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Afterword

This essay reflects on the contents of the Issues in Review section ‘Rethinking Performance in Early Modern England: Sources, Contexts, and Forms’.

In writing this ‘Afterword’, I feel very heavily the weight of the old saying that ‘a good wine needs no bush’ — because word will get round without advertisement. These fine articles do exactly what they promise, singly and as a group introducing the reader expertly to core issues in the use of early drama records: how references to performance can be identified from their original sources, and why they are sometimes misidentified; how attention to context can discover performance more clearly than the bare record permits; what genres of public behaviour might be better understood through the lens of performance; how performance and the performative slide into each other; how performance can be a target, an excuse, or a weapon in other social conflicts; and how discredited traditions of performance can be translated to survive larger cultural, theological, or political changes. The essays also have a methodologically reflexive aspect since they all engage with the conceptual framework of the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project, to which three of the authors directly contribute. They reveal how it has managed its criteria of inclusion and exclusion, and how digital publication might help develop that framework and continue its established policy of increased contextualizing of the records.

In every case the scholarship on which the article is built is itself original and rigorous — these are pieces by researchers who have earned our attention by having gone to the records so that we do not have to. So I hope I can be forgiven for commenting first upon the activity itself. These essays are, as is the REED project, a *gift* to wider communities — be they academic, educational, those involved in the creative arts, interested in heritage or in the objects of tourism, historical language, the built environment, historical and cultural movements, and so on.

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As academicians, we have become used, and to a degree have been *made* used, to viewing our efforts in relation to personal or institutional advancement, and to the financial consequences of that competition. But the time is long overdue for us to think hard about what is actually being done when intellect, skills, and time are spent to others' benefit in the way revealed by these learned articles.

What gifts does one receive in this case? The first is an encouragement to question the obvious. I recall the naive hope I felt when I came across a Scottish Yuletide record referring to Robin Hood, keeper of the wood. Alas, he was elsewhere called Robin Hogg and evidently looked after pit props for mines. Mark Chambers, however, takes on a far more seductive and critically accepted reference to a 'playerchambre' in Finchale Priory. Chambers gives a masterclass in how to analyze, contextualize, and question the evidence offered by bare accounting records. Relative costs, the history of personal names, comparison across documents, the local distribution of relevant terms in Latin and English, the history and architecture of the institution that produced them, together with the building's pattern of use and likely complement of monks (and where they came from) all contribute to a forensic examination which lays this particular ghost, revealing that the term 'playerchambre', whatever its apparent enticements, is a snare and delusion for the scholar of performance. Inevitably, we read towards what we already know, but a close engagement with historical records puts the spotlight on the hermeneutic circle. All four papers are characterized by this rigour and by the self-analysis that follows from it. Perhaps less predictably, they are all 'good reads', economically expressed and effectively focused on intriguing examples.

Secondly, while the authors here are alert to the gap between a record's original function and its modern use, they are even more valuably conscious of the varied nature of that gap. The historical records in which performance can be found were not created for the modern researcher, but for the judges and lawyers, managers and accountants, clerics and local government officers who needed them for court cases, balancing the books, or assuring themselves of good order in church and state. Taken as a group, these pieces show the records of performance serving a range of different functions. And in doing so, they remind us that the *visibility* of historical public action is always contingent on the aims of the original authority, and that these aims can vary in the nature of their engagement with performance. Sometimes, they are generically in parallel with the researcher's needs, as in prosecutions for libel where, citing an early modern legal definition, Clare Egan points out that it was the *manner* not the matter which constituted the actionable event, thus opening up for the modern student of performance a whole range of theatrical behaviours which jostle for inclusion in the Records of Early English

Drama. Egan's distinctive contribution, which directly addresses the boundary of dramatic play and performance, lies in carefully theorizing performance as a spectrum of activity, and closely analyzing instances to demonstrate this. Her provincial libellous events can deploy multimedia theatrical components of text, speech, prop, action (including 'personation'), parodic employment of genre, and manipulation of audiences' expectations and responses in iteratively assertive ways which reveal them as performances with a comparable, though variable, relationship to those events customarily understood as festive or theatrical.

Egan's is one of three papers showing the criteria on which the concept of 'performance' can be enlarged, and the consequences of making that enlargement. Matthew Woodcock's tactful approach — his is alert to the danger of 'mission creep' in a research project — should remind us of one of the benefits of a project like REED. Its criteria for inclusion or exclusion, necessary as they are for making the whole investigation manageable, to any degree 'completable', and readily interpretable through comparison between items, are also an invitation to further thought. It is a mistake to regard its taxonomy as a *limitation*, for REED editors have themselves been in the forefront of exploring the edges around and the spaces between the categories it employs. Though focused on Norwich (as Chambers was on Durham), Woodcock looks to the meaning and function of the Rogation festivals across the country. He suggests that accepting Rogationtide processions as ceremonial which involved more performance and performativity than mimesis would highlight the adaptability of such traditions in response to the Reformation. This approach would also reveal more clearly their continuity as shapers of the public scene. Like Egan and Mayne, he walks the marches of performance and performativity, the event and its use as a declaration of identity, firstly parochial and then civic. And just as dramatic activities were relocated in time and place, being repackaged to cope with changes in authority, so Rogationtide observance survived the theological changes of the Reformation by shedding some accoutrements, moving from mass to elite participation, and selecting from its traditional elements that which would make it more acceptable, becoming overtly a boundary perambulation rather than a liturgical procession.

On occasion the visibility of performance is almost accidental. Emily Mayne's essay shows that our knowledge of the multimedia Norwich celebrations of James I's coronation depends on the happy accident (not her term) of a Star Chamber dispute among the Norwich 'civic elite'. But rather than using it simply to establish the elements of the events, though she does do that, she focuses our attention on issues which lie at the core of many medieval and early modern performance events, but have become additionally topical in recent days: the interpretations

which were drawn from or foisted upon performance. What did an event mean? What could it be made to suggest about the deviser's motives? What did the deviser claim that it meant? What failures in performance might be argued and what prompted them? The prosecutors for libel or the plaintiffs against local authority were assiduous interpreters and, of course, deliberate misinterpreters of the performances that they adduced in their court cases. This practice extended, as Mayne's fascinating paper shows, to exploiting the latent ambiguity of the word 'show': the performance being one, but, in legal terms, also 'showing forth' the claimed malice of its perpetrator.

Nuance has a complex relationship to performance, as studies such as these remind us. From the fragile terminology which accompanies such events, through the contradictory functions which they purport to fulfil, the ambiguous meanings they may appear to suggest, the violent emotions which they can inspire despite offering themselves as festive or jocular, through to the varied and contested reception which they get in context, and their subtle reuse to achieve political ends, instances of performance seem at once to deny and demand nuanced interpretations. No doubt there were many happy instances of public performance which gave joy and passed without notice. But they constitute the dark matter of early modern culture — at once invisible to record and yet underpinning the collisions, contests, and violence which we can see in the records, enabling them through providing a traditional language of display, and guaranteeing audiences well versed in the meanings of genres of action, aware of the perimeter of what might be publicly acceptable, and consequently aware of when it was being crossed.

In this respect, these essays are timely, almost overtly topical as Mayne points out when, writing as were the other authors, in a time of pandemic, she shows the pressure of plague in Norwich upon the decision making of those whose duty it was to organize the civic celebrations. Pressure, public behaviour, and the need to understand the role of interpretative nuance constitute a highly problematic triad in a way instantly recognizable to a modern reader. Whether it is financial, political, religious, epidemiological, or some other force operating on a society, the pressure of change seems to produce unforeseen consequences in the public sphere, whether local, provincial, or national. The public scene rapidly becomes a stage, action is readily regarded as enactment, people begin to see behaviour as signifying, and so 'something that happened' morphs into 'performance', and that performance appears performative to anxious eyes.

It would be conducive to the general good in our own times if anyone aspiring to office were to receive a compulsory course on the material in and

around REED so as to appreciate the conflicting forces which bear upon, and are expressed through, public performance. They could learn much both about what to expect and, even more importantly, what such events portend, and how they should be received. They could learn most from the *longue durée* of performance. In England there has been a recent movement against statues commemorating those who were involved in slavery or imperialism. Monuments, long unnoticed or, if read at all, read quite differently by some, have had their performative potency rediscovered and re-read. As spectators change in outlook, so the public scene changes in visibility and meaning, a benefactor is understood to have been an exploiter, and the ceremonial which attended the public raising of a statue may give way — did in fact give way in the case of the Bristolian Edward Colston — to a performance of its destruction, using a traditional, and an increasingly global, language of action: defacing by paint, stamping on the effigy, debasing it by throwing it into a river, etc. Media exposure now intensifies and replicates the performance in a way which could not have been managed in the early modern period, but was attempted through the elaborately iterative language used in Star Chamber cases to reveal the true horror and threat of past actions now complained about. To this, television adds the spectacle of the defaced statue retrieved from the river, and displayed to the viewer like the mangled remains of a traitor in earlier days.

And when has all this come to a head? In a time of pandemic, with ‘lockdown’ constraints on public behaviour: when the threats of incipient change to the status quo became theatrically visible in the empty streets; simple actions, such as crossing the road to avoid close contact, become a statement of concern, even of courtesy; houses sport NHS rainbows, as earlier generations might have hung out their best tapestries for a coronation procession; ritual applause for health workers on Thursdays at 8pm makes ceremonial licit to people whose action is otherwise limited. This is a time when the act of processing, which would already have been a performative statement, is intensified in meaning by its breaking lockdown laws, and thus implicitly signals the limits of civic authority (an issue raised in Mayne’s study), thereby constituting a demand for a new contract between the government and the governed.

These four essays certainly give us back the past, and show the integrity of scholarship, rigour, and originality which is needed to do this properly from the early records now available to us. But their significance does not rest there for, in a sense, they also give us back our present. They remind us that hard thinking is needed to understand performance of *any* era, its delights and dangers, its generic expansiveness and its limits, its ambiguity, its cultural and political

ramifications. This is particularly true of the present strange times. And the articles also expertly remind us that constant critical self-awareness underpins that hard thinking.