

Somebody and Nobody: the Authorial Identity of the Player-Playwright-Poet in Early Modern theatre

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Abstract: This paper focusses on a particular moment at the beginning of the seventeenth century which has been considered to be transitional in terms of how the profession of playwright was perceived. It explores the complex authorial identities of playwrights who were also simultaneously poets and stage actors, roles which both in different ways created tensions with the role of playwright. Via an examination of the stage figure of Nobody which became popular at this time on the London stage, this paper suggests that filling the multiple roles of poet, playwright and player often led to a conflicted relationship with the idea of authorship. Metadramatic readings of the anonymous 1606 playbook *Nobody and Somebody* appear to support this suggestion, and to indicate that the figure of Nobody could be emblematic of the tensions and conflicts experienced by the player-playwright-poet at this time.

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Printed for John Trundle and are to be sold at his shop in
Barbican, at the signe of No-body.

Figure 1. Woodcut of Nobody from title page of *Nobody and Somebody*

Archdeacon, Anthony. "Somebody and Nobody: the Authorial Identity of the Player-Playwright-Poet in Early Modern theatre." *Authorship* 5.2 (2016): <http://dx.doi.org/10.21825/aj.v5i2.3879>

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When John Trundle printed the play *Nobody and Somebody* in 1606, we know that his shop in the Barbican had “the signe of No-body” hanging outside it. Though he had been at the shop since at least 1603, prior to 1606 it had been identified on publications as “in the Barbican, neere Long Lane end.” It is reasonable to assume, then, that the sign of Nobody, which remained until at least 1620, owed this distinctive shop branding to the 1606 playbook. The character of Nobody in the play had used a visual joke of being all legs / breeches, as illustrated in a woodcut image at the front of the playbook (see Figure 1). It seems most likely that a larger version of the book illustration image was adorning Trundle’s shop for the next fourteen years.¹

Why Trundle thought this an apt sign for his shop is not certain—a jokey allusion to the status of appearing in print, perhaps, or a reference to the anonymity of the ballads and pamphlets which were his staple as a printer. The Nobody character of the play was a likeable, beneficent character, which was perhaps sufficient reason to use it. Trundle himself was not a nobody in the printing world, having a successful career throughout the reign of James I, and his name was probably more familiar to Londoners than many of the authors whose works he published.² There was an allusion to him in the folio version of Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in his Humour* (1616), and he appeared to have been in Jonson’s mind in *The New Inn* (1629), when he gave the name of Trundle to a coachman who appears (Act 2, Scene 3) just after a joke about Nobody.

If Trundle’s Nobody sign alluded to the people whose works he printed and sold, then the joke certainly worked well for playwrights, who at this time were typically less visible than the actors who performed in their plays. *Nobody and Somebody* itself demonstrated this: there was no mention of the author on the printed playbook, and despite its evident popularity both in London and later in Germany, there has never been any definite attribution. In contrast, the actors who played the popular comic role of Nobody were likely to have been well known: we know that John Green, for example, made the role his own and toured Europe with it.³ Richard Helgerson (1979) claimed of the late Elizabethan period that “in the theatre the professional dramatist was visible, if at all, only as an actor. And when, on rare occasions, his work got into print, it was likely to be anonymous” (205-6). Yet Helgerson (1992) would also suggest, as we will see below, that the Jacobean theatre saw the rise of authorial control and the decline of player-power, in which case *Nobody and Somebody* came at a transitional point. This essay will argue that the author or authors of this play used its plot to explore metadramatically the changing power-relations within the theatre. These changes were not simply explained in terms of authors becoming somebodies, whilst players became nobodies. The attitudes of playwrights towards authorship were complex and sometimes ambivalent, and the cultural shift was gradual, so to understand the metadramatic implications of the play we first need to look at how playwrights and players saw themselves, and how others saw them, in this period.

The playwright nobody

¹ Broadsheet pamphlets had featured a differently styled, impish Nobody character repeatedly during the sixteenth century: see Calmann. It seems unlikely, however, that the sign would have been based upon these more elaborately drawn figures.

² Trundle is probably best known to modern readers for his role in printing the “bad” quarto of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

³ When the company took the play on the road to the court in Graz, Germany, John Green gave as a gift to their host, the younger brother of the Archduke Ferdinand, a picture of himself dressed as Nobody, which suggests something of the status he had achieved. See Kramer, 85-95.

Marcy North has warned (1994, 2003) against simplistic assumptions about anonymity in the early modern period, and in particular the idea that the age of print brought a sudden shift from self-effacing medieval attitudes towards authorship to a more self-assertive individualism.⁴ As her research shows, there were still plenty of reasons for publishing anonymously, whether strategic or playful. With regard to playbooks, which were not a particular focus of North's work, their anonymous publication is a particularly complex topic, involving multiple interlocking issues. These issues include the status of plays written for the new public theatres, the status of plays compared to poetry, the market for playbooks, the ownership of plays, the conventions of publishing and patronage, and even the fear of causing offence, especially to the authorities.

The issue of social status related to the broader audience catered for by the public theatres, which had expanded rapidly in the decades after the opening of the first two purpose-built playhouses, the Theatre (1576) and the Curtain (1577). Having areas for a standing audience, these had much larger capacity than the all-seater private theatres situated within the walls of the City of London, and most importantly this meant they were much more affordable to the ordinary people. However, despite the expanded audiences in the 1580s, the few plays to reach print were usually royal entertainments or high-brow material such as translations of classical works, which had been performed in the private theatres. There was still no obvious readership for public theatre playbooks—in fact Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (1584), which had been played by Leicester's Men at the Theatre to the North-East of the City, seems to have been the only such play to get into print in this decade.⁵ The increasing popularity of public playhouses expanded the potential readership of playbooks but, these plays being more populist, they were correspondingly less exclusive. As a result, it seems that writers saw their identities as poets and as playwrights quite differently, and sometimes expressed embarrassment at the publication of their plays. A number of writers have explored this phenomenon in recent years, often describing it in terms of the valorisation of literariness over performance.⁶ Marston's address to the reader prefacing *The Malcontent* (1604) bemoaning how "scenes, invented merely to be spoken, should be enforcibly published to be read" is a *locus classicus*. David Bergeron has observed how John Marston was seemingly torn between a belief that "comedies are writ to be spoken, not read" (97) and the imperative to publish. In the end, Marston would embrace authorship and publish, like Jonson, his own collected *Works* in 1633, shortly before his death.

Thomas Heywood, like Marston a writer for the Red Bull (North-West of the City walls) and also a possible author of *No-body and Some-body*, seems to have had similar struggles with his authorial identity as a playwright.⁷ Benedict Scott Robinson has related how Heywood in the early years of his career "consistently articulated his commitment to performance over print" (365) but later became obsessed with a folio publication of his works. Robinson saw this as Heywood's response to the "literary anti-theatricalism" (364) of the early Stuart period, though Heywood's *Apology for Actors* (1612) seemed to be responding to broader attacks on a theatrical profession which to Puritan detractors was the work of the Devil. Admittedly, Heywood emphasises the classical heritage of the theatre, but

⁴ See also the collection of essays edited by Starner and Traister (2011), which continue the exploration of anonymity in the period.

⁵ Based on *Database of Early English Playbooks* (DEEP).

⁶ See in particular Brooks, who explores the conflicts in Webster, Heywood and Marston amongst others.

⁷ Amongst other evidence which has been put forward is the suggestion that a play written by Heywood and Smith for Worcester's Men in 1602, which Henslowe refers to as *Albere Galles*, might be the same play. Matthew Steggle (101-118) has recently challenged that hypothesis with a new theory about the identity of *Albere Galles*.

in the prefatory poem “To them that are opposite to this worke” he seems to be defending actors against moral attacks from “you that have term'd their sports lascivious” (5).

Heywood’s early conflict about his authorial identity was nowhere better illustrated than in *The Golden Age*, which was printed in 1611 with an address to the reader claiming that the play had “accidentally” gone to press. The self-effacing tone of the address was somewhat contradicted by the subsequent reference to “my book”, and also by his use of Homer as an opening chorus. Just two years earlier he had proudly published *Troia Brittanica*, which was dedicated to the Earl of Gloucester and opened with lavish praise of the King’s “Majestike vertues”. In Canto VIII there is a self-referential digression on “the worth of poets” where Heywood used Homer, in standard humanistic fashion, as exemplar, and suggesting that he had almost God-like powers:

Poets are makers; had great Homer pleased,
 Penelope had been a wanton, Helen chaste,
 The Spartan King the mutinous host appeased,
 And smooth Ulysses with the horn disgrac'd ...
 O Homer! 'twas in thee Troy to subdue,
 Thy pen, not Greece, the Trojans overthrew (*Troia Brittanica*, 171)

To have Homer opening his play effects a clever elision of the poetic and dramatic forms, echoing the poem as he proclaims his supernatural creative powers:

I am he
 That by my pen gave heaven to Jupiter
 Made Neptunes Trident calme the curled waves
 Gave Aeolus Lordship ore the warring winds ... (*The Golden Age*, B1r)

Homer here represents not only poets but playwrights too, both validating their profession and elevating the individual author to quasi-divine status. It would not be unfair to say that here Heywood was displaying what Richard Helgerson (1979) called in Ben Jonson and others “laureate ambition” (193).

Ben Jonson’s mission—eventually achieved with the 1616 publication of his Works—was to close the gap in perceptions between poet and playwright, raising the status of the latter. It was to be a long struggle. For most poet-playwrights, their authorial split identity would continue, partly because the two types of writing were radically different in both process and end-product. In the writing of plays collaboration was common, and ownership of the script might be seen as shared not only with co-authors but also with the acting company which translated it into a marketable product, i.e. a stage production. The playwright would not necessarily have anything to do with the textual publication of a play, which probably depended on the prolonged success of the play on stage and therefore would commonly post-date first performance by some years. Geoffrey Masten (1992, 1997) has argued that we should not take for granted playwrights’ desire for individual identification as authors, and that in the context of collaborative authorship it is anachronistic to even talk of anonymity at this time. Richard Wilson has even suggested that Shakespeare relished his relative anonymity as playwright: wary of authorial sovereignty “Shakespeare hides his own responsibility behind a show of non-existence” (12).

An associated issue is the relationship between patronage and publication. A patron of a poet would expect to see his or her name in print along with fulsome praise at the front of any publication. In this way, patronage was a form of self-advertisement for patrons, but the context was quite different for the aristocratic and royal patrons of the theatre, who typically were sponsors of the acting company, not the playwrights directly. There is a fascinating alternative perspective on the authorship-patronage issue, provided in the mock dedications to *Nobody* which both John Marston and Thomas Dekker used at around the time that *No-body and Some-body* was being staged. In 1602, Marston's *History of Antonio and Mellida*, which had previously been acted by the Children of St Paul's, was printed with a dedication to "the most honorably renowned No-body, bountious Meacenas of Poetry and Lord Protector of oppressed innocence." Then in 1604 Thomas Dekker gave his verse account of the previous year's plague, *Newes from Gravesend*, a dedication to "Sir Nicholas Nemo, alias Nobody", a "Rewarder of Rimes" who is distinguished from less generous "Mecen-Asses" (A3r). Both appear to be satirising the practice of aristocratic patronage, particularly in Sir Nicholas Nemo, who had been a character in *The Three Ladies of London*. Perhaps they were seeking sympathy for their lack of a benefactor whilst simultaneously advertising their independence of patronage.⁸ These mock-dedications reflect a period when personal patronage persisted alongside a theatrical marketplace where jobbing playwrights could sell their skills.

Marston's embroilment in conflict with Ben Jonson in 1602 might also have had a bearing on his dedication, mocking his rival's preoccupation with gaining aristocratic, and even royal, patronage. The point of patronage in relation to publishing was partly of course about power relations, and in the case of the patronage of playing companies it was implicitly about control of a potentially seditious medium. Only a troupe sponsored by one of the great and the good was allowed by law to perform in public, and in addition to this, the Master of the Revels kept an eye out for potential embarrassment to the monarch in the plays being produced. In the 1590s *Thomas More*, to which Shakespeare, Heywood and Dekker all seem to have contributed, had been censored by Tilney (Master of the Revels 1579–1610) for its representation of rioting in 1517 under Henry VIII. And the accession of James, who took over licensing of playing companies which had previously been entrusted to noblemen, had not created a more relaxed environment for playwrights: just a year before the publication of *No-body and Some-body* Ben Jonson had ended up in prison for his part in *Eastward Ho!* In these circumstances it might not have been politic to be named as the author or co-author of *No-body and Some-body*, with its themes of tyranny and usurpation, the arbitrariness of sovereign power, and the follies of British monarchs.

Despite the cultural landscape—or market conditions—described above, evidence suggests that during this period something shifted in attitudes to authorship of plays and also to their printed publication. The London theatre changed dramatically during the 1590s, with the opening of the Swan (1595) and the Globe (1599) as competition for the Rose on the South Bank. Such expansion could only have been feasible in the context of massive demand, with London audiences estimated at around 20,000 across the various theatres. As Peter Blayney has repeatedly (1997, 2005) emphasised, the market for playbooks at the beginning of the seventeenth century should not be over-estimated, but it did substantially increase, with a new readership being created by the expanded audiences of the public playhouses. The numbers of extant playbooks tell a clear story: we have only 30 or so playbooks from the 1580s but 130 new plays in the next decade and over 200 in the next. Gradually, too,

⁸ John Day also dedicated his comedy *Humour out of breath* to Signor Nobody when it was printed in 1608. See <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A19975.0001.001>

identifying the authors of the plays became the norm. Even in the 1590s, at least thirty were printed and published anonymously, including the first editions of Marlowe's plays, but the number of anonymous playbooks decreased in successive decades to just a dozen by the 1620s.⁹ One can see a change even with individual playwrights: none of the six John Lyly plays published in the early 1590s bore his name, but his final two did, in 1597 and 1601. Dekker's first two plays published without his name in 1600 were followed by a third, and many thereafter, where he was named. Marston's first play was unattributed, his second had IM on the frontispiece, and his third published, *The Malcontent*, had his full name. Heywood was not credited until *A Woman Killed with Kindness* in 1607 and Middleton not until his seventh sole-authored play in 1608. There might be a range of different reasons in each of those separate cases why it did or did not happen, but that there was a growing trend towards naming playwrights seems undeniable. If market forces were a factor then presumably the perceived value of naming the author was increasing, and some playwrights made sure that they were always identified with their plays, seeing it as valuable self-promotion.

The player nobody

As the status of the playwright was subtly changing in the first two decades of the seventeenth century, so too, it seems, was the status of players, and particularly of comic actors or clowns. Players such as Richard Tarlton and Robert Wilson had gained considerable fame in the previous two decades, but according to Andrew Gurr (85-94) there was a power-shift towards tragedians by the end of the sixteenth century, starting with Alleyn then carrying on into the seventeenth century with Burbage and Field. Some, prompted by Hamlet's "let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them" (*Hamlet*, 3.2), have characterised the shift differently as one away from unscripted, improvised clowning. For Richard Helgerson (1992), Kempe's departure in 1599 from the Chamberlain's men was a symbolic moment for the development of the theatre, a juncture at which the playwrights were beginning to assert themselves more over clowns who were apt to stray from the script. Helgerson linked Falstaff's banishment in 2 Henry IV and Kempe's departure from the Chamberlain's men (227), seeing both as rejection of carnivalesque subversiveness. For Helgerson, this symbolised a turn-of-the-century shift from the players' to the authors' theatre, with university-educated poets displacing the old school of player-playwrights. In a period when the popular theatre was becoming more verbal than visual, more mimetic than emblematic, the stage actions of the player became increasingly (and literally) circumscribed by the script.¹⁰ Certainly tastes were changing in some respects. The big names on the London stage in the last two decades of the sixteenth century had been the clown players Richard Tarlton and Will Kempe, both known for their music, jigs and physical comedy. But Robert Armin, who replaced Kempe at the Chamberlain's Men, went on to become known for playing Shakespeare's often darkly witty fool characters: Feste, Touchstone and *Lear's Fool*. The old-style clowning which was Kempe's speciality was going out of fashion, in some quarters at least, by 1602 when he joined Worcester's Men at the Red Bull.

Given the context of Kempe's apparent banishment from the Globe in 1599, it is rather poignant that one of his last performances was probably the role of Nobody at the Red Bull in

⁹ My figures are based on searches in the *Database of Early English Playbooks*.

¹⁰ Here Helgerson was following David Wiles who had claimed the "The replacement of Kemp by Armin was part of a broad drift towards a new type of theatre." (x)

1602.¹¹ Richard Preiss, in his work on clowning and authorship in early modern theatre, picks up on Helgerson's account of Kempe's departure from the Globe and considers the symbolic significance of Kempe with his new company playing Nobody.¹² Preiss argues that Kempe felt under threat by the changing fashions and that the written account of his Morris dance from London to Norwich in 1600 had been Kempe's desperate attempt to textualise his ultimately non-textual practice of clowning, one dominated by the jig. Armin, Preiss argued, replaced the extempore clowning of Kempe and Tarlton before him with a scripted, reproducible acting the part of a fool.¹³ In this case, there would have been an extra irony in Kempe's last role being that of Nobody, whose humour relies heavily on carefully scripted word-play.¹⁴

The Helgerson account of a turn-of-the-century shift in the culture of the theatre left out several salient points which complicate the scenario. For a start, at this time all players, comic or tragic, old style or new style clown, were still nobodies of a sort. If they tried to ply their trade without membership of a company which had appropriate sponsorship they were vagabond outlaws. Also, as Preiss points out (186), one cannot generalise about the early modern theatre based on what happened at the Globe: jiggling clowns continued to be popular at the Fortune and the Red Bull well into the seventeenth century, and continued to have a big influence on the success of plays. Preiss goes as far as to say that Armin "was the aberration, not the new norm." John Southworth cited *The City Gallant*, a play written for the Red Bull by John Cooke and first performed in 1611, as an example of comic actors being still able to "hijack" a play from its author (179). The performance by Thomas Greene became so renowned that in 1614 Trundle published it as *Greene's Tu Quoque*, in reference to a running joke in the play, with a woodcut image of Greene in costume at the front.¹⁵ Furthermore, is that it is simplistic to divide playwrights at this time into who were and were not university educated, or those who acted and those who did not. Oxford educated John Marston might look like one of this new breed of playwright, but as we have seen he explicitly denied the literariness of this work. Grammar school educated Shakespeare continued acting through much of his career, as did Cambridge educated Thomas Heywood, and even Jonson had started in the theatre as a player-playwright.¹⁶ Conversely, both the clown Robert Armin and the tragedian Nathan Field turned their hands to writing plays. It is therefore this more complex figure of the player-playwright, who often also had an almost separate, parallel identity as a poet, which we should try to understand in relation to authorship and anonymity.

Evidence which both bears out the theory of a shift in attitudes and the need to be careful about over-simplifying is found in the intriguing possibility that Ben Jonson actually played the role of Nobody, dressed as in the play with breeches up to the neck, in his 1603 masque usually referred to as *The Entertainment at Althorp*.¹⁷ This masque, coming as it did at the beginning of James' reign and performed before his queen, marked an important new start for Jonson in his attempt to raise both his own profile and the status of the dramatist, as

¹¹ See Bourke (2008); nothing is heard of Kempe after 1602.

¹² Preiss also acknowledges (17) his debt to Nora Johnson (2003) who proposed that actor-playwrights, including Heywood, challenged the association of authorship and ownership.

¹³ Supporting the idea of a new, more literary fool, Armin also wrote about clowns and clowning, publishing *Foole upon Foole* in 1600, republished as *A Nest of Ninnies* in 1608.

¹⁴ On the literary and academic origins of the wordplay, see Archdeacon (2012).

¹⁵ Similarly, John Green (possibly Thomas Greene's brother) who played the role of Nobody when touring Europe with his company in 1608, commissioned a portrait of himself dressed as the character.

¹⁶ Helgerson links Kempe's departure in 1599 with Shakespeare's "transformation ... from player to author" (227), yet we know that Shakespeare was acting in Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* in 1603 and was named as a player attending a royal procession in 1604.

¹⁷ See Luke Wilson, 221.

Richard McCabe (292) has described. The self-effacement of the author would in this case be turned into an ironic piece of drama in itself: the nameless / absent author in the guise of Nobody declares that the Morris dancers about to appear “Have got *No-body* to present them” (B2v—emphasis original). Whether or not Jonson was paying this role, the way the character refers to the Morris dancers is particularly interesting in the context of Will Kempe the Morris man having been on stage playing the same character during the previous year. The textual commentary remarks that the words of the speech below could not even be heard above the noise of the Morris men, or “the throng of the Countrey” as they are referred to. Whilst Nobody defends their moral character, he also mocks the Morris men with the ironic aside that a Morris is “a kind of masque” and the double-edged compliment that they are “the choice of all the rout.” (B2v) There follows an extended reference to one of Queen Elizabeth’s favourites, Sir Richard Hatton, once the owner of the grandest private residence in English, Holdenby House, via the tenuous link that he was renowned for his dancing abilities. Nobody suggests that this was Hatton’s only real talent:

I do not deny where Graces meete
 In a man, that quality
 Is a graceful property:
 But when dauncing is his best
 (beshrew me) I suspect the rest (B3r.)

An Elizabethan courtier who had died twelve years earlier was presumably a safe topic for satire, but there seems to be a double target here. Although this has been prefaced by the assurance that the Morris men about to perform are less mercenary than Hatton, the joke relies on the audience agreeing that dancing is not a very highly valued skill. Nobody continues by addressing the dancers in unflattering terms (“Come on Clownes forsake your dumps, / And bestir your Hobnaild stumps”) and assuring them that they will not attract any ladies with their moves. The light mockery here would turn to harsher scornful a decade later in the Stagekeeper’s induction which opens *Bartholomew Fair* (1631), mocking the public’s taste for “a Jugler with a wel-educated Ape”, and their “concupiscence of *Jigs* and *Dances*.” So if Kempe’s Nobody had accidentally reflected the changing status of stage clowns, Jonson’s reflected the aspirations of a playwright who wanted to purge the theatre of rustic crudeness, and become a respected, literary, somebody.

“I not desire this soveraintie”: metadramatic readings of *No-body* and *Some-body*

The figure of Nobody in the Red Bull play can bear a number of metadramatic readings which reflect on the issues discussed above: the oppositions between player and playwright, old clown and new, and also anxieties about or assertion of authorial identity. The conflation of actors and authors begins even in the Prologue, whose “a subject, of no subject, we present” (A2^r) recalls the joking of the Althorp Nobody. The Prologue would probably have been spoken (like the epilogue) by Nobody himself, and the “we” could be playwright/s or players, since Nobody represents both. There follows a bold rhetorical move which goes even further than Heywood’s use of Homer in associating dramatic and divine creativity: “No-body is Nothing: Who of Nothing can something make?” (A2^v). Whilst the line could be read simply

as an allusion to the commonplace *ex nihil nihil fit*, the obvious answer to that question would have been God, so by implication the play is a God-like creation, *ex nihilo*.¹⁸

Once the action starts, we find that the play's title does not refer directly to the main plot, a somewhat farcical history play, but to an incongruous sub-plot involving the abstract characters Nobody and Somebody. Being in the favour of the tyrant Archigallo, Somebody is identified right away as a villain, and responsible for various social ills which the (ironically) heroic Nobody is trying to rectify. The action here is mainly driven by Somebody's attempts to blame Nobody for his own wrong-doings. With its references to absent landlords, usury, the Plague and even London street names, the sub-plot is recognizably contemporary. Most notably this plot is concerned with "the poor", who are referred to over and over again, as well as more specifically poor infants, farmers, ex-soldiers and imprisoned debtors. Via the abstract yet recognisably real figure of Somebody, the play castigates those who not only fail to help the poor but actually drive people into poverty. The historical plot meanwhile is based on the early British King Elidurus, whose story appeared in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and then in Holinshed's *Chronicles*.¹⁹ Elidure is considered at the beginning of the play to be "too milde to rule" (B2^v) by Cornwall, but via much chronologically compressed action and various implausible scenarios he ends up ruling three times. As David Hay observed, the historical plot can be read in quite conventional ways as about kingship and order, but the degree of disorder portrayed is dizzying. The action flits back and forth between the two plots, and each time we return to the main plot the crown changes hands by either deposition, abdication or death, with an almost farcical rapidity.

Throughout the play Nobody seems to convey the authorial voice rather as Shakespeare's post-Kempe clowns do, but the meta-dramatic possibilities are more complex than that. Nobody is simultaneously player and playwright, and when he steps out of character in the epilogue to *No-body and Some-body*, with his line "if no-body have offended you cannot blame No-body for it" (I3^r) the theatrical in-joke is that he is still a nobody, whether he is player or playwright.²⁰ And if Nobody is a proxy for the player/playwright, the Clown who accompanies him throughout the play could be seen as synecdochally representing players as a whole. If this were the case, then No-body's putative crime of "entertayning / Extravagants and vagabonds" (B1^r), in a period when an identification of "player" with "vagabond" was no great metaphoric leap, could have a specifically theatrical referent.²¹ This theme is highlighted by the relationship which develops between Nobody and the Clown. The wordplay around the Clown serving Nobody could allude to the legal requirement for acting companies to have patrons. On his first appearance with Nobody, the Clown explains that he was arrested for having Nobody as his master:

I was carried afore the Constable but yesterday, and they took me up for a stravant; they askt mee whom I served, I told them Nobody, they presently drew me to the post, and there gave me the law of armes. (C1^r)

¹⁸ The line also echoes Theseus's speech about the creative imagination and "the poet's pen" creating things from "airy nothing" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.15).

¹⁹ As Hay observes (29ff), critics have been divided over which was the primary source, though the play departs from both in a number of respects.

²⁰ This line recalls the Prologue of the play-within-the play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600), where Quince begins: "If we offend, it is with our good will. / That you should think, we come not to offend / But with good will. (5.1.109)

²¹ The 1597 *Act for the Repression of Vagrancy*, like the *Vagabond Act* before it, applied to "common players", who could be punished with whipping if they did not have a patron of substance.

This satire of Elizabethan Poor Laws which criminalised vagrants, that is anyone travelling without a master, could equally be read metadramatically as a defence of actors.

The relationship between Nobody and the Clown surely also conveys something of the rustic clown / witty fool distinction which had been exemplified by Kempe and Armin. The nameless Clown is clearly being distinguished from the comic role of Nobody, even if that role was also being played by a clown. The Clown actually appears before Nobody in the action, where he is seen as both amoral and stupid, having stolen Rafe's betrothed only to have her stolen in turn by Archigallo. The Clown, though he does also contribute to the wordplay, is distinguished by his malapropisms, his country origins and his contrasting physicality, demonstrated when he defeats a Braggart who was attacking Nobody. No-body, in contrast, is un-bodied by his reliance on wordplay rather than action for the humour. So, if Kempe was playing Nobody in 1602, he was rather poignantly playing a role which was about to eclipse his old style of clowning on the stage, and opposite an exemplar of that style.

Elidure's role in the play is also open to metadramatic readings. First, he reluctantly takes the throne after his tyrant brother Archigallo has been deposed, apparently preferring to read books than take power. He relinquishes the crown to Archigallo again when he believes his brother has repented and is reformed, but almost immediately regains it when Archigallo dies, declaring at his coronation, "Witnes I not desire this soveraigntie" (E3^v). Such coyness recalls perhaps Marston and Heywood, but more certainly Richard Wilson's argument that Shakespeare deliberately eschewed the "authorial sovereignty" involved in being committed to print.²² Heywood's apparent reluctance to grasp the laurels of authorship in the early years of his career seems rather like Elidure's protestations, and perhaps both were strategic rather than really self-effacing. In this sense the play's title does not refer only to the comic sub-plot, but signifies a unifying theme: Elidure oscillates between being somebody and nobody throughout the action. When brothers Vigenius and Peridure decide to usurp the throne and reign jointly, Elidure relinquishes the crown readily, with a speech about the drawbacks of kingship:

O heaven, that men so much should covet care!
 Septers are golden baites, the outsides faire:
 But he that swallowes this sweete sugred pill,
 Twill make him sicke with troubles that grow, stil. (G1^r)

The King's avowed preference to be a nobody and avoid the burdens of responsibility becomes an analogue of the playwright's. It was easier to be just an actor playing Nobody than an author trying to be somebody, but, as Wilson comments with a particular relevance to the player-playwright opposition, "The slipperiness of Nobody, for a culture poised between presence and representation, was that he was always busy becoming Somebody" (13).

A final level of metadrama is suggested by the ending of the play. After, predictably, Vigenius and Peridure both decide they want complete power, they end up fighting and killing each other in battle, leaving the way clear for Elidure to make his third appearance on the throne. It is in this final scene that he meets Nobody and effectively unifies the two strands of the play's action by not only taking the side of Nobody, but also promising to deal with the vices and social ills which Nobody had opposed in the sub-plot. This is like a final

²² Richard Wilson follows Helgerson in conflating authorial control and control by the State.

handing over of power in the play: responsibility for social reform is accepted by the new King, who has realized that “such abuses / Grow in the country, and unknown to us!”²³ Instead of Nobody being blamed, at last Somebody is brought to justice:

Thou that hast bin the oppressyon of the poore,
Shalt bee more poore than penury itselfe.
All that thou hast, is forfit to the Law. (12^v)

Not only is Somebody’s property confiscated but he is sentenced to death: by the end, Elidure has learnt the lesson that he needs to be a king of actions to be effective.

If Elidure’s earlier bookishness had highlighted the author / authority link, it might also have suggested a more specific reference to King James, himself an author who had few qualms about publication. During the twenty years prior to his accession to the English throne, James had published a number of works in Scotland, culminating in *Basilikon Doron* (1599), a treatise offering advice on good government, which had been republished in London in 1603. The characterisation of Elidure as learned and studious is entirely the playwright’s invention, not found in Geoffrey of Monmouth or Holinshed, and this touch might have been added after James came to the throne to make the association obvious.²⁴ Whatever the case, the ending dramatizes the link between authorial and political sovereignty. The Prologue’s joke “a subject, of no subject, we present” is about grammatical subjects with no referent, but there may also be a pun there which points to the play’s “advice to princes” sub-text: the playwright as one of the King’s less than significant subjects. The positioning of poet-playwright is deferential yet self-aggrandising: he has raised the issues of social injustice, but only a King can really do something about them. This scenario might reflect the new relationship between King and theatre under James I, but it is suggestive of Ben Jonson in particular. According to Richard McCabe (291), Jonson implicitly put himself forward as poet laureate in an epigram written on the accession of James. Like an obverse to Nobody handing over responsibility for social reform, the epigram implies that since the King will now be too busy for poetry, Jonson can take over that role for him: “Whom should my muse then fly to, but the best / Of kings, for grace; of poets, for my test?” Moreover, as McCabe also observed, that test would come very quickly for Jonson in *The Entertainment at Althorp*, that piece for which he had written, and probably acted, the part of Nobody.

According to these readings, the figure of Nobody on the stage represented the confused and contradictory status of the early modern playwright: attacked by some but increasing in power and respect, anonymous but influential, increasingly literary but always dependent on performance. It was certainly not simply about nobodies wanting to be somebodies; it was also about uncertainty and anxiety for playwrights who had an as yet unformed identity. One might be a somebody as a poet or even a player, whilst still being a nobody as a playwright. The profession of playwright did not yet even exist, so these groundbreaking authors temporarily occupied a cultural interstice, caused by the time-lag between the economic development of the play market and its cultural assimilation. If no longer nobodies, they had yet to become somebodies. *Nobody and Somebody* captures the cultural

²³ There is a thematic similarity here to King Lear’s realisation that “I have tane too little care of this” (Scene 11, Q1, 1608) and Peter Womack has drawn comparisons between Edgar’s role in *King Lear* and Nobody’s.

²⁴ The bookishness also makes Elidure a little like Shakespeare’s Prospero, especially since he was also usurped by his brother.

chaos of the moment through its self-referential clowns and Elidure's conflicted relationship with power; it is a play that reflects on both the state of the nation and the state of the theatre at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

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