Stage Directions and Spatial Mapping on the Elizabethan Stage

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Data from Henslowe’s diary shows that in a ten-week period over the summer of 1595 the Admiral’s Men did fifty-seven performances of twenty different plays, four of which were new to their repertory (Rutter 1984, 91). Such a punishing schedule suggests the company must have developed a range of strategies to simplify the decision-making processes involved in preparing for performance—strategies to help overcome what would otherwise be a logistical nightmare. This paper suggests that one such strategy might be evidenced in the stage directions embedded in the playtexts from which the actors’ performance preparation processes began.

In their invaluable Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama (1999, 84-85) Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson note the substantial presence in the texts of the familiar verbs ‘enter’ and ‘exit’ to indicate movement onto and off the stage. These two English verbs derive directly from Latin: ‘enter’ is from ‘introire’, which in turn is composed of the prefix ‘intro-’ (in, into) and the verb ‘ire’ (to go); even more directly, ‘exit’ is simply the third person singular of ‘exire’, again composed of a prefix ‘ex-’ (out) and ‘ire’ (to go).

It is perhaps not surprising, as Dessen and Thomson also note (1999, 54 &101), that another set of verbs appears in stage directions: verbs which paraphrase the Latin-based forms referred to above. And paraphrase is a precise description, for these are more typically English constructions known as ‘phrasal verbs’: constructions made up of verb + preposition, such as ‘come in’, ‘go out’, ‘carry in’, ‘run away’. It seems then that Elizabethan stage directions sometimes used a Latin ‘enter/exit’ system, and at other times, even within the same text, employed an alternative and what might be termed a ‘latinate’ phrasal construction, with ‘come in’ and ‘go out’ used as straightforward alternatives to or derivatives of ‘enter’ and ‘exit’.

That, it would seem, might be the end of the matter; however Dessen and Thomson point out that there are many instances which puzzlingly contradict such a correspondence (1999, 120). Sometimes characters ‘come out’ onto the stage, and their exit is notated as ‘goes in’. Similarly, properties are sometimes ‘thrust out’ onto the stage rather than being ‘brought in’. It is possible therefore that playwrights were not always working from a generic latinate system when they were writing the stage directions, and that a different conceptual framework generated these ‘reverse’ stage directions. Such a conceptual frame might have derived from the open air nature of Elizabethan public performance, where the stage was ‘outside’ in the open air courtyard at the centre of the playhouse, and the
Being There: After back stage or tiring house was ‘inside’ the fabric of the building. Hence the act of leaving the stage might be conceived as going ‘in’ to the tiring house, and the act of entering the stage could be seen as coming ‘out’ of the tiring house; properties stored inside were ‘thrust out’ onto the stage, then ‘drawn in’.

There are myriad examples of the former (Latin and latinate) system in the ‘enter’ and ‘exit’ stage directions and their phrasal equivalents which punctuate the texts. Similarly there are many references to offstage sound effects occurring ‘within’ (i.e. offstage, within the tiring house) to support the notion that the latter architectural spatial conceptualisation was also current. We see an example of the latinate system with the use of ‘in’ as an entrance in the quarto of King Lear, when Gloucester is hauled before Goneril and Regan: *Enter Gloucester brought in by two or three* (Act III; scene vii; line 27).

In The Widow’s Tears we see ‘out’ denoting an exit: *Lysander stamps and goes out vex’d, with Cynthia* (Act I; scene ii; line 282). In contrast however the system which invokes the tiring house, which I will call the ‘architectural system’, is evidenced (in both directions) in a single stage direction from The Spanish Tragedy, where ‘in’ denotes an exit and ‘out’ an entrance: She, in going in, lets fall her glove, which Horatio, coming out, takes up (Act I; scene iv; line 99). This clearly contradicts the latinate system in its sense of ‘in’ and ‘out’, and actually constitutes a problem: any such architectural or tiring house system will always directly contradict the latinate system, since it simply reverses the spatial polarities. And having two contradictory systems running is not actually a system—it will generate rather than alleviate confusion.

Dessen and Thomson wonder why and how two such contradictory systems persisted (1999, 120), even in closely-related stage directions—as occurs in Shakespeare’s 1 Henry VI and 3 Henry VI respectively:

*Bedford brought in sick in a Chair . . . Bedford dies, and is carried in by two in his Chair* (Act III.; scene v; lines 9, 155).

*Enter Warwick, Somerset, and the rest, bringing the King out in his Gow . . . They lead him out forcibly* (Act IV; scene iii; lines 27, 57).

If Bedford comes ‘in’ onto the stage, why is he then carried ‘in’ rather than ‘out’? If the King enters ‘out’ onto the stage from the tiring house, why does he then exit ‘out’ rather than back ‘in’ to the tiring house?

The question posed by this paper is the following: if ‘come in’ and ‘come out’ can both mean ‘enter’—and ‘go out’ and ‘go in’ can both mean ‘exit’—is there an overarching logic that rectifies the apparent contradictions in directional cues? The presence of stage directions where both systems are used in close proximity to each other makes it tempting to posit the presence of a more complex overarching system that would make sense of such contradictions.

A further motive for theorising a broader macro-system is one immediately obvious drawback of both these systems: they are not specific enough to provide the actors with information about the precise point of entrance or exit. The stages of the public playhouses were fitted with two access doors through which most entrances and exits were made—as is conceded by even the most hardened supporters of a central discovery space that might have provided a third entrance and exit point in special circumstances (Gurr 2001, 65-6; Ichikawa 2006, 5). But neither the latinate nor the architectural systems provide any clue to the actors or the book-holder as to the direction of any particular entrance or exit—they merely indicate movement from the stage to the tiring house or vice-versa, with no more specific indication as which of the two available stage doors is to be used for the entrance or exit. These are both simple binary systems which counterpose onstage and offstage, whether conceived in
Can we analyse these stage directions in such a way as to establish the possibility that there was a third system operating in the minds of some playwrights as they wrote their dialogue and stage directions? I have previously analysed spatial indications in the characters’ dialogue and suggested that, to assist the actors in choosing their entrance- or exit-points, the playtexts inscribed a ternary rather than binary spatial system that worked by ascribing contrasting spatial connotations to each of the two stage doors (Fitzpatrick 1999). Briefly, this system involved one of the two stage doors leading to offstage places that were ‘further inwards’ or more private, and the other door leading to offstage places that were more public or ‘further outwards’ from ‘here’—wherever the ‘here’ (usually defined by dialogue indications) represented by the stage space happens to be in any particular scene.

This more complex system, inscribed in the actors’ dialogue, would provide them with invaluable information about the direction of the entrance or exit—theirs or other characters’—i.e. information about which of the two lateral stage doors was to be used. This can be simply outlined by a diagram which is a variation on the previous:

It is important to note the one significant change involved here: the stage/tiring house binary has been replaced by a ternary relationship. Instead of referring to two functional spaces (stage and tiring house) and to two contradictory in/out spatial relations between them, this system rests upon a triangulation of fictional places. The stage stands for an ‘in between’ place between two other offstage places, one of which is further ‘inwards’ and the other further ‘outwards’. Evidence from the dialogue suggests the playwrights were working from a systematic division of the space of the fictional world into (usually) three sub-spaces. Single scenes take place in a particular location represented by the ‘here’ of onstage, and this location (‘here’) is then contrasted to two offstage counter-locations (two ‘theres’). In turn, those two ‘theres’ are opposed to each other: one of them is further inwards from
the location represented by the ‘here’ of onstage, the other is further ‘outwards’ (Fitzpatrick 1999, 4). Once this relational spatial system is grasped, it is immediately easy to see why a character can be brought ‘out’ (from somewhere further ‘inwards’: e.g. his tent) and then taken ‘out’ (to somewhere further outwards: e.g. to his place of execution).

I have suggested (Fitzpatrick 1999, 7) that the actors’ dialogue indicates the existence of a system that was serving two related and intertwined purposes. This system articulated for the actors and audience the onstage/offstage ‘geography’ of the fictional world, with its two contrasting offstage areas (the offstage fictional ‘signifieds’), and it did this by ensuring that this fictional geography was represented semiotically by the stage space and its two opposed entrance doors (the performance ‘signifiers’). In this way the entrance or exit of an actor or a large property through one or other of the two stage doors stood as a clear and concrete sign for movement from one part of the fictional world to another.

The second purpose of such a system, however, went beyond the spatial semiotics of the fictional world. This was a functional or logistical purpose: the provision of information that would have been immediately useful for the actors and others involved in the performance (Fitzpatrick 1999, 6). If the inwards/outwards fictional relationship between the offstage places and the stage-place that was ‘in between’ them was signified in a systematic concrete manner on the stage, then this would give the actors indications as to where precisely they should exit to and enter from. If the two lateral stage doors were ‘marked’ consistently, with one of them always leading to the ‘inwards’ sphere and the other always leading to the ‘outwards’ sphere, this would constitute a rudimentary stage-management system that signified and reinforced in functional terms the fictional division of the world of the play.

Indeed there are indications in the dialogue of just such a system: the stage-right door led ‘inwards’, the stage-left door led ‘outwards’ (Fitzpatrick 1999, 16), and this would have provided the actors with a simple rule of thumb—facilitating the preparation process by reducing the number of decisions to be made.

This paper discusses evidence that arguments I have previously made on the basis of indications in the dialogue are also supported by the choice of stage directions. Such evidence strengthens the argument for this second functional role for such a system—since the stage directions in the book-holder’s copy of the play constituted a major resource in terms of the logistics of performance. If it can be shown that the lexical choices in a statistically significant number of stage directions reflect the inwards/outwards carve-up of the fictional world evidenced in the dialogue, then this constitutes precisely because of the unquestionably pragmatic, functional, stagecraft, stage-management import of stage directions—potentially important corroborative evidence for the dialogue-derived system which I have posited. If in stage directions characters exiting the stage are sometimes directed to ‘go in’ and sometimes to ‘go out’—and characters entering are sometimes told to ‘come in’ and sometimes to ‘come out’—it is possible that these comings and goings might correspond to the fictional and stage-management ‘geography’ evidenced in the actors’ dialogue: they are coming out of the ‘inwards’ door onto the stage, or coming in from the ‘outwards’ door, and so on.

The analysis which follows is made possible through an expansive project that is examining around seven hundred instances of such stage directions from nearly three hundred plays, derived from the Dessen and Thomson Dictionary. The verbs used to indicate movement ‘in’ and ‘out’ are listed below; the same verb in combination with ‘in’ or ‘out’ (or one of their equivalents) can refer to either entrances or exits. Also included are some nouns commonly linked to the relevant words (which in such cases are prepositions rather than having an adverbial function to modify the verbs):

- *bring*, *bear*, *beat*, *break*, *bring*, *carry*, *come*, *conduct*, *convey*, *creep*, *drag*, *draw*, *drive*, *fetch*, *follow*, *go*, *issue*, *lead*, *march*, *pluck*, *pull*, *pursue*, *put*, *run*, *rush*, *send*, *serve*, *set*, *shut*, *steal*, *take*, *thrust*, *tug*, *usher*
- *in*, *out*, *forth*, *off*, *away*
- *chamber*, *house*, *study*
- *into*, *out of*
- *answer*, *choir*, *horn*, *knock*, *noise*, *shouts*, *sounds*, *voices*
- *within*, *without*
The following data does not account for all the instances which Dessen and Thomson refer to, since their dictionary must necessarily limit itself to providing representative samples of the multitude of instances they have catalogued in its preparation. However thanks to their detailed scholarship the ‘sampling’ they provide in the Dictionary is comprehensive, and a corpus of around 700 examples provides a solid statistical basis for the arguments made from the analysis.

But how can such data be used, and what needs to be done with it to make it serve a particular analytical purpose? Many texts show that authors continued to use the generic Latin-derived ‘enter’ and ‘exit’ in stage directions, which are non-specific in terms of fictional direction. The persistence of the generic Latin-derived forms would also indicate that even if a case can be made that the phrasal verb forms reflect the fictional spatial system, they might not all do so coherently—since playwrights might not always have considered specificity in the stage directions to be important, and might therefore have been using these phrasal verbs to express generic indications rather than provide directional information. Further, it might well be the case that the spatial sensitivity of different playwrights differed markedly, leading them to use these phrasal verbs imprecisely and even erroneously.

Let us approach the issue by means of the via negativa: what would we expect to find if there were no such fictional system operating? Let us assume for a moment that when they used these phrasal verb forms the playwrights were neither consciously nor unconsciously invoking any such fictional space-based system: sometimes they were simply using ‘comes in’ and ‘goes out’ as paraphrases of the generic Latin-derived ‘enter’ and ‘exit’; and sometimes instead they were thinking architecturally, and used ‘comes out’ and ‘goes in’ in reference to the tiring house’s interiority in contrast to the stage’s openness—with no sense of the fictional directionality I have suggested. If that were the case, we would expect to find that the instances where these phrasal verb forms are used were evenly distributed in terms of any possible attribution of inwards/outwards directionality: if they were just being used randomly in one or other of the binary systems without any implied inwards/outwards directionality, we would expect to find no marked alignment between say ‘goes in’ and a clear sense that the exiting character is going ‘inwards’, or between ‘comes in’ and a clear sense that the character is coming onto the stage from ‘outwards’.

In other words the non-fictionally-directional use of either of the binary systems would give us a roughly 50-50 distribution: a character who ‘goes out’ would be just as likely to be going to a fictionally ‘inwards’ place as to a fictionally ‘outwards’ place. There would be no reason why ‘comes out’ would be used more often in situations where a character is coming from an ‘inwards’ place than from an ‘outwards’ place; no reason why ‘goes in’ would be used more in cases where the character is going to a fictional ‘inwards’ location when they leave the stage—since either way they are just coming ‘out’ of or going ‘in’ to the tiring house.

However the instances examined so far indicate that this is not the case. When one of these phrasal verbs is used, 70% to 80% of the time (depending on how you view the statistics) it aligns with the fictional system: a character who is described as ‘coming out’ is usually coming out from a more ‘inwards’ location; a character described as ‘coming in’ is usually entering from a more ‘outwards’ location; a character described as ‘going in’ is usually going towards a more ‘inwards’ place; and a
character described as ‘going out’ is usually exiting to the outside world, further ‘outwards’. Across each of these four categories the distribution is not 50-50, but closer to 70-30 or 80-20. Here are the figures so far, with 276 instances analysed, and I should stress that these figures are provisional, pending final checking:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of stage direction</th>
<th>Interplay of two binary systems with ternary system</th>
<th>Instances</th>
<th>Latinate, Architectural subtotals</th>
<th>Fit/contradiction subtotals</th>
<th>AS % of total S.D.s</th>
<th>As % of space-specific S.D.s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comes in, and from ‘outwards’</td>
<td>Latinate phrasing fits with fictional directionality</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>= 70%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goes out, and to ‘outwards’</td>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comes out, and from ‘inwards’</td>
<td>Architectural phrasing fits with fictional directionality</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goes out, and to ‘inwards’</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comes in, but from ‘inwards’</td>
<td>Latinate phrasing contradicts fictional directionality</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td>= 18%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goes out, but to ‘inwards’</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Comes out, but from ‘outwards’</td>
<td>Architectural phrasing contradicts fictional directionality</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Goes in, but to ‘outwards’</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Latinate, but indeterminate</td>
<td>Fictional direction of entrance or exit unclear</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
<td>= 12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architectural, but indeterminate</td>
<td>Fictional direction of entrance or exit unclear</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td></td>
<td>276</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>276</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The 276 stage directions examined thus far indicate that where the latinate phrasing is used (come in/go out) it tends to be in cases where characters are coming and going from and to a more ‘outwards’ or public location, i.e. through the ‘outwards’ or stage-left door. Conversely, where the architectural locution is used (come out/go in), it tends to be in cases where characters are coming and going from and to a more ‘inwards’ or private location, i.e. through the ‘inwards’ or stage-right door.

In other words the data does not reflect the 50/50 breakdown we would expect if the phrasal verbs were simply reflecting one or other of the two generic systems. When phrasal verbs are employed, it is considerably more likely that the ‘in-ness’/‘out-ness’ implicit in them is in correspondence with the fictional inwards-outwards system, and this suggests that the phrasal verbs were not simply being used to paraphrase the Latin system or to reflect the architectural system. Instead it seems they were being consciously employed to provide specific information about the fictional and hence functional direction of entrance or exit, and that this system of fictional spatial sense was in fact the underlying motive for such a notation.
There are, however, cases where the stage direction is at odds with a fictional system. Sometimes the fictional places are clearly articulated in the dialogue—a character is obviously coming out of their house, yet the stage direction has ‘comes in’ rather than the ‘comes out’ which a fictional system would predict. This usage might be explained as a vestige of the Latin-based system, with the stage direction merely indicating generically an ‘enter’ or ‘exit’ rather than providing a fictional direction for the entrance or exit. We cannot discount the persistence of the generic systems in cases where direction of entrance or exit was taken to be self-evident or insignificant—such a persistence is clearly a fact from other data, with the plethora of generic ‘enter’ and ‘exit’ stage directions, and the chronic use of ‘within’ for noises off within the tiring house, wherever their fictional point of origin might be. I am therefore arguing that, despite the persistence of the received latinate and architectural systems, both of which are generic in relation to which door might have been used, there is evidence for a fictional system in the stage directions, which reflects indications in the dialogue and which is more specific about which door is to be used.

The flat contradictions between the uses of ‘come in’ and ‘come out’ for an entrance, and ‘go out’ and ‘go in’ for an exit are not satisfactorily explained by invoking an uneasy cohabitation between two contrasting binary systems, the latinate and the architectural. A more satisfactory explanation, supported by this analysis, is that a generic latinate scheme (enter/exit, paraphrased as come in/go out), initially adopted from classical models, was then made more specific over time with the emergence of an inwards/outwards fictional spatial scheme. Once the stage doors were employed as two opposed signifiers for fictional ‘inwards’ and ‘outwards’, this generated ‘come out’ and ‘go in’ to specify activity at the inwards door, and ‘come in’ and ‘go out’ was restricted to mean something more specific than it had previously: it now referred to activity at the outwards door.

Then ‘come out’ and ‘go in’, now potentially signifying specific activity at the inwards door, may have been used by some playwrights—whether in ignorance or deliberate vagueness—to refer to the tiring house in general rather than a specifically ‘inwards’ fictional location. Rather than using these phrasings to provide the actors with finer-grained information about their precise (fictional) point of entry or exit, they merely referred to the (functional) offstage tiring house.

While it can be argued that spatial indications in the dialogue might merely be to provide the actors and audience with some generic fictional spatial ‘background’ for the action, evidence of a similar articulation of space in the stage directions—in those very textual instruments aimed at controlling the functional stagecraft of performance—suggests that this went beyond the generic to the practical and particular. It seems instead to have been a widely-accepted system that worked at the fictional as well as the functional level to ensure the smooth running of performance and to facilitate performance preparation, enabling the playwrights to encode spatial information into their texts—to write with performance foresight, as I have argued elsewhere (Fitzpatrick 2002). Only with a range of such strategies and systems in place would it have been possible for Henslowe’s company and the other acting companies to cope with the logistical demands of a tight production schedule, and a theatre industry that required of them a repertory system that turned over plays in rapid succession.
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*Tim Fitzpatrick’s* research field is late-16th early 17th century European popular theatre. He has published articles and a book on the oral/popular origins and processes of the *Commedia dell’Arte*, and has subsequently focussed on Elizabethan and Jacobean staging at the public playhouses in London. In that regard he has published articles questioning the reliability of the iconographic evidence on which the Globe reconstruction is based, outlining evidence in the playtexts for particular staging resources in the public playhouses, and positing on the basis of such evidence the existence of a stage-management system for using the staging resources to facilitate preparation and performance. His principal interest is in how external performance factors (pre-existing oral traditions or architectural and scenographic resources and constraints on the staging) feed into the performance process, how such resources and constraints can be traced through textual structures as ‘pre-inscribed parameters’ in playwrights’ mindsets, and how such considerations lead the historian to posit a performance process significantly different from more modern ‘norms’.