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Landscape, Movement, and Civic Mimesis in the West of England

Because of the survival of four English mystery cycles, it has been usual to think of those civic and guild-sponsored entertainments as being the exemplar form in cities and towns that sponsored drama by amateurs between Whitsuntide and Midsummer Day.¹ And, indeed, surveys of medieval drama by what they do not talk about generally imply as much. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, for example, opens with an overview of medieval theatre, then presents chapters on the four Middle English cycles, the non-cycle plays, the Cornish cycle, moralities, and saint's plays. But all the English cycles that happen to survive are from the north. Evidence from the southwest – particularly in Somerset – suggests that while communities there also mounted civic-sponsored entertainments, those events seem to have had a different form that, I would suggest, deserves to make its way more centrally into discussions of civic-sponsored drama. And because that form is replicated at the city, town, and village level, it presents what is in some ways a more coherent picture of entertainment traditions within the context of local and regional culture than do the cycles, which appear to be associated only with large urban centers.

As the title of this essay suggests, one way to understand that form is to explore its mobile nature and its use of the local landscape; to those I would add its recurring structural use of a combat metaphor. This study begins such an exploration by analyzing dramatic records from Somerset that I collected during research for *REED: Somerset*, published in 1996.² The bulk of those records, dating as they do from the 1530s through the Civil War, reflect the political, social, and religious conflicts that characterized the period. Many of the records are from courts (local, county, ecclesiastical, Star Chamber), where references to entertainments occur because so much of the struggle to preserve or to change traditional culture crystallized in efforts to preserve or abolish traditional customs, entertainments, and ceremonies. Because the records mirror those societal stresses, they not only give useful descriptions of the entertainments themselves, they provide evidence relevant to issues of social history that have been much debated during the past decade. Did differing

terrain within a county or region determine the kinds of entertainments that turn up there as David Underdown has contended?³ What sort of traditional relationships, including borders, does the distribution of entertainments reflect? What was the effect of reform (including puritanism) on traditional culture and the forms of entertainments in the villages, towns, and cities of the West Country?

Of course, local culture had many non-theatrical customs, ceremonies, and rituals that involved processional movement over the landscape in ways that made statements of ownership, control, and use about both the culture and the landscape. Beating or perambulating the bounds was an annual trek undertaken in diverse communities, from Wells to Yeovil, that reaffirmed the shape and limits of the parish.⁴ In southeast Somerset, early churchwarden's accounts also record liturgical processions, with banners and flags, travelling considerable distances to other parishes as early as the fifteenth century.⁵ Larger parishes also exchanged annual visits with their dependencies to raise funds for services and affirm traditional bonds between the two entities.⁶ All these traditional activities bringing together parishes and their dependencies made metaphorical statements. One such statement might be called the metaphor of arrival or festive appearance, with a processional entry by the neighbours; another, the metaphor of reunion, the restating of the ties of brotherhood and neighbourliness; and third, the metaphor of control, the progress itself acting as a kind of mock mobilization, a re-seizing of the landscape for themselves and their sovereign.

However, the subject here is not those activities but the civic-sponsored entertainments that appear in local records of Somerset between 1450 and 1640, encompassing both the period when they were accepted and the time when they came under attack by reform-minded authorities. Among the surviving records of performance in Somerset, the most striking recurring feature is that all the community-sponsored entertainments that had a mimetic element seem to have partaken of a single form, replicated in its essential features at the level of city, town, and village. Thus, evidence that is fragmentary for any one of those urban entities becomes impressive when considered in the aggregate.

In Somerset most of these traditional entertainments – whether in city, town, or village, whether Robin Hood or May game, guild pageant, morris or long dance – involved some form of civic and religious play, variously incorporating elements of processional movement, acting, ritual, music and/or dance, with involvement by different social classes and of civic and religious officials of the community, as sponsors and/or participants. What are often called 'games' in a Somerset village or market town seem to have been no

different in structure and purpose from what are called 'shows' in the city of Wells. Their purposes, depending on the specific activity, were to raise funds for the parish, to celebrate religious holidays, to express civic pride and communal harmony, or to punish offenders against social norms. They did so by patterned, theatrically conceived movement over the landscape of the parish. In that sense all traditional entertainment in Somerset was 'parish' entertainment, the only significant difference being the size and resources of the sponsoring community, which in turn determined the scope and configuration of similar events in different places.

This form of entertainment invariably included a leader (an honorary position, usually elected) and a select group who became his or her followers for the duration of the entertainment. Other members of the community took part as audience, as objects of appeals for charitable contributions of food or money, and by extension, as part of the larger festive troupe into which the community itself was transformed during the time of the event. The event itself seems usually to have been built around a mock battle variously involving morris dancers, sword dancers, and dragons or other creatures, thereby making the street a mock battleground. Even long dancing,⁷ for example, by numerous couples in the streets of Wells, was led by the May lord and lady and was part of the street theatre of the May games and church ale that occurred in phases throughout the month. These long dances were a kind of festive progress and the participants saw themselves as followers of the May royalty. Games involving Robin Hood, May lords and ladies, and autumn and summer kings⁸ occurred, as the names would indicate, between late spring and autumn, most often between Whitsuntide and Midsummer. Similar processional entertainment, including hogging, took place during the winter and included door-to-door visits by a leader and troupe, usually between Christmas and Twelfth Night.⁹

Skimmingtons – another kind of processional show – were also common. They were processions 'accompanied by cacophonous drumming and music, with one or more men, sometimes costumed (frequently as women), and either walking, riding a horse (usually backwards or facing each other if there were two riders), sitting astride a pole, or being carried in a cart.'¹⁰ Communities sometimes used skimmingtons as a form of community justice through public humiliation for adultery or shrewishness, but they also used them for social and political purposes as well. Some skimmingtons were festive, as at Yeovil, where churchwardens willingly rode in great good cheer on a cowlstaff to the church house in 1607.¹¹ In this context, the ridings were good-natured street theatre used to express traditional community values and to deliver a mild warning (be generous in your giving or you could be publicly disgraced) by

symbolically capturing and releasing the vicar or a churchwarden. However, the greatest number of recorded skimmingtons in Somerset involved neither marital squabbles nor communal celebration but disputes over lands and properties or control of the local culture. Leaders of anti-enclosure riots in 1626–32 in Wiltshire and Somerset took the name ‘Lady Skimmington’ and authorities in court cases identified them by putting ‘alias skimmington’ after their surnames.¹² Clearly the skimmington was a malleable form that could be adapted for many purposes, but it was always a way of using a metaphorized leader and troupe to visually write a piece of justice, so to speak, onto the landscape of the parish.¹³

The replication of this form in communities of differing size can be seen clearly in the Robin Hood games. In the tiny village of Weston Zoyland, the Robin Hood game apparently included a parish breakfast, a drinking, and another game in which the troupe put the minister into the stocks and released him only when he had drunk a prescribed amount (a symbolic act of bonding with the troupe).¹⁴ In the large market and glove-making town of Yeovil, where the Robin Hood game was the principal means of fund-raising for the parish church, it involved at the least a street procession, an ale, and an entertainment in the church house. It featured a minimum of three characters – Robin Hood, Little John, and a sheriff – who apparently travelled in procession through the streets with a band of parishioners, drummers, and musicians and carried men, including churchwardens, on a cowlstaff to the church house. As part of this fund-raising game the troupe might stop people in the street and demand payment to avoid a ride on the cowlstaff. The route included a procession from the church, through the streets, to a dinner and entertainments at the church house. The records refer to several elements of costume and gear, including jerkins and gowns, ribbons of silk and lace, a horn for Little John, a sword for the sheriff, and arrows for Robin Hood, which seem to have been part of a permanent stock owned by the parish. Robin Hood also provided drink to the bell-ringers on Ascension Day, perhaps implying that they too might have been thought of as members of Robin Hood’s band.¹⁵

In Yeovil the position and title of Robin Hood was reserved for the most senior members of the local civic oligarchy, specifically those who had earlier served as senior churchwardens. That the game dramatized an assertion of control over the landscape of the town can be seen in the complaint of a puritan-leaning resident in 1607 whom the band confronted in the street (as they did any passing horseman or walker who chanced by), demanding a contribution from him, pursuing him into a house when he refused, and threatening him, as did the shrieve, who drew his sword when the man would not take part in the game.¹⁶

In the city of Wells, the description of the Robin Hood game is less detailed. We know only that Robin Hood had a band of considerable size that in 1607 staged an event in the market square at the end of May – an event separate from the May games, which were presided over by the May lord and lady. We do know that the Robin Hood game in Wells was one component in an array of games and guild shows cooperatively mounted by parish and town between May 1 and Midsummer Day. And we know that guild shows in Wells involved civic, parish, and cathedral officials leading processional entertainments, travelling over carefully prescribed routes that took them from a guild's street or verdery to the church house and back again via the market square, with shows enacted en route, and in the market square and the church house. The dignitaries leading the entertainments represented the three centers of power in the city; the routes reflected the unity among those three elements of the community; and the content of the shows dramatized the legendary history of the guilds in the context of biblical and national history and myth. They were inherently a statement of authority and control in representational form over the landscape of the town. The Robin Hood game, occurring in the context of, and midway through, the May games and the June shows, must have had contextual meaning and formal structure similar to the rest of the Wells shows and most probably included the enactment of a mock battle including sword dances, since that seems to have been the central element in several other of the shows in Wells.¹⁷ In form and purpose, then, there seems very little difference between Robin Hood games in the villages, towns, or cathedral city of Somerset.

All of these traditional, civic-sponsored entertainments, whether Robin Hood events or May game and feast day revels offered the opportunity for locals to use the spectacle of movement, music, dance, and simple costuming to merge the church and community into a single charitable play world, where funds could be gathered to finance parish services. This kind of community drama used the landscape itself. Churchyards and greens were transformed – mainly through the election of mock royalty and the setting up of maypoles and bowers – into small kingdoms of sport, dance, and play. May bowers such as those at Old Cleeve in 1619, Priston in 1588, and Wells in 1634 often stood for a month.¹⁸ Actors used some gear and costuming in all of this (bells for the morris dancers, jerkins, hoods, staves, and bows for Robin Hood's band), but the representation seems to have been generated mainly by word, action, and movement.

Evidence of that use of the landscape survives in a number of 'playstreets', such as those at Axbridge, Bickenhall, Combe St Nicholas, and Exford, apparently so named because they were traditionally associated with games,

sports, or parish folk play. But ordinary streets – with the high cross in the market square as one focal point – certainly were a factor in the course of traditional, processional entertainment in Glastonbury, Taunton, Weston Zoyland, and Yeovil, among others.¹⁹ Streets could function in this context as month-long playing places with maypoles and bowers set up in front of someone's door. Such actions had the metaphorical effect of transforming the street into a revelling place, the visual impact of which should not be underestimated.

Open country, too, could become a playing place using inter-community processional entertainments, some of which were May games and parish fund-raisers taking the form of mock musters with battles, dancing, and speeches. The classic incidence of such activity is the extravaganza mounted by Thomas Coryate of Odcombe on Whitsunday in 1606, which, along with other examples, is discussed below.

Built as they were around symbolic battle followed by ceremonial reconciliation and triumphal march through the community, these events must have had a riveting, even intimidating dimension, and seem to have been as much a statement about control of the landscape as they were a form of festive entertainment. But before the Reformation there was apparently no doubt in anyone's mind that these were mimetic games, not insurrections. In form, the election of summer lords and Robin Hoods, the holding of mock musters and mock battles, sword dances, and skimmingtons parodied the vocabulary and processes of mobilization and war. Indeed, mobilizations and military training were a fact of county life in a realm constantly under the threat of foreign invasion or domestic insurrection during the sixteenth century. In theme and purpose, however, these entertainments seem principally to have been communal celebrations of Christian charity, civic pride, and neighbourly reconciliation, enacted within the context of the battle between the fallen world and the world redeemed by Christ. They generated, rather than destroyed, the idea of community in pre-Reformation society.

But during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, they began to mirror a growing social factionalism and seem to have evolved in fits and starts from celebratory games into stratagems in the political, legal, sometimes literal battles for control of the cultural and physical landscape. Proponents and opponents alike increasingly used the games as instruments in political and other struggles, thereby changing many aspects of their uses and forms. The evidence suggests that the literal and theatrical vocabulary of the games increasingly became a political statement for both sides, emphasizing militaristic imagery and actions, and expressing threat and intimidation in an emerging 'theatre of conflict' in the countryside.

The evidence for the largest of these games and the most large-scale conflict comes from Wells, and from communities in an arc from Taunton through Milborne Port, clustering most impressively in the south-east part of the county bordering Dorset and Wiltshire, an area notable for its large estates and arable land. But literally hundreds of incidents in smaller towns and villages turn up in court records. Neither size alone nor the region of the county determined whether social upheaval related to traditional entertainments would occur within a given community. Several of these incidents can serve to illustrate the conflict and the evolving uses of the games.

In 1606, a courtier named Thomas Coryate, of Odcombe, Somerset, served as lord of a Whitsun ale that travelled from Odcombe to Yeovil, some three miles away. He then wrote and published a pamphlet dedicated to the royal family, proudly describing the event in great detail, and including both the text of the lengthy oration that he, as summer lord, had made to the residents of Yeovil, and a second oration that he had delivered welcoming the 'Yeovillians', as he called them, when they travelled to Odcombe.²⁰

To replenish the church stock he, as summer lord or 'Captaine', had chosen one hundred 'good fellows' of the parish who mustered at 6 AM on Whitsunday at Odcombe Cross. With all manner of weapons and martial music, and he upon a white horse, they marched toward Yeovil, where they were met outside town by two 'cohorts' from Yeovil, one masculine, the other feminine, which Coryate claimed, 'encountered vs like a company of Amazones'. After two or three volleys of shot by both sides and 'a prettie kinde of velitation or light skirmish' both sides descended the hill into town and staged a second skirmish 'vmbraticall and imaginarie'. Then Coryate, with music, ascended to a high place near the town cross, beneath a canopy, where he brandished a sword, and delivered an oration to at least 2,000 people from many parishes there around.²¹

His extraordinary oration addressed all the assembled throng as friends and confederates, expressed his love for their town, apologized for the boldness of his troop, and stressed emphatically that they came not as an army to conquer and pillage, but to offer themselves in a league of friendship, and to fulfill a religious purpose: to spend their own money at Yeovil's Whitsun ale for the benefit of Yeovil Church, in hope that the Yeovillians in their turn would reciprocate by coming to Odcombe. His oration then offered an elaborate legalistic and historical defence of church ales as creating order, comparing them to Roman and Greek rites and to early Christian feasts of charity that had been used for two purposes in ancient times: to breed love between neighbours and to raise a stock for the church. He warned that excesses at ales

must be avoided and urged those present to season the ale with 'pleasant conceits'. As captain or duke, he then commanded them to forget past injuries, to be merry, to spend money, and to join hands to form a 'league of love'.²²

Coryate's pamphlet then followed with a second oration that he claimed to have given when a similar troupe from Yeovil later visited his smaller, rural parish of Odcombe. It reflects reciprocity and stresses the same themes outlined above, while apologizing for Odcombe's modest means, having no 'Bulles, nor Beares, nor Apes'²³ with which to divert them (seeming, thereby, to suggest that those diversions may have been present at the Yeovil ale).

Several implications arise from his description. It seems unlikely that one would need to make so elaborate a defence of a cultural practice unless it were already under attack. Dedicated, as his pamphlet was, to the king, and supported by numerous commendatory poems from local gentry and courtiers, his effort appears to reflect a royalist defence of traditional games eventually articulated in the Book of Sports. It also resonates with local events. Yeovil had one of the notable Robin Hood traditions in the county (though absent from Yeovil churchwarden's accounts after 1578–9), but in the year following this spectacle, the Yeovil churchwardens were presented at the Quarter Sessions for allowing those games. One wonders if those Quarter Sessions presentments were not a counter response to the huge inter-parish ales in 1606. The churchwardens' accuser in 1607, a reform-minded local, claimed that the officers of the Robin Hood troupe had called him puritan and assaulted him because he refused to participate. Coryate's event vividly illustrates the use of the landscape in these entertainments as a way of expressing an historic bond between parishes and perhaps of making other more political statements as well.

Reflecting the ever-more-contentious social environment in the decades leading up to the Civil War, opponents of these games increasingly tended to describe them as a military manoeuvre, attempting thereby to redefine them as a kind of insurrection or riotous and unlawful assembly. For example, in 1606 William Walton of Cannington brought suit in the court of Star Chamber accusing John Parham of Poyntington and his son, Sir Edward Parham of Milborne Port, with procuring 300 'Rioutous and Routous' men – their friends, tenants, popish recusants, and Papists – armed with muskets, calivers, pikes, long staffs with blades, and armour in Milborne Port, where they marched and skirmished in 'tumultious and warlicke order' with trumpets, drums, and ensigns, to the house of John Parham two miles distant in Poyntington, and skirmished again.²⁴ It caused, Walton said, great terror to see such popish recusants exercised and trained in such martial manner. The men, he said, were then entertained and feasted by John Parham, and they shouted that they would live and die with Sir Edward Parham. The Parhams,

it was further charged, had similarly assembled 200 or 300 – sometimes 5,000 persons – sundry other times and places as well, including at South Cadbury where they had ‘vttered, vndecent speches agaynst the grave preachers in these partes’. Further they had procured bull baitings and morris dances, at which Sir Edward had been one of the dancers. These events, Walton charged, revealed the Parhams’ ‘inward purpose of chaunge’ and their wish to win the love and affection of the common people at the expense of the preachers.²⁵

In contrast, John and Edward Parham and their compatriots in the games described the event not as a military manoeuvre but as a traditional church feast or ale, held on Monday of Whitsun week to raise funds to repair the parish church and bell at Milborne Port.²⁶ John Parham estimated the number at sixty to eighty substantial householders (yeomen and gentlemen), plus diverse boys and youths, marching in merriment ‘after the fashion of a Maye game’. The further purpose, he said, was to nourish love and familiarity among neighbours, and he further said that after the event occurred, the participants returned to their parish church for morning prayer (so it occurred early in the morning). According to other witnesses, Sir Edward and men of Poyntington, a few days later, similarly skirmished ‘in merry & sportfull man^{er}’ on the downs with the men of Milborne Port, then went to an ale in that parish.²⁷

Clearly the spectacle of mock skirmishes and alarums in the fields near Milborne Port caused concern on the part of the complainant, who saw them as threatening political statements about control of the land. He sought to describe them as a military riot, thus a form of insurrection. All his description is in military terms, from muster to marching to battle. Yet the event could hardly have been perceived as a threat by the Crown: King James knighted Edward Parham less than two months later. For their part, the participants themselves described the event in distinctly unmilitary terms as a traditional ale (in purpose) and May game (in form), though held in mid-June. However, the fact that speeches at a similar event were made against preachers at South Cadbury (where several influential members of the puritan gentry lived) indicates the presence of an element of political conflict that makes the protestations of the participants seem a little disingenuous. The Parhams and Waltons were themselves local gentry linked by marriage and property. In their divergent descriptions of the event can be seen two factions using a traditional fund-raising game in a way that turned it from a form of mock conflict and reconciliation into a vehicle for expressing literal political and religious conflict played out upon the land itself.

A series of ales at Skilgate and Taunton, further illustrates this use of traditional games moving over broad expanses of land as a blunt tactical

instrument by both sides, this example showing that the process was already current in the area near Taunton by the 1590s.²⁸ This series of ales grew out of a dispute involving Roger Sydenham of Skilgate, a ranger, versus Humphrey Sydenham, lord of the manor at Dulverton, plus several notables from Skilgate, collectively charged by Roger and by the chief forester, Sir John Poyntz (of Iron Acton, Gloucester), with illegally taking the king's deer from the forest of Exmoor. To raise funds for their defence (it was charged by Roger in a subsequent case), the defendants organized a church ale in Skilgate church house for Tuesday of Easter week in 1592, which event they advertised in 16 or 17 parishes, including Taunton (more than 15 miles distant).

There must also have been religious issues involved in the dispute because the plaintiff, Roger Sydenham, who was also churchwarden of Skilgate, disliking the publication of the church ale in the church and the storing of ale in the church house, took it upon himself to remove the ale, destroying some of it in the process. The organizers then broke into the church house, replaced the ale, and held the church ale. In his suit in Star Chamber, Roger charged that Humphrey Sydenham had required the trained soldiers under his command (some one hundred from various parishes) to muster and, from fear of their captain's displeasure, to repair to the ale at Skilgate and spend their money there. The suit described the revelers as riotous great troops and companies. It further charged that Humphrey Sydenham had organized similar events, including a bidale, between 1589 and 1591.

Though described by its opponent in stark military terms, other sections of the bill make clear that the event was not a muster at all but an event similar to the ales described earlier at Odcombe and Milborne Port. The organizers had appointed a lad to stand watch on a hill at Skilgate, and when the visiting company approached, to run into the church, which he did, crying out loudly, '[T]hey are com~~m~~e they are com~~m~~e', whereupon the organizers ordered the service to cease, the bells to be rung, and bagpipes to be played.²⁹ The parishioners then went out from the church to greet the approaching company and went with them to the church ale (which raised £60).

Sydenham's suit also charged that the same group of 'rioters' had similarly descended upon a fair at Taunton in 1589 (which would explain why men of Taunton later came to Skilgate), 'vnder color of a *certainne* pretended title' (which may describe a summer lord), illegally collected goods and money (which sounds like a gathering for an ale), and assaulted the bailiff and his deputies (including Roger Sydenham) who tried to stop them.³⁰ The plaintiff described all of the events as forms of riot led by a band of thugs, but that seems unlikely since several of the organizers were part of the ruling oligarchy in their own communities. It can be observed that the events described in this suit

occurred shortly before the appearance of the first surviving order prohibiting ales in 1594 by the reform-minded lord chief justice, Sir John Popham, and several local justices of the peace, including Sir George Sydenham of Combe Sydenham in Stogumber. One suspects that this suit was really part of an ongoing attempt to suppress traditional ales in the area. In this case mock musters and church ales seem to have moved a good way from festive, symbolic battle to literal contest for control of parish land and buildings. It might also be noted that these several violent, entertainment-related encounters occurring in or near 1606 took place in communities with utterly dissimilar terrain. Some were in open fields, some on remote slopes or in market towns, some in a cathedral city with narrow streets and built in rocky hill country.

A number of smaller incidents further illustrate the confrontational and militaristic context into which these traditional games increasingly fell, becoming literal skirmishes and political statements about ownership of the landscape. In a land dispute at Wraxall in 1615, an armed group was accused of having assaulted and driven a man from a fourteen-acre tract, and then having set up a cabin or cottage, brought ale, hired minstrels, danced, and revelled for an indeterminate period. The armed group were locals who felt that property had been finessed away from them by those skilled at manipulating the law.³¹ In 1608 a remarkably similar case occurred at Frome where an armed group of men and *women* drove its holders from a piece of property, claiming that they had been cheated out of ownership, then published and scattered libellous ballads about their opponents.³² At Shepton Mallet in 1633, after the Book of Sports had been republished, a man was presented during an archepiscopal visitation for saying that all who went to revels were rebels acting contrary to the laws of God.³³ Locals elsewhere were presented for invading the parish church with entertainments. At Bawdrip in 1585, claiming authority from Baron Poulett, the churchwardens and others set a Maypole atop the church steeple at a Whitsun ale. A similar incident occurred at the nearby parish of Pawlett in 1587. At Catcott in 1600–1, a maypole was brought into the church, where knells were rung for it. At Holford in 1588, revelers brought a cavil staff into the church; at Middlezoy in 1604 they insisted on playing bagpipes in honour of the king.³⁴ Numerous other confrontations concerning maypoles occurred between parishioners, disputing whether they should be allowed or taken down. In many respects, entertainment had become a form of battle for literal control of the land and properties.

Summary

The records cited here convincingly show that the principal form of traditional civic-sponsored entertainment in Somerset and other parts of the southwest was not the cycle play, but a kind of traditional mimesis built around a troupe, a leader, and a mock-contest that used the entire landscape of the parish as its stage. Contrary to the arguments of David Underdown cited above, there is little evidence that the form and kind of entertainment differed in nucleated versus dispersed communities, nor in areas of arable or communal agriculture as opposed to areas of pastoral agriculture and artisan employment. Evidence of May games, baitings, and processional entertainments (with Robin Hoods and/or summer lords) occurs in every region of the county. It is only variations on the form that seem determined by local factors. Urban settings (such as Yeovil, Wells, or Glastonbury, all cited above) involved processional movement through the streets and around the market cross en route to the church house; villages (such as Dundry, Pawlett, or Sampford Brett) seem to have used church and churchyard and/or village greens, and sometimes to have processed between mother church and chapelry or other dependencies; parishes in areas of large open fields or on remote hills (such as Milborne Port or Skilgate respectively, both cited above) made mimetic use of those expanses – but all within the context of universally understood parish values and similar forms of performance.³⁵

Nor, as some scholars have recently argued, do conflicts that developed seem explainable in terms of class conflict, as between oligarchy and workmen. Instead, the evidence shows that conflict cut across all class lines, pitting defenders of traditional culture (oligarchy and workmen alike) against those who were reform-minded, a basic pattern intermixed with and triggered by a host of personal, economic, and religious factors unique to each community. For example, people who had recently moved into a community from elsewhere for economic reasons – perhaps to work in the cloth industry (as at Wells) – often seem to have had very little sympathy for the local May games and guild shows. A vicar interested in claiming the rights to income from timber near the churchyard (as occurred at Chew Magna and Dundry) might well oppose May games that, by necessity, involved the lopping and dressing of valuable trees.³⁶ Or warring egos such as Sir Robert Phelips of Montacute and John, Lord Paulett of Hinton St George, might defend or seek to prohibit May games as part of a political agenda and personal rivalries.³⁷

Also apparent in the records is a gradual evolution in form, content, and purpose within the entertainments themselves, from celebratory entertainment into a kind of political theatre by local residents. Surely not everyone in

pre-Reformation England liked or approved of traditional entertainments. The Church itself had certainly found it necessary to suppress such activity through statutes issued periodically from the thirteenth century on prohibiting entertainments and their excesses in churches or on church property (apparently with little sustained effect). Violent incidents sometimes ignited in the volatile mix of ale and revelling. But on balance, pre-Reformation society apparently approved of traditional parish entertainments, if rightly conducted as good and godly activities. There seems to have been no formal program to suppress them; otherwise, records of such entertainments would not have been so freely and copiously recorded in pre-Reformation parish, civic, and household records. But the effects on the entertainments themselves of efforts to criminalize traditional culture can clearly be seen in later records. Initially entertainments were forbidden on Sundays and feast days, and on church properties, then hounded out of every alternative time and venue into which they moved. Their very association with earlier Catholic culture made them ideologically problematic in reform England. In that context, and for economic reasons as well, one can see evidence of the entertainments changing in form and purpose from celebratory to punitive forms and being used in various new ways by advocates of one kind or another.

In his book *In Contempt of All Authority*, Buchanan Sharp has shown that artisan leaders of riots against deforestation and food shortages in the West Country (especially the rural broadcloth making area of Somerset near the Wiltshire-Dorset borders) used the name 'Lady Skimmington' and wore women's dresses during the riots, thereby linking the political theatre and traditional entertainments to economic issues as well.³⁸ Enemies of the games applied the vocabulary of riot, disorder, and treason in attempting to redefine them as criminal activities. Supporters defended them with a vocabulary of celebration, communal love, peace, and harmony, while using them to mock and excoriate their opponents, and assert the legitimacy of their own claims. In the process, one might argue, the form itself evolved from a theatrical metaphor for the defeat of disorder into a literal expression of social disintegration.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of these issues as they relate to the celebration of Corpus Christi in the West Country, see Alexandra F. Johnston, 'Corpus Christi in the West Country', p. 15 above.

- 2 Unless otherwise indicated, all the instances of entertainments cited in this article can be found in James Stokes with Robert J. Alexander (eds), *Somerset, including Bath*, 2 vols, REED (Toronto, 1996), where the records are arranged alphabetically by location, and chronologically within each location.
- 3 David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985), 75 and 83–9.
- 4 James Coleman, 'Beating the Bounds, Out Parish of St Cuthbert's, Wells', *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries* 7 (1894), 268–71 and 297–8.
- 5 See, for example, Tintinull in Edmund Hobhouse (ed), *Church-wardens' Accounts of Croscombe, Pilton, Yatton, Tintinhull, Morebath, and St. Michael's, Bath, Ranging from A. D. 1349 to 1560*. Somerset Record Society 4 (1890), 183.
- 6 On inter-parish processional activities, see Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 2.492, 500–1, and 641–3. For more on parish fund-raising in Somerset, see Katherine L. French, *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese* (Philadelphia, 2001), 99–141, which offers a much-expanded version of her 'Parochial Fund-raising in Late Medieval Somerset', *The Parish in English Life 1400–1600*, Katherine L. French, Gary G. Gibbs, and Beat A. Kümin (eds) (Manchester, 1997), 115–32.
- 7 The furry dance performed in Helston, Cornwall, annually on 8 May, seems similar to long dances held in Wells; see James Reeves (ed), *The Everlasting Circle* (London, 1960), 147–9.
- 8 See analyses of these festivities in Bath and Tintinhull in Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 2.477–8, 500, and 926–7.
- 9 For description and detailed examples of hoggling, see Appendix 4 of Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 2.641–708.
- 10 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 2.477.
- 11 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.411–12.
- 12 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 2.477.
- 13 For standard references concerning skimmingtons, see Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 2.614–15.
- 14 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.388–9.
- 15 For references to the Yeovil Robin Hood, see Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.405–12, 2.481–2, and 965–72.
- 16 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.411–12.
- 17 For more on Robin Hood and the Wells shows of 1607, see Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.261–367; 2.480.
- 18 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.201–2, 208–9, 384–5.
- 19 For references to those playstreets, see The National Archives, Public Record Office [NA,PRO]: E 326/B 9585 (Axbridge); NA, PRO: C3 23/8 and NA,

- PRO: PROB 6 14A, f 44 (Bickenhall); Somerset Record Office [SRO]: DD/SAS SE 86, p 19 (Combe St Nicholas); SRO: D/D/Cd 55, f [147] (Exford). For Glastonbury, Taunton, Weston Zoyland, and Yeovil respectively, see Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.129–36, 227–9, 388–9, and 411–13.
- 20 Extracts from the pamphlet Coryate published appear with Odcombe record entries in Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.189–200. The following paragraphs in the main text refer to this document.
- 21 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.190 and 1.189; 1.190; 1.190.
- 22 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.193; 1.195.
- 23 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.200; for all of Coryate's second oration, see 1.196–200.
- 24 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.167; see 1.167–8 for the bill of complaint in *Walton v. Parham et al.*
- 25 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.168; 1.168.
- 26 For the Parhams' answer to the bill of complaint discussed here, see Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.168–9.
- 27 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.168; 1.169; see 1.169–70 for the examination of John Beaton.
- 28 The account of these ales appears with Skilgate record entries in Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.212–19. The following paragraphs in the main text refer to this document.
- 29 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.215.
- 30 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.217.
- 31 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.398.
- 32 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.121–4.
- 33 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.211–12.
- 34 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.32, 202–3, 71–2, 140, and 165.
- 35 For examples from Dundry, Pawlett, and Samford Brett, see Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.100–5, 202–3, and 210–11.
- 36 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.100–5 and 77–8.
- 37 Stokes with Alexander, *Somerset*, 1.439–46 and 2.977–80.
- 38 Buchanan Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority: Rural Artisans and Riot in the West of England, 1586–1660* (Berkeley, 1980) 86–109.