The Bear Stage

Callan Davies, with Sophy Charlton, Andy Kesson, Liam Lewis, Hannah O'Regan and Lizzie Wright

A key area of disagreement in early modern theatre history has involved the idea that performance occurred on what Alan Dessen calls "a bare platform stage."[1] Andrew Gurr refers to "what we probably rightly know as the bare stage," Michael J. Collins to the "essentially bare stage" of "Shakespeare's [original] theatrical practices", each employing a preamble that may concede potential disagreement.[2] As Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa put it, "the Elizabethan stage [...] was bare in that it lacked any scenery or devices to fix a sense of location other than the standard portable props. It was simply a space for walking over."[3]

But perhaps the most revealing aspect of this dispute over the bareness of the stage is that it audibly confuses discussions of its homonym, the bear stage. Early modern human performance happened next to performances by non-human animals, particularly bears. In a book about Shakespeare and play, what does it mean to play with the bear stage? The Box Office Bears research team has been exploring the place of bears and baiting in early modern English culture, using our combined specialisms in theatre and literary history, archaeology, and ancient-DNA analysis. This act break offers us a chance to go on a journey that traverses those disciplines, in order to centre the bears on the bear stage.

We start with a journey mapped by one of the earliest historians of early modern theatre. In the mid-seventeenth century, Edmund Gayton wrote a short vignette about his playgoing days as a youngster. He recalled the boisterousness of holidays, when audiences would demand myriad different plays from a company even mid-way through their performance. Such crowds would "frequently mount […] the stage" and force players "to act what the major part of the company had a mind to; sometimes *Tamerlane*, sometimes *Iugurth*, sometimes *Malta*, and

---

[1] *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), p. 33.
[2] Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642*, pub. 1970 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992); Collins, "Staging early modern drama at Shakespeare's Globe." *Staging and Stage Décor: Perspectives on European Theater 1500-1950.* Ed Bárbara Mujica (Malaga: Vernon Press, 2023), p. 131.
[3] Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa, *Staging in Shakespeare's Theatres* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 62.

sometimes all of these."[4] When these demanding playgoers were ultimately frustrated, they threatened to destroy the "stately fabric" of the playhouses themselves.[5]

Gayton's recollections transport us, semi-fictionally, to the London leisure industry of the 1600s or 1610s.[6] The audience's rending of the playhouse walls, and demands of piecemeal theatrical extracts, break down the bounded notion of *play* we inherit from playtexts. They rather point us towards a more fluid entertainment world—one comprised of skits, of changes of mind and movement of crowds, of threats to tear down theatrical boundaries. It is therefore telling that the journey Gayton maps out ends in visits to an institution conceptually and physically related to theatrical space; the playgoers ultimately head

> to the Banks side, where the poor Beares must conclude the riot, and fight twenty dogs at a time […]; this perform'd, and the Horse and Jack-an-Apes for a jigge, they had sport enough that day for nothing.[7]

Gayton's carnivalesque vision of playgoing combines playhouse and bear-baiting arena in an "instant." On Bankside, play could be experienced in manifold ways, from Marlowe's Malta to a bear-baiting, in the same space, watching animals "jig" alongside human butchers negotiating beastly temperaments: a multiplex of animal-cruelty-cum-sport, including a Barbary monkey tied onto a horse and sent into the playspace.

Entertainment modes are often seen as discrete activities, but surviving documentation shows that spectators flocked to Bankside for precisely such overlapping, manifold play experiences.   We have almost no surviving playbills or equivalents for drama of the period, but we do have a surviving bear-bill from the early seventeenth-century (the time when Gayton's audiences were heading "instantly" to the Bankside):

> Tomorrow being Thursday shall be seen at the Beargarden on bankside a great Match played by the Gamesters of Essex who hath challenged all comers whatsoever to play 5

---

[4] *Pleasant Notes Upon Don Quixote* (London, 1654), p. 271.
[5] p. 271.
[6] For more on Gayton's account and Bankside animal play, see Callan Davies, "Playing Apples and the Playhouse Archive," *Practices of Ephemera in Early Modern England*, eds Callan Davies, Hannah Lilley, and Catherine Richardson (London: Routledge, 2023): 191-209.
[7] pp. 271-72.

dogs at the single bear for 5 pounds and also to weary a bull dead at the stake and for your better content shall have pleasant sport with the horse and ape [and] whipping of the blind bear.

Viuat Rex[8]

This "poster" helps us get closer to what early modern audiences understood about "play." Just like bowlers or fencers, the Essex "gamesters" went to Bankside to "play"—here with a more-than-human cast. The advert once again indicates the multiplicity of playing options available at the Bear Garden or Hope: bear baiting, bull-baiting, and the jack-an-apes mentioned by Gayton. Lupold von Wedel's account in 1584, discussed in the prologue to this book, shows that Paris Garden bear-baiting arena offered even further "play" activity: immersive human performance and fighting, animals, and pyrotechnics.[9]

The playhouse known as the "Hope," built in 1614 by Philip Henslowe and Jacob Meade, might be the most obvious port of call for a bear stage. This structure replaced the existing "Bear Garden" visited by von Wedel. In doing so, Henslowe and Meade contracted the carpenter Gilbert Katherens to "take down or pull down all that game place or house where bears and bulls have been heretofore usually baited" and in its place to "new build, erect and set up again the said playhouse or game place."[10] The slippery vocabulary reminds us that the "play" in playhouse could be and was any number of things. At the Hope, human players and bears performed in the same space. Accordingly, a visitor to the venue in 1614 would have seen the Hope's stage-keeper sent offstage to oversee the "sweeping the stage, or gathering up the broken apples for the bears within."[11] A bear stage involves bears both on- and off-stage.

"Are you there with your bears?", asks a neurodivergent-coded character in John Lyly's *Mother Bombie*.[12] The question may seem random in the context of the play, but (like all of Silena's observations) it is dramatically astute: just as baiting spaces saw play-like performances, so drama folded in bears. Most famously, Shakespeare's Antigonus exits *The Winter's Tale*

---

[8] MSS 2, Article 041, Dulwich College Archive, Dulwich, London.

[9] Gotfried von Bülow, 'Journey through England and Scotland Made by Lupold von Wedel in the Years 1584 and 1585,' *Transactions of the Royal History Society* n.s. 9 (1895): 223-70. p. 230.

[10] *English Professional Theatre*, eds Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry, and William Ingram (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 598.

[11] Ben Jonson. *Bartholomew Fair*. *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*. Ed. David Bevington et al. (London: Norton, 2002): 961-1066. Induction, ll. 49-50.

[12] *Mother Bombie*, ed. Leah Scragg (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010), 2.3.52.

(c.1610-11) pursued by a bear.[13] Ursine appearances in fact form a sub-canon of early modern drama: *Mucedorus* (one of early modern England's most popular plays[14]) opens with the rampages of a bear in the woods; George Peele's *The Old Wives Tale* (c. 1592) features Erestus, an elderly man by day who transforms into a bear at night. Equally telling are those plays where bears, in today's online parlance, live rent free in characters' heads: in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1594-5)*,* Slender invokes the famous fighting bear Sackerson in the opening act and Anne Page confirms there are "bears i'th'town."[15] Both explicitly and implicitly, the wider entertainment world, with bears at its heart, seeps into and onto the stage—like the stage-keeper's apples at the Hope. Given that bears were toured from London around regular and that baiting occurred all over the country, live bears were a regular part of life, be that at regional wakes or on a weekly basis in the city.

We started our bear journey in the early seventeenth century, but we could have begun even earlier to capture the range of more-than-human play spaces. A little before Gayton penned his recollections, a 77-year-old man named John Taylor offered a similar topographical guide to Bankside in a Chancery lawsuit. He recalled since his youth four places for "the game of bear baiting" (Mason stairs, Maid Lane by the Pike Garden, the Bear Garden on William Payne's "parcel" of land, and the "place where they are now kept").[16] Meanwhile, across the country, innovative venues and leading entertainment producers worked to the tastes of local regions.[17] This crucial provincial energy balances the "centralised" regulation of bear-baiting, which, under sovereign authority, had a London bias. It was exercised by the "Master of the Bulls, Bears, and Mastiff Dogs" (among titular variations) and included displays at royal residences and, often, access to Bankside bear garden(s) for public shows. Perhaps the most famous holders of this role were office-sharers (and father and son-in-law) Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn. They were lessees of the Bear Garden on Bankside and (from 1604) Masters of the Game. Alleyn left

---

[13] *The Winter's Tale. The Norton Shakespeare*, eds Stephen Greenblatt et al., 3rd ed. (London: Norton, 2016): 3133-3204. 3.3.57.1.

[14] For background and its wider popularity, see Kim Gilchrist, "*Mucedorus*: The Last Ludic Playbook, the First Stage *Arcadia*," *Shakespeare* 15 (2019): 1-20.

[15] *Merry Wives of Windsor*. *The Norton Shakespeare*, eds Stephen Greenblatt et al., 3rd ed. (London: Norton, 2016): 1474-1531. 1.1.250.

[16] E 134/18JasI/Mich10, m. 5, MS, The National Archives, Kew, London. Qtd. in W. W. Braines, *The Site of the Globe Playhouse, Southwark* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924), p. 87.

[17] Callan Davies, "The Place of Bearwards in Early Modern England," *The Historical Journal* 66 (2023): 303-24.

an institutional repository of records at Dulwich College Archive, which holds extensive documentation about leisure activity on Bankside and its connection to animals and animal sport.

Yet one of the difficulties in assessing early modern entertainment is that the archives we have tell the tales from an entirely human perspective: we are faced with the challenge of animal phenomenology, in Erica Fudge's words, of speaking with animals that "had no voices and left no textual traces."[18] In a world where non-human animals were captured and forced to perform for entertainment, where do we find the bear's or dog's understanding of "play" in the early modern entertainment industry? We might have to turn, as Ron Broglio puts it, to the "sites where the human and animal worlds bump up against each other, jarring and jamming our anticipated cultural codes for animals and offering us something different."[19] This approach might also lead us to a new set of questions about what "play" means for those more-than-human inhabitants of entertainment spaces.[20]

Archaeologists have explored how hard it is to identify playthings in the past, despite play being a fundamental part of many animals' experience.[21] While not all species play, carnivores such as the bears and dogs of the Bankside rely on play to learn hunting and other behaviours.[22] In both species, play might encompass playing with their mother, littermates, other animals of the same species, or with objects.[23] What opportunities might there have been for bears and dogs to "play" at Bankside?

It is unlikely the bears and dogs used for baiting would have had an outlet for natural behaviours such as exploring, foraging, and seeking mates. We know that multiple bears were present on Bankside. Bears are naturally solitary but may be kept in groups in captivity, their behaviour ranging from friendly to antagonistic depending on the individuals involved.[24] While theatre history focuses on the play-house or the tiring house, used by actors for costuming and

[18] Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000), p. 2.
[19] *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. xix.
[20] Liam Lewis, "Posthuman Bears: Agency in Premodern Bear Baiting in Britain." *Bear and Human: Facets of a Multi-Layered Relationship from Past to Recent Times with an Emphasis on Northern Europe*, ed. Oliver Grimm (in press, print run 2023).
[21] Sally Crawford, "The Archaeology of Play Things: Theorising a Toy Stage in the 'Biography' of Objects," *Childhood in the Past* 2.1 (2000): 55-70.
[22] Aubrey Manning and Marian Stamp Dawkins. *An Introduction to Animal Behaviour*, 6th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 78-79.
[23] pp. 78-9.
[24] S. Montaudouin and G. Le Pape. "Comparison between 28 zoological parks: stereotypic and social behaviours of captive brown bears (*Ursus arctos*)." *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 92 (2005): 129-141.

practical preparations back-stage, bears may have been housed together or within sight and smell of one another in a "bear house"—a term used in a contemporary map of Bankside by John Norden and in inventories as far afield as Cheshire.[25] When the Hope's stage-keeper gestures to the bears "within," might he be playfully combining the bear and tiring house? If bears were housed in cages, they are likely to have been small—lion cages at the Tower of London were 2m x 3m, although modifications were made in 1606 to double their size.[26] Bankside had a pond,[27] available for the animals to wash themselves in, which suggests some mobility beyond travelling to the playspaces and back. These limited conditions could provoke involuntary forms of what audiences may read (cruelly, ignorantly, or indifferently) as a performative type of "play." For instance, modern zoo husbandry shows that bears are particularly prone to stereotypies, or repeated patterns of behaviour, which include repetitive pacing backwards and forwards or around an enclosure or swaying their heads from side-to-side while standing in the same place. For visitors to Bankside, might any repetitive movements in the bears be seen as amusing animal traits rather than signs of stress or boredom, and therefore part of the "play"?

Dogs were similarly "housed": an eyewitness description of 1562 suggests over 200 dogs were present on Bankside in individual kennels,[28] which is borne out by map depictions by Ralph Agas (based on the Copperplate map). If dogs were able to mingle outside such kennels, both antagonistic and play behaviours probably occurred. For instance, dogs exhibit a "play bow" in which they wag their tail, their forelegs outstretched and head lowered.[29] This bow is an invitation to play and signals a lack of aggression.[30] Can we, by any stretch, imagine that dogs were *playing* (in their own terms) on Bankside? There is scope here for positive answers, even though living conditions and human attitudes meant that Bankside play was largely on human terms.

The precise nature of the game itself, for humans and animals alike, remains somewhat obscure. Certain visual traces indicate something of the melee among bear and dogs.

---

[25] See Davies, "The Place of Bearwards."

[26] Hannah O'Regan, Alan Turner, and Richard Sabin. "Medieval big cat remains from the Royal Menagerie at the Tower of London." *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 16 (2006): 385-394.

[27] See account in Exchequer concerning land in the area, E134/18Jas1/Mich10, The National Archives, Kew, London.

[28] Giles E. Dawson, "London's Bull-Baiting and Bear-Baiting Arena in 1562." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15.1 (1964): 97–101.

[29] Manning and Stamp Dawkins, p. 149.

[30] Mark Bekoff. (1995) "Play signals as punctuation: the structure of social play in canids." *Behaviour* 132 (1995): 419-429.

Fig. 1. Woodcut from *Antibossicon*, by William Lilly. (London, 1521). STC 15606. Used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

In this early sixteenth-century representation, we see the baiting "game" in action. A tethered bear stands on all fours, defending itself against multiple dogs, some with collars and some without. This imposition of a costume by the human agents involved in staging baiting shows the complex ways in which human and animal agency intertwine and suggest how a live fight can be stage-managed in advance. In many later images of baiting the bear stands upright, its belly exposed and vulnerable. This stance is not the natural fighting posture of a bear, which is on all fours (allowing defence with paws and teeth). Bears are usually upright when they curious, seeing their surroundings. It is possible that "gamesters" were forcing bears upright to fight: a chance to increase the spectacle. Yet it also risks serious damage if not death to the bear, and while the game revelled in animal violence, bear keepers were keen to keep their animals fit for as long as possible, not least because they were expensive investments.

These attempts to think through animal "play" via more-than-human perspectives remind us that our visit to early modern London's animal arenas need not be circumscribed by textual accounts. Moreover, the Bankside game's vast archival sources is unusual in having vast archaeological equivalents. Not only have excavations of the various bear garden structures offered insight into their architectural make-up,[31] but large deposits of animal remains mean we can get closer to the more-than-human "actors" who rivalled dramatic players in popularity. Indeed, these celebrity animals, given names like Sackerson, Hunks, Judith of Cambridge, Bess of Bromley, and, brilliantly, Beefe of Ipswich, and who seemingly had both distinct personalities and geographical links, leave behind non-textual legacies of their own. We are learning more about these legacies by analysing the skeletal remains of bears, dogs, and other animals from Bankside and there is much more to come.

---

[31] Anthony Mackinder with Lyn Blackmore, Julian Bowsher and Christopher Phillpotts. *The Hope playhouse, animal baiting and later industrial activity at Bear Gardens on Bankside: Excavations at Riverside House and New Globe Walk, Southwark, 1999-2000* (London: MOLA Museum of London Archaeology, 2013), pp. 11-12.

Interdisciplinarity is essential to time travel; our historic "play" tour of Bankside relies on a range of methodologies to bring its leisure world into focus. The archival, performance, and zoological sources touched on in this act-break suggest something of the social, economic, and architectural environments that brought animals, including humans, into play-worlds. Zooarchaeological analysis—the study of animal bones—extends our conversation with these historic animals. Previous study of Bankside remains has shown that dogs involved in baiting activity were particularly large animals and regularly sustained injuries that went on to heal.[32] These injuries were enough to cause pain or draw blood, but not enough to kill them, revealing a bloodsport industry that sought to keep animals alive in order to re-use them in multiple fights. While the names of bears and bulls have survived for posterity, the dogs are anonymous. Yet their skeletal remains can nevertheless provide insights into their individual lives. Both archival and archaeological evidence suggest that certain dogs were selected deliberately for their role in baiting activities, known by contemporaries as "curs," "bandogges" or "mastiffs." By integrating textual materials, isotope values, DNA, and performance evidence about "play," we can get closer to the more-than-human lives who sustained the industry, going some way to addressing what Erica Fudge recognises as the "absent-presence" of animals in early modern England's social and cultural world.[33] Studies of their bone chemistry to analyse diet or movement, and of their genetics to look at relatedness and ancestry, all have a part in telling their stories.

Not only is play itself not commensurate with "drama" for Shakespeare's contemporaries, but our appreciation of the period's play need not be limited to published or manuscript texts or to documentary sources. Thinking hard about bears and stages, as we have on this brief journey during our act break, encourages us to think more capaciously about who or what can be considered historical witnesses to, as well as subjects within, the *playing* industry. Far from being a bare stage, "simply a space for walking over", the early modern stage was a place of props, pyrotechnics, combat, dogs, bulls, humans and bears.[34]

---

[32] Les Capon and Kevin Rielly, "Excavations at Empire Warehouse, Bankside: New Evidence for Bear-Baiting in Southwark, 1522-1682" *London Archaeologist* 15.11 (2020): 312-20.
[33] *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000), p. 2.
[34] Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa, *Staging in Shakespeare's Theatres* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 62.