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Performance, Politics, and Culture in the Southwest of Britain, 1350-1642: Historian's Response

To begin with the obvious: drama is a communal art. Performance is a group activity. As such, it is the product of some kind of communal effort, and expresses, or seeks to influence, communal opinion, beliefs, and preconceptions. The records of past dramatic performances should therefore offer promising material for social and economic historians, whose subject is the organization of communities, and for political and cultural historians interested in the formulation, communication, and actualization of ideas and norms. The studies presented in volume six of *Early Theatre* amply fulfil this promise.

As Gloria Betcher writes in her Editorial in *ET* 6.1, the inspiration for the volume came from the 'closing' of REED's survey of southwest Britain (6.1: 9). The result is a collection which, as Betcher also observes, highlights the great diversity of a region that encompassed a wide range of landforms, economies, and cultures, and whose single unifying characteristic might be no more than its remoteness from London (6.2: 10) – but even this is debatable, since the region's most important towns, such as Bristol, Exeter, and Salisbury, enjoyed close relationships with the metropolis. As revealed by a number of the contributions, notably those by Betcher, Rosalind Hays, and Sally-Beth MacLean, mere distance was less important than accessibility in determining the patterns of contact within the region (6.2, *passim*). While these studies of touring players have necessarily concentrated on overland routes, if the geographical area covered by this volume can be seen as one functioning region at all, then it must surely be waterborne transport that held it together: the great highway provided by the Severn and the Bristol Channel, with its tributary rivers, and the south coast of England from Land's End to Southampton. While Betcher's minstrels, morris dancers, and players seem to have had little need to ply the waterways of Cornwall on their journeys within the county (6.2: 33–55), David Klausner's versifying Welsh apprentice (6.2: 62–3) probably reached Bristol by boat rather than the difficult overland route through

Gloucester. However, the constraints and opportunities presented by the routeways discussed here remind us that at the more local level – the level at which most of the inhabitants of the region experienced it – local identities and associations were shaped by the ease, or otherwise, of communication. The economic or social historian might wish to place the itineraries of touring companies, such as those described by MacLean (6.2: 17–32), within the context of networks of commercial and social contact, which can be reconstructed from the evidence of credit transactions, or with the distribution of alehouses, taverns, and inns recoverable from the 1577 census of licensed premises and seventeenth-century publicans' recognizances. Did the touring companies follow the same routes as other travellers, and where did they stay along the way?

The production of detailed, tightly-focused studies within a region of such diversity might well reveal important exceptions to the big picture based on national or county-wide surveys. While MacLean's interpretation of the diminishing opportunities for touring companies in the southwest (6.2: 22–6) accords with the historiographical orthodoxy of growing 'puritan' pressure – even allowing for many historians' unease at the use of this convenient shorthand – for C. E. McGee, the restrictions placed on traditional performance in Dorset resulted at least as much from 'rationalization' as from puritan reaction: levying rates was simply a more efficient form of revenue raising than holding church ales (6.1: 56). A similar 'rationalist' approach seems to have governed local fund-raising elsewhere in the region as well. Not only did the town of Sherborne, as described by Hays, abandon church ales and home-grown performance efforts in preference to professional, itinerant players, who paid for the privilege of performing (6.2: 84), but the local rates of Salisbury, according to Audrey Douglas, simply made the old practices irrelevant, rather than necessarily repugnant (6.1: 75–6). In passing, it is worth repeating Douglas's point about the deleterious effect such 'rationalization' had on women's opportunities (6.1: esp. 73–4); in contrast to Hocktide celebrations, church ales, and other communal activities, rate-collecting was a male monopoly.¹ There is an obvious need to distinguish between 'puritanism' as a religious position on the one hand, and a bundle of related social attitudes such as the desire for greater social discipline, whether expressed as enhanced respect for the sabbath, disapproval of drunkenness, or increased apprehension of disorder at public performances, on the other. These latter attitudes, while often associated with 'puritanism' as a religious position, should not be seen as only having been held by puritans.

Several contributors acknowledge their debt to Ronald Hutton's classic studies of early modern popular culture, but some of them also suggest ways in which his model of the decline of 'merry England' might be challenged – or at least fine-tuned – through detailed case studies that can take due account of local political and social contexts.² Particularly intriguing examples of this – surely in the 'fine-tuning' rather than 'challenging' category – are Yeovil's revival of its Robin Hoods and Sherborne's Corpus Christi play, new-forged in the early 1570s, about a decade later than Hutton's work would have us expect (see Stokes 6.1 and Hays 6.2). The reason for such an apparently anachronistic late-flowering must lie in particular local circumstances. James Stokes's article provides a corrective – or enhancement – to David Underdown's famous 'chalk and cheese' division of Somerset, since performance patterns within the county show no significant correlation with these regions.³ In addition, Stokes finds little evidence of the contending parties in disputes over public performances dividing along class lines; rather, the dichotomy seems to be between 'new-comers' and 'locals' (6.1: 46). Finally, Alexandra Johnston's challenge to the notion of a generic 'Corpus Christi play' may come as something of a surprise to those historians who have not kept up with the literature on early drama (6.1: 15-34).

For historians, perhaps the most exciting aspect of these studies is what they reveal about local politics. Several of these articles show performance as a sort of lightning-conductor for latent conflict. In her examination of early fifteenth-century Exeter, Johnston explores how public display and spectacle were used to challenge or reinforce territorial and jurisdictional claims in a struggle between civic and ecclesiastical authorities (6.1: 24–9). Here are interesting parallels with David Mills's work on Chester, since in both cities the processional route may have been seen as making a political point by staking a claim to disputed territory. In both cities the Corpus Christi festivities were associated with the Church, those at Whitsuntide with the civic authorities. In early sixteenth-century Chester the Corpus Christi celebrations were effectively hijacked and sublimated to the civic Whitsun festivities.⁴

Performance could certainly be politically charged before the Reformation; during and after it (assuming that we can talk about a 'post-Reformation' period as existing before 1642), public drama appears to have attracted increasingly intense and frequent disputes. These were not always of a purely religious nature. The 'civic takeover' of parochial display in Salisbury, and the appropriation of the cathedral as the focus of civic ritual, as described by Douglas (6.1: 78ff.), perhaps could not have happened outside of the context of the Reformation, but the tension between civic and ecclesiastical authorities

does not seem to have been generated essentially by religious differences. St Osmund, whose remains lay in the cathedral, became a symbol of civic pride among the lay elite. What was going on in Salisbury was a process of aggrandizement by the mayor and common council; this was at the cost of the episcopal authority, but guild autonomy also suffered, as illustrated by the appropriation of the Tailors' giant to become the 'Salisbury Giant'.

The century from the Henrician Reformation to the Civil Wars saw growing pressure on economic resources, and particularly on customary rights to property. As Stokes shows, the skimmington was a common weapon in defence of communal interests against enclosure. In Wraxall the popular assertion of property rights was accompanied by minstrelsy. Conversely, in Yeovil (and probably in Wells) the archetypal popular hero, Robin Hood, was used by the civic elite to dramatize 'an assertion of control over the landscape of the town' (6.1: 38). The manipulation of church ales and other traditional communal festivities in the course of gentry conflicts over property and politics – as instanced by the Walton-Parham and Sydenham disputes – further illustrates how the elite could use popular cultural forms for their own purposes, or rather, how our distinction between 'elite' and 'popular' culture would not have been recognized in pre-modern societies.

Stokes describes the increasing politicization of performance as the transition 'from a theatrical metaphor for the defeat of disorder into a literal expression of social disintegration' (6.1: 49). While one would not wish to demur from this elegant formulation in general terms, the growth of documentation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in particular the proliferation of detailed Star Chamber testimonies, may create the impression of a greater gulf between pre- and post-Reformation behaviour than was actually the case. While on the one hand it was in the interests of plaintiffs before conciliar or common-law courts to stress, or invent, the violent behaviour of their adversaries – hence, perhaps, the occasional portrayal of church ales as riots – on the other hand the frequency with which genuinely aggressive acts were attended by minstrelsy may prompt us to look again at the culture of popular protest in the later middle ages. Satirical songs and, allegedly, dance accompanied the hated duke of Suffolk's corpse as it was carried through Kent in 1450, while ballads evidently encouraged the 1381 rebels. Political songs were probably widely sung during the Wars of the Roses. The well-organized and quite-blatant mass trespasses and poaching expeditions that formed part of many aristocratic turf wars may well have taken on the character of dramatic performance.⁵ Perhaps the link between performance, politics, and conflict was

more pronounced in pre-Reformation society than is apparent from the evidence.

However, it would be unwise to attempt to downplay the importance of religious conflict in these studies. Protector Somerset's regime saw the demise of many forms of communal performance. As Stokes points out, the association between Catholicism and many aspects of popular performance resulted in the latter's inevitable suppression (6.1: 47). For all that Sherborne's new Corpus Christi play of Lot's wife and Sodom had been designed to be anodyne, it may still have been too much for mainstream opinion in the mid 1570s (6.2: 83 and 86). However, as Thomas Coryate's story (related by Stokes and Hays) suggests, in Jacobean England it was not a simple case of Crown and aristocracy ranged against popular traditions. In many ways it was quite the reverse, as illustrated by the king's sponsorship of *The Book of Sports* in 1617. Klausner's interpretation of Philip Bowen's dramatic production in Llanelli churchyard in 1604 combines the two themes of performance as an expression of conflict and the subversive potential of popular drama, since this theatrical event took place as part of a violent feud and was of an overtly Catholic nature, designed to offend the sensibilities of Bowen's more orthodox opponents (6.2: 64–5).

This response cannot do justice to the richness and variety of the studies in this volume. More themes, and many more questions, are raised than I have been able to address. One of the most exciting developments in recent historiography is the convergence between literary studies and the work of political and social historians. The present volume is a fine example of this most-welcome trend. The contributors, aside from Hays, are not employed in history departments, yet they demonstrate a command of the record sources that would satisfy the most exacting historian. One might venture to suggest, not excepting oneself, that historians' command of literary sources is rarely as complete.

Notes

- 1 Discussed in Gervase Rosser, 'Myth, Image, and Social Process in the English Medieval Town', *Urban History*, 23 (1996), 5–25.
- 2 In particular, Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994).
- 3 David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985).

- 4 David Mills, 'The Chester Mystery Plays: Truth and Tradition', *Courts, Counties, and the Capital in the Later Middle Ages*, Diana E. S. Dunn (ed) (Stroud and New York, 1996), 1–26.
- 5 Isabel Harvey, 'Was There Popular Politics in Fifteenth-Century England?', *The MFarlane Legacy*, Richard H. Britnell and Anthony J. Pollard (eds) (Stroud and New York, 1995), 155–74.