Afterword

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In 1620, Richard Brathwaite worried that the five senses, which had the capacity to convey ‘morall or diuine discourse to the imagination’, could instead be abused and therefore make the body vulnerable to vice and corruption. Here, Brathwaite demonstrates the tension that existed within the medical and moral discourses on sense perception in the early modern period: the senses were gateways to knowledge and God, but they were bodily channels susceptible to Satan’s devastating influences too.¹ Early modern discussions of the senses were fraught with anxiety, contradiction and absolutes. Some writers, as contributors have pointed out here, were certain that there was a clear hierarchy of the senses, with sight at the top. This ordering of the senses occurs as early as Aristotle, but is later reimagined within a Christian framework through the Middle Ages and early modern periods. Other writers, such as Brathwaite, were troubled by the double nature of the senses and sense organs. For example, Jackie Watson shows us in Chapter 2 to what extent theories of vision were in flux and how the eyes were seen both as the “‘most noble, perfect and admirable” of the senses’, while being burdened with the notion of ‘visual deception’ (p. 42). As a result of this dichotomy, the ability of sense perception to enlighten or harm an individual meant that people were constantly reminded to be vigilant, guarded and to regulate their sensory activities. Our senses are often taken for granted in everyday life, but to early moderns, ignoring the sensations of the world upon the body would have been unthinkable.

In addition to hierarchies and dichotomies, the senses are beset by conflict, vulnerable to deception and held hostage to the emotions. Aurélie Griffin shows in her contribution, for instance, how this is noted by early modern writers who were concerned about the effects of love melancholy upon the eyes. Griffin also highlights an important point that medievalists tend to pay more attention to than those of us working with later texts, and that is the notion that there are five external and three internal senses. As scholars of early modern texts, we need to be aware of the ways in which sensory theory changed or evolved from one epoch to another. Refreshingly, this awareness is heightened throughout the chapters in this volume.

As the editors point out in their introduction, being able to recreate the early modern sensory environment or replicate the early modern subject's sensory experience would be impossible and in many ways misses the point of why we should historicize the senses. As David Howes suggests in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, culture mediates the senses and vice versa. To understand a culture, we must uncover its ways of perceiving and acquiring knowledge, and in doing so, identify what that culture understood about its ways of perceiving and knowing. This volume of essays is timely, then, as scholars and critics of early modern literature and culture are turning their attention from the fashioning of the body to its processes, and what this study provides is a way of assessing how those processes, in particular sense perception, affected, mediated and influenced the reception of art, literature and theatre in this period. In examining the role of the senses in the reception of art and the experience of intense emotion, the chapters in this volume have uncovered the origins of sensory theory. The vast range of texts – classical, medieval, religious and medical – shows how far into the past we must glance in order to identify the many facets of the history of sensory theory that developed and shaped the way art was interpreted and literature was read during the early modern period.

Scholars in a range of disciplines are beginning to ask how early moderns perceived phenomena and how artists and writers interpreted and represented the sensory worlds they encountered. Art historian François Quiviger, for example, explores the 'presence, nature, function and meaning of sensation in Renaissance art as productive of space and meaning', opening up new avenues for a profound engagement with not only visual components of art but how it reflected sound, taste, touch and smell.² The editors of this volume take up the question of how a theory of early modern sense perception can aid our own interpretation of art work and its reception in its moment as well as ours. Although we cannot necessarily recover the specific sensations of the early modern period, an examination of how writers and artists accounted for those sensations can help us to structure our own encounters with the texts and artefacts left behind. In particular, taking into consideration how early modern subjects describe their experiences of love, pain and death through a lexicon of the senses forces us to take note of the inextricable links between language, emotion and the physiology of sense perception in this period. The synaesthetic effect of desire, for example, is discussed in this collection by Natalie Eschenbaum in her chapter on Robert Herrick. Herrick suggests that 'to sensually engage with things or people is usually to infuse with them, to melt into them, to liquefy' (p. 115); here the double nature of the senses seems to be invoked deliberately by Herrick in order to express the nature of desire. Equally, the process of sense perception is bound up with the humoral condition of an individual subject. Some of the chapters in this volume are right,

therefore, to address the ways in which the passions, humours and senses merge within the complex physiology of the human body.

To understand ourselves and our own sensory engagement with the world is one justification for a cultural history of the senses. But we may ask ourselves why this book and others like it (as there are more studies on the senses in early modern England on the way) are particularly important and why they are important at the moment. In October 2011, Globe Education launched a series of lectures, staged readings and conferences on Shakespeare and the Senses to explore early modern sensory theory, to reveal the number of works in the period that are preoccupied with themes and language of the senses and to challenge the idea that Shakespeare's first audiences went only to 'hear' plays or that they were either auditors or spectators. We wanted to suggest that early modern theatrical performance was a multisensory phenomenon and that audiences/spectators/congregators/assemblies responded to performance with the entirety of their bodies.

Reconstructed early modern playhouses, such as the Globe Theatre, the Blackfriars in Staunton, Virginia and the newly built Sam Wanamaker Playhouse (at Shakespeare's Globe) provide extraordinarily fertile testing grounds to measure the ways in which all the senses are called to attention simultaneously through performance. As we learn more about attending to plays in those old playhouses through these reconstructed playhouses, we are learning more about the early modern sensorium and how language, the body and theatre architecture function together when attending to plays. Juxtaposing studies of sensory performance, such as Simon Smith's chapter on visual musical experience in Shakespeare's playhouse, with studies of performance in reconstructed venues can lead us to important discoveries about the development of performance practices through time. However, the chapters here do more than that; they provide a sustained analysis of the ways in which art, literature and theatre pushed into the body and how the senses heighten, transform and induce melancholy or a wide range of humorally inflected passions in response – suggesting that a dialogic, fully embodied engagement with aesthetic phenomena was contingent upon these five crucial portals to the body.

Notes

- 1 Richard Brathwaite, *Essaies Vpon the Fiue Senses with a Pithie One Vpon Detraction* (1620), p. 19.
- 2 François Quiviger, *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), p. 7.