Issues in Review

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Rethinking Performance in Early Modern England: Sources, Contexts, and Forms

Introduction: Rethinking Early Modern Performance
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This Early Theatre *Issues in Review section explores concepts of 'performance' in late medieval and early modern England. Responding to current work on drama, festivity and spectatorship, and to the ongoing editorial project Records of Early English Drama (REED), essays address questions such as: what constitutes performance in pre-modern contexts? where, and in what types of texts, can evidence of medieval and early modern performance be located? and what can rethinking ideas of performance and sources do for critical understanding of medieval and early modern culture and drama?*

At the centre of Pieter Brueghel the Younger's painting *A Village Festival* is a play in performance on a temporary stage.[1] A sizeable crowd of villagers raptly watches a scene unfold in which a monk and a woman, both seated at a table, kiss, while a man looks on covertly from a basket which another man is carrying on his back.[2] Behind a curtained partition we can just make out several other figures, apparently assisting with the performance.[3] We can even identify the play: this scene is from the *rederijker* drama *Cluijte van Plaijerwater*, or *The Wonderwater Farce*, in which a peasant is sent away by his wife on a spurious errand but returns secretly to his house hidden in a basket carried by his friend in time to catch his

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wife committing adultery.[4] Rather unsurprisingly, Brueghel's depiction of a play in performance is the part of *A Village Festival* that has received the most attention from theatre historians and scholars, but a closer look at the painting reveals that it also depicts many other, offstage performances.[5] On one side of the composition villagers dance to the music of a pipe- and drum-player, while on the other a group dance in pairs to a bagpipe; meanwhile, crossbowmen make their way towards the upper centre of the painting led by a drummer and followed by men carrying pennants and statues of the festival's patron saints Anthony and Hubert. Villagers are also partaking in a wide range of festive pastimes, including drinking, feasting, overindulging, flirting, shopping, playing games, gossiping, and watching everyone else.

Figure 1. Pieter Brueghel the Younger, *A Village Festival, With A Theatrical Performance and a Procession in Honour of St Hubert and St Anthony.* Oil on panel, 1632. © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

We should be wary of understanding Brueghel's painting as a depiction of an actual festival, or as a true-to-life record of events and activities that took place in a particular place at a particular time. Instead we might note the way in which the composition presents its viewers with a range of performances in addition to the staged play at its centre, and brings these activities into relationship with one another. This Issues in Review section attempts something similar. Drawing on manuscript and archival materials from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, its essays explore a wide range of medieval and early modern performance practices beyond the scripted drama performed in the London theatres and on tour in the regions. All of the essays 'rethink' performance in medieval and early modern culture in different ways: by proposing new types of early modern practice *as* performances, by examining and re-examining documents in which records of potential or actual early modern performance are found, and, implicitly and explicitly, by interrogating what 'performance' means in early modern contexts.

So what *is* — or what *was* — early modern performance? This is a large question for a short introduction, but we can begin with the obvious. To modern readers 'performance' is probably most comprehensible in relation to the representation or enactment of a dramatic composition, or of a specific ceremony or rite.[6] This use of the word was not in fact current before the 1670s, although, as Mary Thomas Crane has pointed out, the absence of the term need not imply the absence of the concept.[7] In early modern usage the word 'performance' (noun and verb) most often relates to *doing*: to the carrying out of an action.[8] The Porter in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for instance, remarks that lechery 'provokes, and unprovokes: it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance' (2.3.26–8).[9] As Crane notes, the words 'performance' (noun) and 'perform' (verb) in these early modern senses thereby 'incorporat[e] a concept of performativity, in that it involves turning something immaterial (a duty, a promise, a contract, the pattern of a ceremony) into a material thing', or, we might add, into social reality.[10] These definitions have a great deal in common with the heuristic understanding of performance proposed by anthropologists and theorists of performance such as Victor Turner and Richard Schechner in the second half of the twentieth century, foundational to the discipline of performance studies, and to the performative turn more broadly.[11] 'Performance' in this sense is those actions and practices which work to enact and strengthen social relationships and identity within particular human communities.[12]

Given the dizzying proliferation of meanings, implications, and scholarship around the word and concept(s) of 'performance' evidenced even in the paragraph above, why has this Issues in Review section chosen to title itself 'Rethinking

Performance', rather than (for instance), 'Rethinking Theatre'? While individual contributors offer slightly different takes on the relationships between perform-ance, drama, and theatre, I have chosen the term 'performance' because it is broad enough to evoke a range of early modern cultural and social practices that include specific scripted performances on stage without being confined to them, while nonetheless retaining a persistent association with scripted, staged drama. The term 'performance' thus has the potential to draw early modern performances of both stage- and non-stage-based varieties into dialogue, as several of the essays in this Issues in Review aim to do.

'Rethinking Performance' begins with Mark Chambers's essay '"Players" in Context: Determining Performance in Medieval Accountancy Records', which re-examines the late-medieval 'playerchamber' in the Benedictine priory of Finchale near Durham. Previously assumed by scholars to have been a chamber for the performance of 'dramatic representations, such as the Mysteries or Mir-acle plays of the age', the 'playerchamber', Chambers shows, was in fact a room in the monastery in which monks on 'holiday' from their duties at the main Benedictine monastery in Durham spent time in rest, dining, and recreation.[13] Chambers brings the 'playerchamber' back into its contemporary context through examining Finchale's detailed accounts and ordinances, which contain no records of payments for players or plays, and archaeological surveys of the site, which suggest that the small dimensions of the chamber render it an unlikely space for the production of mystery or miracle drama. 'Play' here is a loan word from the Latin *ludentibus*, referring to something like 'monks on holiday' or 'monks on recreation', rather than dramatic activity.[14] The case of Finchale alerts us to the difficulty of identifying instances of performance in surviving premodern records, and of what the nature of that 'performance' might be. As Chambers points out, in medieval monastic accounts it is often difficult to identify whether 'Rob*er*to le Taburer', for instance, was a tabor player paid for music, or a person surnamed 'le Taburer' paid for other services.[15] These problems can sometimes be solved through, as Chambers argues, 'recontextualising' records, but Finchale's 'playerchamber' also reveals the interpretative assumptions that modern scholars bring to bear on premodern sources, as well as the hierarchies of value that govern interpretation: surely part of the reason why the 'playerchamber' was persistently identified as a site for the performance of mystery and morality plays is because we would like it to be.

Chambers frames his discussion of Finchale in relation to the practices and methodologies of the Records of Early English Drama project (REED), the long-established scholarly undertaking which has pioneered the systematic collection

and study of the surviving historical evidence of 'dramatic, secular musical, and mimetic ceremonial performances' to 1642 across England, Wales, and Scotland, initially in printed red-bound volumes and now in 'born digital' format on its digital platform *REED Online*.[16] REED looms large in this Issues in Review, for three of its contributors, including the present writer, are editors.[17] Since its foundation in the 1970s REED has transformed our understanding of medieval and early modern drama and ceremony, and especially of theatrical touring and repertory, patronage culture, and the connection between London and the theatre in the provinces, in urban settlements, and in private households.[18] In the decades since its foundation the project has evolved its approach and its methodologies, expanding its source materials well beyond civic records into ecclesiastical records and household accounts, and including more context and critical commentary in its editions. These changes have come about partly through the experience of scholars working on and using the records, and partly through criticism of the 'bald nature' of the records presented in REED's earliest editions.[19] Chambers responds to these criticisms in his efforts to unpack the broader contexts of Finchale's records, and argues that 'recontextualizing' performance is not only a matter of including more of the original record, but also putting records into a multi-disciplinary frame, in which 'the records are merely a part — if a crucial one — in the wider study of early performance culture'.

But REED's central mission — to collect, transcribe, and edit historical records of 'dramatic, secular musical, and mimetic ceremonial performances' — brings us back to our opening question: what *is* performance; or, what *was* performance in medieval and early modern England, Wales, and Scotland? This is obviously a vital question for the REED project, since determining what is (and is not) performance directly shapes the materials included and excluded in REED collections. The next two essays engage directly with REED's definitions of performance, making the case for widening its current remit. As REED's description of its mission quoted above shows, to be included as records of performance in its collections records have traditionally had to demonstrate that *mimetic* activity specifically took place. As Matthew Woodcock points out in his essay 'Perambulation and Performance in Early Modern Festive Culture', this criterion recalls the conception of drama set out by E.K. Chambers in *The Medieval Stage*, which, as Woodcock says, 'asserted that dialogue, impersonation, and action are necessary defining characteristics of dramatic activity'.[20] Evidently if performance is understood as mimetic in this sense, a great number of early modern festival and recreational practices do not qualify. Woodcock's essay is on one such activity: the perambulation, a central feature of Rogationtide observances in early modern

England, which typically involved the procession of parishioners around the parish boundaries, sometimes with singing, and the ritualized 'beating' of the bounds of the parish, followed by feasting and conviviality. As Woodcock shows, perambulations are a particularly difficult type of event for REED because of the origins of Rogationtide in liturgical, rather than secular, practice, as well as their non-mimetic format. One way of dealing with this problem is to make the case that perambulations and processions *are* mimetic, even deliberately 'dramatic'. Woodcock suggests, however, that performance need not be mimetic, and that it is the former concept which should inform inclusion in REED. He therefore proposes that we understand perambulation as a 'vital for[m] of performance whereby a community affirmed and celebrated its own identity, and (to apply Robert Tittler's useful phrase) "performed or represented itself to itself"'.[21]

In this case the answer to our central question 'what is performance?' would be 'the carrying-out of particular actions or activities in a particular community or setting for specific, often public, purposes'; or, in Meg Twycross's wording, 'sustaining a particular type of behaviour in public for effect'.[22] If this concept sounds broad, it is: this understanding of performance asks us to acknowledge the performativity of much of early modern social interaction and public life. Clare Egan's essay, 'Performing Early Modern Libel: Expanding the Boundaries of Performance' adopts this understanding of performance and its relationship to the public nature of early modern social interaction. Egan highlights the import-ance of the 'manner' of libelling to early modern commentators such as William Hudson, and its implications for our understanding of the nature and function of libel. The 'manner' of libelling encompassed a variety of public actions, includ-ing 'reading verses aloud, sending defamatory letters, enacting public impersona-tions, and posting up symbols or images in significant public spaces'. As Egan points out, some libels have been included in REED collections due to specific and explicit connections between the libellous incident(s) and the theatre: in one case from 1607–8, for instance, witnesses reported that the defendant recited a libellous verse 'with the action of his foote [&c] and hand, much like a player', and also parodied lines from Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great, Part 2*, all in the service of satirizing a local official.[23] Evidently some libellous practices are quite straightforwardly recognizable as mimetic, such as (unflattering) persona-tion, while others are not, such as sending a defamatory letter. But for Egan these piecemeal inclusions sidestep the issue. She argues that early modern libel should be recognized as a form of performance in general, for central to libel is 'the public communication of elaborate, pre-planned messages'. Egan argues that libellous practices 'functio[n] on a spectrum of performance', with 'at one end libellous

stage plays or interludes … and at the other end publicly performative behaviours. In the middle would come such "manners" as reading verse or prose texts aloud to spectators, enacting mock ceremonial or festive rituals, and posting up elaborately constructed visual symbols, all in spaces and places with specific communal meaning'. When we examine libels en masse, therefore, 'we discover a new genre of early modern popular performance'.

Egan's essay discusses libellous incidents across this 'spectrum of performance', from the libellous play put on by Tailboys Dymocke to defame Henry Clinton, second earl of Lincoln in 1601, to the multi-episode libel to shame the merchant Edmund Whetcombe of Nether Stowey, Somerset, for his alleged 'vaine bragg*es* in standing vpon his ^ ⌜pretended⌝ gentility', which featured a mock proclamation and a libellous letter enclosing a book made of the knaves from two sets of playing cards.[24] What particularly interests Egan is the way in which these various incidents make use of a similar repertoire: Dymocke's interlude, for instance, functions through the deployment of 'a mixture of written, oral, and visual forms — the mock-sermon, song, written verse, coat of arms, symbolic props'. Although most early modern libels did not make explicit use of mock plays or similarly theatrical frames, Egan suggests that the appearance of these forms in Dymocke's elaborate production, as well as less mimetic libels, points to their 'suitability as theatrical content', and that their routine appearance in many early modern libels cued their audiences to read them as such. She points out that the complexity of libels such as Dymocke's interlude and the series of events enacted to defame Whetcombe in Somerset, and the social practices in which they were embedded — such as the ritualized actions accompanying a 'real' royal proclamation — required engagement from their audiences akin to the 'spectators of early moralities, in which the boundaries between the real world and the play world were continuously collapsed in challenging ways'.

My essay, 'Shows of Joy and Malice: Performance, the Star Chamber, and the Celebration of James I's Coronation in Norwich in 1603' also makes use of Star Chamber materials, first to reconstruct the festivities put on in Norwich to celebrate the coronation of James I in July 1603, and their derailment by a combination of the plague and aldermanic infighting, and second to reflect upon the broader implications of legal narratives for understanding performance in early modern England. As this research shows, the case of Gibson vs Lane — or, the former alderman versus the former mayor — is significant because it provides a hitherto unknown picture of the coronation celebrations in Norwich in 1603, including descriptions of what she describes as 'unofficial' festivities: activities and celebrations apparently not directly organized or funded by the Norwich city

authorities, though possibly influenced by particular elite aldermanic factions in the city. The coincidence (or is it?) of these events with the feast of St James may point towards more continuity in festive practice and celebration in sixteenth-century towns than civic records always allow modern scholars to access. My broader point, however, is to draw attention to the rich possibilities and complexities of legal narrative for understanding early modern performance and festivity. The documents of complaint, replication, examination, and counter-replication that make up this particular Star Chamber case permit readers to have access to a range of perspectives and interpretations of the festive events that took place in the city. This approach shows early modern civic festivities, 'official' and 'unofficial', to be sites of both multiple and contested meaning. The case's plaintiff makes critical use of the potential uncertainty of meaning around public action by reading his opponent's actions during the celebrations as, in a telling phrase, 'probable testimonies' of his wicked intentions.

Such wide-ranging discussions of performance in early modern culture and social practice come at a time in early modern theatre studies in which we see increasing interest in concepts of drama and performance that take place off as well as on the commercial London stage. Some of these other performances are in very close proximity to that stage or even within it — sometimes termed the 'intertheatricality' of the performance itself — and some are at greater remove, even though they might have shared participants, spectators, and materials.[25] Recently scholars have given particular attention to civic pageants and festivities as forms of drama in early modern English culture, which was, as Tracey Hill puts it, 'full of confidence in its creative abilities, both on the street and on the stage'.[26] This description works particularly well for complex, multimedia events such as the annual London Lord Mayor's Show, or for royal entries and entertainments, which often shared personnel with the London commercial theatres, and sometimes produced more impressive 'special effects' than the theatres did, but it is not confined to them.[27] The broadness of the actions regarded as dramatic here moves us away from a definition of drama as principally mimetic towards one rooted in performativity; it brings 'drama' and 'performance' more closely together. These approaches share a renewed commitment to *doing*-centred understandings of 'performance', as well as to bringing the theatrical, the performative, and what we might tentatively call the 'literary' into dialogue with each other. This Issues in Review section aims to both contribute to and provide material for the continuation of these conversations.

Notes

1 Brueghel made several, slightly variant copies of this painting, probably indicating its popularity. Although most of the artist's oeuvre consists of copies of the works of his father Pieter Bruegel the Elder, there is no direct surviving source for this painting. I am grateful to Dr James Clifton for helpful advice about Brueghel and the contexts of his work.

2 In a version in Auckland Art Gallery the wife's lover is less readily identifiable as a monk: see Pieter Brueghel the Younger, *A Village Fair*, oil on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, New Zealand.

3 In the Auckland version the bookholder is clearly visible behind the curtain, as pointed out in Michael Hattaway, *Elizabethan Popular Theatre: Plays in Performance* (London, 1982), note to Plate 6, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203709542.

4 For text and translation see Hans van Dijk et al., 'Plaijerwater: A Sixteenth-Century Farce with an English Translation', *Dutch Crossing* 8 (1984), 32–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.1984.11784313. On *rederijker* drama, see Walter S. Gibson, 'Artists and Rederijkers in the Age of Bruegel', *The Art Bulletin* 63 (1981), 426–46, https://doi.org/10.2307/3050144.

5 See for example Hattaway, *Popular Theatre*, 21; David Wiles, *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge, 2003), 95–6.

6 Definitions paraphrased from *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (*OED*), s.v. 'performance, n.', 4.a., 4.b., 4.c.

7 Mary Thomas Crane, 'What Was Performance?', *Criticism* 43.2 (2001), 173, https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2001.0013.

8 *OED*, s.v. 'performance, n.', 1.a., 1.b., 1.c.; 3.

9 William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. Nicholas Brooke (Oxford, 1990), https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198129011.book.1. Quoted in *OED*, s.v. 'performance, n.', 1.a.

10 Crane, 'What Was Performance?', 174.

11 This broad field cannot be discussed with any justice here; for a useful introduction, see Henry Bial, ed., *The Performance Studies Reader*, 3rd edn (London, 2016).

12 See for example Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York, 1987); Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London, 2003), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203426630.

13 Quotation from James Raine, ed., *The Priory of Finchale* (London, 1837), ccccxli, quoted in Chambers, '"Players" in Context'.

14 For a penetrating discussion of medieval uses of *ludus* and other theatrically preg-
    nant words, see Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Cul-
    ture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago, 2001), 1–24.

15 Durham Priory Bursars' Accounts, Durham University Library DCD-Burs. acs
    1298–9, mb 4 (*dona prioris*), as quoted in Chambers, '"Players" in Context'.

16 Quotation from 'About the Records: Series Methodology', *REED Online*, https://
    ereed.library.utoronto.ca/about/series/, accessed 10 July 2020.

17 Mark Chambers is co-editor with John McKinnell of *REED: Durham*; Emily Mayne
    and Matthew Woodcock are co-editors of *REED: Norwich, 1540–1642*.

18 For a retrospective, see Audrey Douglas and Sally-Beth MacLean, eds, *REED in
    Review: Essays in Celebration of the First Twenty-Five Years* (Toronto, 2006), https://
    doi-org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.3138/9781442627383.

19 'bald nature' from Greg Walker, 'A Broken REED?: Early Drama Records, Politics,
    and the Old Historicism', *Medieval English Theatre* 17 (1995), 45.

20 See E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1903).

21 Robert Tittler, *Architecture and Power: The Town Hall and the English Urban Com-
    munity, c.1500–1640* (Oxford, 1991), 111–12, quoted in Woodcock, 'Perambulation
    and Performance'.

22 Meg Twycross, 'Some Approaches to Dramatic Festivity, especially Processions', in
    Festive Drama, ed. Meg Twycross (Cambridge, 1996), 7, quoted in Woodcock, 'Per-
    ambulation and Performance'.

23 Hole vs White, 1607–8, in James Stokes and Robert J. Alexander, eds, *REED: Som-
    erset*, 2 vols (Toronto, 1996), 1.354, quoted in Egan, 'Performing Early Modern
    Libel'.

24 Whetcombe vs Prowse (1607), London, National Archives (NA): STAC 8/229/30,
    Deposition Book, sheet 46; STAC 8/229/30, mb 28, quoted in Egan, 'Performing
    Early Modern Libel'.

25 For intertheatricality, with bibliography, see William N. West, 'Intertheatricality', in
    Early Modern Theatricality, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford, 2013), 151–72, https://doi.
    org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199641352.013.8.

26 Tracey Hill, *Pageantry and Power: A Cultural History of the Early Modern Lord
    Mayor's Show, 1585–1639* (Manchester, 2010), 25, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.
    ctt1wn0rr0. See also J. Caitlin Finlayson and Amrita Sen, eds, *Civic Performance:
    Pageantry and Entertainments in Early Modern London* (London, 2018), https://doi.
    org/10.4324/9781315392707. The term 'form of drama' in relation to civic festivities
    appears to originate in Richard Dutton, ed., *Jacobean Civic Pageants* (Keele, 1995), 7.

27 On special effects, see Hill, *Pageantry and Power*, 118–214.