affected by such factors as that spectator’s age, gender, profession, level of education and class affiliations.[[6]](#endnote-6) Still others have considered the role played by audience expectation and desire, exploring, for example, the question of whether spectators went to the early modern theatre looking to share in a communal emotional experience or whether they approached drama in a more openly consumerist spirit, valuing plays as luxury goods, and how such attitudes might have affected their responses.[[7]](#endnote-7) Meanwhile, the last fifteen years or so have seen an extraordinary surge of interest among scholars in exploring the history of emotions, and the ways in which emotional response may be affected or shaped by cultural and social factors.[[8]](#endnote-8) Within the field of early modern literary studies, of particular importance has been the increased concern with materialist and embodied models of emotion—influenced in great part by Gail Kern Paster’s groundbreaking studies of early modern humoralism[[9]](#endnote-9)—and what such models may tell us about how emotions were both experienced and transmitted in the period. For example, Allison Hobgood has argued that *Macbeth* may have created a sense of terror in its audiences, given the repeated displays that the play offers of characters in a state of fear and the period’s belief in the contagiousness of emotion, as something that may be transmitted from stage to spectator.[[10]](#endnote-10) Equally, the recent so-called ‘cognitive turn’ has offered further strategies: scholars have discussed the potential relevance to spectatorship theory of concepts such as ‘cognitive blending’, taken from modern cognitive science, and to the possible role of brain features such as mirror neurons in shaping emotional response.[[11]](#endnote-11)

All these approaches have something to recommend them. However, what concerns me is that within many of them is also the potential to over-simplify and flatten audience response, via the desire to see it as something that can be made at least relatively stable and predictable. When we assume, with David Mann, that female spectators would be more likely that male ones to respond favourably to a love plot,[[12]](#endnote-12) or, with Jean Howard, that audiences generally responded to plays as the author expected and intended, or, with Matthew Steggle, that audiences typically shared the feelings expressed by the characters on stage,[[13]](#endnote-13) or with Bruce McConachie, that there are ‘species-level commonalities’ of thought that are likely to lead all spectators to share certain responses to fictional characters,[[14]](#endnote-14) then we largely ignore the huge capacity within the audience for diverse and mixed responses.

The aim of my current research, therefore, is to develop not an alternative but rather a supplementary way of thinking about spectator response to early modern drama, which aims to counter what I see as a trend towards homogenising spectators and their responses in many of these approaches to early modern spectatorship.[[15]](#endnote-15) I do not want to suggest a single, dominant emotional response that a spectator may have had to particular scenes or characters in early modern drama. Instead, I want to explore the *variety* of responses that were possible, by looking at some of the frames of reference that early modern spectators might have brought to bear on their understanding when watching a play, and how these frames might have affected their emotional responses.[[16]](#endnote-16) As recent studies of emotion have taught us, emotional response does not simply occur in the mind as a kind of automatic reflex. In fact, rather than being a natural force (and one which is often rhetorically opposed to the forces of rational judgement), much if not all emotion is itself the product both of cultural training and of the judgement that is enabled by that training. As Lisa Feldman Barrett puts it:

Emotions are not reactions to the world. You are not a passive receiver of sensory input but an active constructor of your emotions. From sensory input and past experience, your brain constructs meaning and prescribes action.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Early modern spectators might thus have had variant emotional responses to what they saw because they also had variant judgements of what they saw. For example, although it seems likely, given the structure of the play, that Shakespeare intended his spectators to feel gladness when Macbeth is beheaded in his play’s final act, it is possible to imagine a spectator reacting differently: worrying, for example, whether the death of a king—even a tyrannical one who had initially won the crown through murder—should really be straightforward cause for celebration. One spectator might interpret the severed head as an indicator of the restoration of order to the kingdom of Scotland, noting (perhaps unconsciously) its relationship to the severed heads of ‘pagan tyrants’ such as Goliath and Holofernes in the Bible,[[18]](#endnote-18) or the beheadings that were the traditional fate of traitors in the early modern England. However, a different spectator might focus on the brutality of beheading as a form of execution, and make uneasy connections between the avenging Macduff and the contemporary tales of savage Celts who took heads as trophies.[[19]](#endnote-19) Early modern emotion, like modern emotion, was a complex phenomenon, resulting from a mixture of different and overlapping cognitive processes. It was affected by the multiple frames of cultural, religious and social reference that the spectator brought to the drama, including (but certainly not limited to) frames enabled by that individual spectator’s demographic profile. Thus, some kinds of spectator response towards particular scenes or characters will perhaps be more *likely* than others, but we can never assume that a spectator’s response can be made truly predictable, even when one takes into account factors such as that individual’s gender or social class or level of education. Moreover, not only will audience response differ from spectator to spectator, but it is likely to fluctuate even within individual spectators. Theatregoers’ feelings about what they are seeing may vary from moment to moment, or they may even entertain divided emotions within the same moment, as different constructions of meaning collide or overlap within their minds. In this essay, therefore, I want not only to acknowledge the likelihood of discrepant spectator emotions, but to embrace that fact: to explore the ways in which early modern drama can be slippery, inviting complex, changing and even self-contradictory types of audience response.

As an example of how this approach might look in practice, I will turn to examine the figure of Lavinia in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (c.1592), and specifically the issue of how spectators might have responded to her role in the play’s final revenge plot.[[20]](#endnote-20) Lavinia is the victim of what is perhaps the most spectacular act of violence in a play full of violent acts. The daughter of the Roman general Titus, she is attacked and raped by the sons of Titus’s enemy Tamora, and re-enters the play at the start of Act 2 scene 4 with “*her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, and ravished*”.[[21]](#endnote-21) The brothers have committed these mutilations in an attempt to prevent Lavinia from conveying her experience or the identity of her attackers to others, but despite this she manages to communicate with her family, by drawing their attention to the story of Philomela in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Philomela, who was raped by her brother-in-law Tereus and then deprived of her tongue so that she could not denounce him, works as a mirror to explain Lavinia’s own situation; and Lavinia then adds further information by using her stumps to write the names of the brothers on the ground with a stick. Lavinia’s revelation thus leads to the play’s final act of violence, as her family unites to take their revenge on Chiron and Demetrius.

There is, in fact, some debate among modern critics about the extent to which Lavinia should be read as a revenger, or whether an audience of the time would have seen her as such. Cynthia Marshall, for example, tends to assume that Lavinia’s main function in the play is as a spectacle for others to read and respond to, and so argues that:

Lavinia occasions the political argument with which the play begins, she inspires the rapists, she motivates the revenge plot, and she incites the horror of viewers. But none of these acts affirms her subjective agency.[[22]](#endnote-22)

However, I would query this. Lavinia is not just a passive object who inspires the actions or emotional responses of others. On the contrary, she plays a dynamic role in the events that follow. Before the rape, Lavinia had pleaded to Tamora for death rather than dishonour, describing rape as something so shameful ‘That womanhood denies my tongue’ even to name it (2.3.174). However, after the assault, she seems to lose such inhibitions. As Aebischer notes, ‘The ungainly breach of decorum of Lavinia running in pursuit of her nephew [to get his copy of *Metamorphoses*] gives emphasis to her relatives’ inertia and her own frantic desire to overcome her physical limitations and provide her family with the text and the words that will allow them to proceed to their revenge.’[[23]](#endnote-23) Lavinia’s introduction of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and her subsequent writing of the brothers’ names, allows the plot to move forwards, as it gives her relatives a clear sense not only of how she has been wronged but by whom. Moreover, Ovid also inspires the nature of the revenge: just as Philomela’s story ends with her banding together with her sister Procne to kill Procne’s son Itys and feed him to his rapist father, so Lavinia and her father unite to kill Chiron and Demetrius and feed them to their mother. The idea that Lavinia will play an active part in this revenge (or, at least, as active a part as she can, given her handicaps) seems to be assumed automatically by the rest of the Andronici. She is included by her uncle Marcus as part of the revenging group, invited to ‘kneel’ alongside Titus and her nephew Young Lucius and ‘swear with me’ to carry out ‘Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths’ (4.1.86-92). Subsequently, in the scene in which Chiron and Demetrius are killed, Titus explicitly frames the revenge as belonging to her—‘Come, come, Lavinia. Look, thy foes are bound’ (5.2.165)—and she helps him to the best of her abilities, by holding the basin that will catch the brothers’ blood between her stumps.

Lavinia’s participation in the revenge for her own rape makes her an anomaly in the drama of the period. There are four other surviving plays written between c.1590 and c.1610 that feature violent rape—Peele’s *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe* (c.1588-94), the anonymous *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606), Heywood’s *The Rape of Lucrece* (1608) and Fletcher’s *Valentinian* (c.1610)—and in all of these, the heroine either commits suicide or vanishes from the action immediately after her rape, leaving the responsibility for retribution in the hands of male family members. Of course, in real life rape victims did not necessarily commit suicide,but in drama it appears to have been conventional.[[24]](#endnote-24) Suzanne Gossett suggests that Lavinia too would commit suicide if she had the capacity to do so, arguing that it is only the nature of her injuries that holds her back: she is physically handicapped to the extent that her death must be ‘of necessity by her father’s hand.’[[25]](#endnote-25) However, being handless does not necessarily mean being helpless in such a matter: Titus himself instructs Lavinia in how she might effect her own death: ‘get some little knife between thy teeth / And just against thy heart make thou a hole’ (3.2.16-17). The fact that she does not do so suggests that her survival at least until her rape has been revenged may be a deliberate choice on her part. A contemporary spectator might therefore have been surprised both at Lavinia’s failure to take herself out of her play’s action, either by death or voluntary seclusion, and at her apparent eagerness to participate in the murder of the brothers, since it is out of keeping with what appears to be the usual behaviour of a rape victim in the drama of the time.

In order to consider further how spectators might have responded to a female rape victim turned revenger, it is helpful to look at how the classical model that Lavinia herself invokes, Philomela, was typically regarded at the time. As Jane Newman comments, Ovid’s account of Philomela is important because whereas other classical stories such as the rape of Lucrece provide a narrative in which the raped woman is portrayed as shamed and marginalised by her experience, with no agency beyond her ability to inspire men to action, ‘Philomela belongs to and represents the countertradition of vengeful and violent women associated with Bacchic legend,’[[26]](#endnote-26) as she chooses to take violent action not upon herself but upon her oppressor.

The story of Philomela (and those of other violent female revengers from classical literature, such as Hecuba and Medea) seems to have both fascinated and worried the early moderns. Violent women, and women who killed, were typically seen in this period as being monstrous, more unnatural than violent men. This was not so much because women were not believed to feel strong and violent emotions, as it was because of the sense that women should be encouraged to regulate their emotions in an appropriate way, and defer to male authority rather than acting on their own behalf. [[27]](#endnote-27) Letting men be the ones to act showed a proper subordination of female anger and emotion to male rule. However, Ovid not only shows a woman who takes violence into her own hands but also emphasises the sense of joy and freedom that Philomela ultimately finds in her retribution against her oppressor. After Tereus has unknowingly eaten his son:

[H]e

Looks round, asks where [Itys] is, and, as he asks

And calls again, in rushes Philomel,

Just as she is, that frantic butchery

Still spattered in her hair, and throws the head

Of Itys, bleeding, in his father’s face.

She never wanted more her tongue to express

Her joy in words that matched her happiness![[28]](#endnote-28)

Philomela, in confronting her rapist, rejects the narrative of female shame after rape, and embraces the use of violence; while Procne, in killing her own son, rejects the narrative that a woman’s primary duty is to protect her children and to choose perpetuation of male lineage over the bonds between women. The story thus offers an alternative course of action in response to rape that is a clear threat to the patriarchy, in its implication that women do not necessarily need men to protect and revenge them, and its demonstration of the liberating power of female anger when unleashed.

It is easy to see how this might have alarmed at least some early moderns, in its apparent celebration both of female violence and female rejection of patriarchal control, and we can see this discomfort in early modern retellings of the story of Philomela, in which ‘Authors regularly remove her from the actual murder, for example in Patrick Hannay’s *The Nightingale* (1622) and in Pettie’s text [George Pettie, *A Petite Pallace of Pettie his pleasure: Contaynyng many Pretie Hystories* (London, 1576)].’[[29]](#endnote-29) Early modern authors, it seems, found it more congenial to separate out the victimised woman from the violent woman, which allowed them more easily to create a sense of sympathy for the wronged Philomela while putting the blame for the murder of Itys primarily on her sister Procne. In these retellings, Philomela stays more clearly in the role of victim, while Procne, in turn, is demonised as an unnatural mother.

Early modern spectators might therefore have responded to Lavinia’s role as revenger in very different ways. Some may have seen her as a threatening figure, in her move from initial weeping stasis to active revenging. It is striking that Shakespeare stages a scene in which she frightens her own nephew:

Young Lucius: Help, grandsire, help! My aunt Lavinia

Follows me everywhere, I know not why.

Good uncle Marcus, see how swift she comes.

Alas, sweet aunt, I know not what you mean.

Marcus: Stand by me, Lucius. Do not fear thine aunt.

Titus: She loves thee, boy, too well to do thee harm.

Young Lucius: Ay, when my father was in Rome she did.

(4.1.1-7)

The scene is potentially disturbing for a number of reasons. First, Young Lucius’s description of Lavinia—following him everywhere, approaching swiftly but silently—emphasises both her unknowability and her force. There is something eerie about this Lavinia, who cannot speak but who implacably chases the boy down. Second, those spectators who are familiar with the story of Ovid’s Philomela may recall the fate of Itys and fear that Lavinia too means harm to her nephew. And third, Young Lucius raises the possibility that Lavinia’s physical transformation has brought about an internal, psychological transformation. She did love Young Lucius once—but who knows if she still does? Can one be sure that her values remain the same as they were before?[[30]](#endnote-30) For the early moderns, the human body was full of symbolism, and the parts that Lavinia has lost perhaps particularly so, as the hands and tongue (as a metonym for speech) were often seen as the aspects of man that elevated him above lower animals.[[31]](#endnote-31) Some contemporary spectators may therefore have felt that Lavinia had become monstrous in her state of mutilation: a creature who could no longer be seen as fully human, whose enforced silence only added to her uncanniness and whose mental state was terrifyingly opaque.

From another perspective, however, a spectator might find the revenging Lavinia a figure who invites sympathy and even approval. As many critics have noted, although revenge was officially frowned upon in the period, as both conflicting with Christian ideas of forbearance and contrary to a legal system that was attempting to eliminate private blood feuds, there nevertheless seems to have been considerable public support for it, particularly in situations where alternative forms of justice were unavailable.[[32]](#endnote-32) In keeping with this, Titus laments that ‘*Terras Astraea reliquit*’ (4.3.4), and his claim is supported by the play’s action, which repeatedly shows the failures of justice within Saturninus’ Rome (for example, in the execution of Titus’s innocent sons without trial for the murder of Bassianus). Moreover, whereas Tamora’s revenge for the murder of her son Alarbus seems cruel and disproportionate, as it is enacted not upon Titus himself but upon the innocent Lavinia and Bassianus, Titus and Lavinia’s revenge upon Chiron and Demetrius, unrepentant and gleeful rapists, seems far more obviously justifiable.[[33]](#endnote-33) The idea of a violent woman might have worried some audience members, but others might have found satisfaction in the play’s willingness to allow the victim of a rape to supervise and symbolically participate in the revenging of that rape. Within the play, Marcus implies that the crime against Lavinia was so horrific that a violent emotional response on her part might seem only fitting: surveying the names of the rapists scratched onto the ground, he comments, ‘There is enough written upon this earth / To stir a mutiny in the mildest thoughts’ (4.1.83-4). Moreover, that such attitudes to female revenge were possible at the time is also suggested by Brutus in Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece* (1594), who comments that Lucrece’s suicide was misguided: ‘Thy wretched wife mistook the matter so / To slay herself, that should have slain her foe’ (1826-7). Lavinia, as a wronged woman who fights back, might be seen not as dangerous and unruly, but as a potentially inspirational, even heroic figure.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Audience response to Lavinia and her role as revenger may thus vary widely, depending on the perspective that each spectator takes. She is unlike other raped women in contemporary drama, but does that mean that she is to be condemned, for apparently lacking the sense of shame felt by characters like Fletcher’s Lucina or Heywood’s Lucrece, which leads them to immediate suicide, or does that make her a more admirable heroine, for refusing to punish herself but instead appearing to place all blame squarely on her rapists? This latter position was, after all, the Christian orthodoxy of the time, based on Augustine who wrote that, ‘We maintain that when a woman is violated while her soul admits no consent to the iniquity, but remains inviolably chaste, the sin is not hers, but his who violates her.’[[35]](#endnote-35) Lavinia participates in violent action against her attackers, but should that mark her out as an unruly woman, unable to control her own anger, or show her as a righteous figure who demands justice? Emotional response to Lavinia’s role as revenger is very much determined by spectator’s interpretation of her character, and the attitudes they have towards female violence, anger, rape, and bodily deformity.

In this relatively brief discussion I have, I hope, shown the ways in which this approach to audience response can be rewarding, alerting us to some of the many factors that may have affected contemporary spectator response, and showing also how much potential there was for mixed responses both in audiences as a whole and within the minds of individual spectators, as a playgoer might see Lavinia at one moment as threatening and at another as sympathetic, or even maintain a sense of both responses simultaneously.

This approach is, of course, not without potential problems of its own. First, although thinking about how spectators may have responded to drama by considering the cultural contexts within which they lived and thus the associations that particular acts or types of behaviour had for them may be illuminating, it is important to remember also that there are important differences between responding to the stage and responding to the real world. The Chorus to *Henry V* may ask spectators to ‘Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them’ (Prologue 26), but audiences did not, of course, react to stage action exactly as they would have done to the same events in reality, nor do they really ‘believe’ in a literal sense in what they see. In the case of Lavinia, for example, spectators would have been well aware on some level that she was not really a suffering rape victim (and indeed, was not even really female, since she was played by a boy actor).

That is not to say, of course, that fictional events cannot stir up very real emotional and physical responses in spectators (tears, laughter, a flinch of sympathy when a character is injured, an elevated heart rate at a scene of high drama), only to make the obvious point that the spectator’s knowledge of the play’s fictionality must to some extent affect his or her responses. For example, a spectator may apply different moral standards to characters in fiction than they do to people in reality; they may be happy to cheer on a stage revenger while simultaneously believing that in real life revenge should be left to God, because their awareness that this is a fiction without real-world consequences allows them to enjoy the sense of poetic justice without worrying about the ethics of murder. This might go some way towards explaining why historians of the emotions have traditionally been reluctant to use works of art as sources for investigation. Although art can both represent and provoke real emotions, the question of how those emotions might relate to the emotions that we have and express in the ‘real’ world outside art is a more complex issue.

Because of this, any study of playgoer response which takes the approach that I do needs to be careful to place the plays not only within their wider social contexts, but also to consider them within their immediate theatrical and literary contexts, and also to look at the cues for response that are set up within the play itself. It is important, for example, to consider the role played by generic expectation in a spectator’s mind, and be aware that audiences will be—again, for example—more likely to treat a murder lightly if it occurs in a fantastical romance rather than a domestic tragedy. The meaning of a play is shaped by its cultural contexts but also by its dramatic form and its linguistic registers, so all these factors must be taken into account when thinking about possible spectator responses.

The second potential problem with my approach is another perhaps obvious one, which is that it cannot be exhaustive. As Pangallo comments, there is an ‘infinite number of *potential* imaginative responses to a play,’[[36]](#endnote-36) once we both allow for the individual capacity of spectators to be aroused, disgusted or distressed by the most unexpected of things and the wide variety of possible cognitive frameworks within which any single stage action can be interpreted. Those employing my approach can therefore only hope to explore some of what seem the most *likely* set of possible responses, based on our sense of which influences on spectator response were most powerful and pervasive in this period. For example, early modern culture was steeped in religious belief to a degree far exceeding our own, so looking at the religious implications or associations of particular acts may seem one obvious road of enquiry. Nevertheless, choosing which contexts to include will inevitably to an extent be a matter of the individual critic’s judgement, and there is always the possibility that they may miss or ignore influences that other critics might consider vital.

Finally, the third most obvious problem relates to the fact that we are considering spectator responses to productions that we cannot, of course, see for ourselves. We have the evidence of the play-texts to go on, along with some broad knowledge of how early modern theatre probably worked in practice (such as the technical devices that may have been employed to produce particular types of special effect such as the appearance of bleeding[[37]](#endnote-37)), which allows us to speculate about how particular scenes might have appeared on stage, but we know almost nothing about such issues as how particular parts were played. It is unclear how much, for example, an actor playing Lavinia might emphasise the sense of menace in the scene in which the character chases her nephew, as this is an aspect of the original play that is now inevitably lost to us.

Despite these problems, though, I believe that the approach that I have adopted in this paper can help to advance our thinking about early modern theatregoers—and, by extension, also our thinking about those who constituted other kinds of early modern audience, such as the attendees at an anatomy demonstration, a sermon, or a political gathering. I do not aim to replace the approaches to the study of early modern playgoers that other critics have developed: studying the play-texts as guides to intended response, considering how much spectators’ responses might have been affected by factors such as their own gender or level of education, looking at the cultural associations that theatre held for spectators, understanding how the early moderns themselves believed emotion to work, and considering the ways in which spectatorship seems to work at a cognitive level are all important strategies for rediscovering early modern spectator experience. My approach can, however, be valuable as a supplement to these approaches, as it works to remind us of how various and complex audience response can be, and how much spectators may defy expectations and produce responses that may seem unusual or ‘perverse’. I want to emphasise how much may be going on in the mind of any one spectator while they are watching a public spectacle, how many different factors contribute to the emotional and intellectual experience that they undergo, and how much their emotional responses may thus be shifting, ambivalent and conflicting.

1. See, for example, Ann Jennalie Cook, The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London, 1576-1642 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Herbert Berry, Shakespeare's Playhouses (New York: AMS Press, 1987); Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Forman, quoted in Stephen Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare: A History of Texts and Visions* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), p. 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Jonathan H. Turner and Jan E. Stets, *The Sociology of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 285-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jennifer A. Low and Nova Myhill, *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558-1642* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jean Howard, *Shakespeare’s Art of Orchestration* (Urbana, IL: Illinois University Press, 1984), pp. 7-8. Howard does, however, acknowledge that ‘uniformity of response will not always occur,’ (p. 8). For a similar, more recent approach, see Jeremy Lopez, *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 7-8, 170-200, which focuses on the playwright’s manipulation of audience response via the conventions of dramatic genre. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For example, Alison Findlay’s *A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Wiley, 1998) considers the way in which female spectators’ responses to early modern plays might have differed from those of male spectators. See also Lucy Munro, who suggests that the diverse ‘social identities and allegiances’ held by spectators would have affected their individual responses to drama, particularly if the play in question was a comedy that involved jokes about social class; *Children of the Queen’s Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 70-73 (72). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. These debates regarding the motivations behind early modern theatregoing are best exemplified by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin’s *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare’s England: A Collaborative Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For a survey of the main currents in this field, see Erin Sullivan, ‘The History of the Emotions: Past, Present, Future,’ *Cultural History* 2:1 (2013), pp. 93-102. However, Sullivan notes that there is, as yet, no clear consensus among critics about the ‘relative value of the[] varying approaches’ that have been developed by scholars, or consistent sense of how they might be used or combined in critical analysis (p. 101). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In particular, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) and *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Allison Hobgood, ‘Feeling Fear in *Macbeth*,’ in Katharine A. Craik and Tanya Pollard (eds), *Shakespearean Sensations: Experiencing Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 29-46 (40). Hobgood does not, however, put forward a purely passive model of spectatorship: she argues in *Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern* *England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) that the audience’s own emotions could, in turn, affect those on the stage, and also that spectators could potentially resist the emotions that the actors projected (p. 10). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (New York: Palgrave, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Discussing how great a proportion of Shakespeare’s audience might have been female, Mann comments that when love is a play’s ‘dominant theme’, ‘sympathetically presented and focus[ing] on female feelings’, then it ‘has to be taken as some sort of indicator of the likelihood of female spectators’; ‘Female Play-going and the Good Woman,’ *Early Theatre* 10:2 (2007), pp. 51-70 (64). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ‘[O]ne of the central arguments of this book … propose[s] that, as a rule, stage laughter anticipates and shapes audience laughter, and stage weeping anticipates and shapes audience weeping.’ Steggle, *Laughing and Weeping in Early Modern Theatres* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. McConachie, *Engaging Audiences*, p.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. I should note, however, that not all studies of early modern spectatorship follow this trend. In particular, John J. McGavin and Greg Walker’s *Imagining Spectatorship From the Mysteries to the Shakespearean Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)is an important work in its emphasis on how many different factors may shape audience response. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. I am, in my own work, particularly interested in studying early modern responses to scenes of violence in Renaissance drama, since violence is both a highly emotive subject and one whose meanings were particularly heavily codified within early modern society, but my approach could in practice be applied to any scenes or incidents in the drama of the period and, in adapted form, could also be used as a way of thinking about the emotional experiences of other kinds of spectator in non-theatrical contexts. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), p. 31. Barrett discusses the traditional idea of emotions as ‘natural’, as opposed to being cognitively and culturally constructed, on pp. xi-xii, 222-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Thomas Herron, ‘“Killing Swine” and Planting Heads in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*,’ in Larissa Tracy and Jeff Massey(eds), *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 261-88 (278). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. For discussions of the association between head-taking, barbarism and the Celts in this period, see Frank Ardolino, ‘Severed and Brazen Heads: Headhunting in Elizabethan Drama,’ *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 4 (1983), pp. 169-81. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For reasons of space I have chosen to focus here only on one small aspect of Lavinia’s role in the play. There is, of course, much more that could be said about how contemporary spectators might have responded to her rape, her physical mutilation, and her ultimate death. For critics who have focused on audience response to these aspects of Lavinia’s presentation, see in particular Mariangela Tempera, *Feasting With Centaurs: Titus Andronicus from Stage to Text* (Bologna: CLUEB, 1999); Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 106-37; Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare’s Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 24-63; Sandra Logan, ‘Interpretive Multiplicity: Audiences and Mediators on the Shakespearean Stage,’ *Γράμμα : περιοδικό θεωρίας και κριτικής* 15:1 (2007), pp. 49-66; Richard Meek, ‘“O, what a sympathy of woe is this”: Passionate Sympathy in *Titus Andronicus*,’ *Shakespeare Survey* 66 (2013), pp. 287-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. All quotations from Shakespeare’s works are taken from John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells (eds), *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Marshall, *Shattering of the Self*, p. 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Aebischer, *Violated Bodies*, p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Thamar, the rape victim in *King David*, does not commit suicide, instead taking refuge in her brother Absolon’s house. However, she never again appears in the drama after this point, which makes her disappearance feel in some sense equivalent to a suicide. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Suzanne Gossett, ‘“Best Men are Molded out of Faults”: Marrying the Rapist in Jacobean Drama,’ *ELR* 14 (1984), pp. 305-27 (306). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Jane O. Newman, ‘“And Let Mild Women to Him Lose Their Mildness”: Philomela, Female Violence, and Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*,’ *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45:3 (1994), pp. 304-26 (305). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. In fact, there was some debate about the gendering of emotions such as anger in this period. See Gwynne Kennedy, *Just Anger: Representing Women's Anger in Early Modern England* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), pp. 1-22 and Karen Robertson, ‘Rape and the Appropriation of Progne’s Revenge in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Or “Who Cooks the Thyestean Banquet?”’, in Christine Rose and Elizabeth Robertson (eds), *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 213-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book 6, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1987), pp. 141-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Sarah Carter, ‘*Titus Andronicus* and Myths of Maternal Revenge,’ *Cahiers Elisabéthains* 77 (2010), pp. 37-49. Carter notes, though, that these authors do tend to ‘include her [Philomela] in the dismemberment and cooking of Itys’ (p. 43). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. The fact that Young Lucius focuses on the banishment of his father as accompanying the possible shift in Lavinia’s affections may again emphasise a fear of female power. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See, for example, Farah Karim-Cooper, who argues that, ‘The hand is and always has been a symbol of our dignity as human, as civilized beings’: *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage: Gesture, Touch and the Spectacle of Dismemberment*(London:Bloomsbury, 2016), p.3. For hands in *Titus* specifically, see Katherine Rowe, ‘Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*.’ *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 (1994), pp. 279-303, and Karim-Cooper, *The Hand*,pp. 158-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See, for example, Fredson Bowers, who comments that there is ‘much evidence of an Elizabethan sympathy for blood revenge’; *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Though spectators who fundamentally disapproved of revenge whatever its motivation might, of course, still have had problems with it. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Woodbridge suggests that Lavinia’s rape can be viewed as perversely empowering, in that it positions her as a marginalised figure with nothing left to lose. Linda Woodbridge, ‘Palisading the Body Politic,’ in Woodbridge and Edward Berry (eds), *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p.291. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* (c. 413-426 CE), trans. Marcus Dods, ed. Philip Schaff. Book 1, chapter 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Matteo A. Pangallo, *Playwriting Playgoers in Shakespeare’s Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) 72; my italics. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. See Lucy Munro, ‘*They eat each other’s arms*: Stage Blood and Body Parts,’ in Farah Karim-Cooper and Tiffany Stern(eds), *Shakespeare’s Theatres and the Effects of Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 73-93, which describes, for example, the possible use of bladders filled with sheep’s blood, or blood-soaked sponges attached to the body or held in the hand (pp. 79-82). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)