

Editorial

Special Volume: Performance, Politics, and Culture in the Southwest of Britain, 1350–1642

In 1996 the Records of Early English Drama project published its *Bristol* volume (Mark Pilkinton, ed), the last of its collections focused on the documents of Britain's southwestern-most region. At the Leeds International Medieval Congress that summer, REED sponsored four sessions to celebrate the 'closing' of the region. Those sessions, which featured REED editors, historians, and other researchers of drama in the southwest of Britain, provided a forum for discussion that inspired the articles published in *Early Theatre* 6.

Since that gathering of scholars at Leeds, much work has been done to illuminate the region's history, politics, and culture from the medieval to the early modern period. Studies by such scholars as David Underdown, Ronald Hutton, Nicholas Orme, and Beat Kümin, to name a few whose work is cited in this collection, have led to a reconsideration of historical issues more often studied for in relation to larger, national trends. Among those issues are the nature of 'urban' environments in smaller, regional towns; the growth and maintenance of parish community in the pre- and post-Reformation periods; the nature of and balance between civic and ecclesiastical authority; the effects of topography and geography on economic, religious, and political trends; and the continuity and change within the region, in religious and social practice, in traditional entertainments, and in expression of communal values.

What has become clear is that the region and its constituent parts show marked continuity alongside significant religious, political, and social change over the period 1350 to 1642. Such change and continuity is also evident in the nature and history of performative activity in the southwest of Britain, but relatively few works on these aspects of life in the region have found their way into print. *ET* 6 will help to fill the gaps in our understanding by presenting a range of insights into the complex relationships among performance, politics, and culture as they played out in the culturally diverse West Country.

In *Early Theatre's* current two issues, contributors examine subjects as varied as Corpus Christi celebrations; the dramatic interdependence of towns on the

Somerset/ Dorset border; and the relationship between itinerant performance and topography. They ask us to consider the influence of puritan reformers on performance; the inter-relation of civic and ecclesiastical affairs in a cathedral city; and the ways in which social conflicts find expression in mimetic activity enacted against rural and urban landscapes. The cultural diversity within the region also emerges, especially in studies of its two Celtic zones: South Wales and Cornwall. *Early Theatre* 6 will guide readers from Wiltshire to Cornwall and north to Wales via Dorset, Somerset, and Devon, exposing what Nicholas Orme has called the ‘unity and variety’ of the West Country.¹

Much of the southwest’s regional character has been fostered by its geography and topography, which make it at the same time both accessible and remote. The farthest reaches of the area – the west coasts of Cornwall and South Wales – lie more than 240 miles from London, the nation’s political heart. No easy trip today down narrow, hedge-rowed lanes, the journey to these far outposts was even harder before the modern period. In a region where farmland, moorland, and expansive downland were interspersed with deep valleys and forested areas, the limited road networks and waterways of the pre-modern period tied country to town, county to county, fostering connections evident in the documentary history of performance in the region. The types of performative activity and the range of responses to it show marked similarity throughout the southwest, yet the specific circumstances of each environment – the controlling influence of a bishopric, the vocality of puritan preachers, the idiosyncratic fund-raising techniques of a parish community – gave activities similar in nature a unique character in each West Country locale.

In their respective articles for *Early Theatre* 6.1, Alexandra Johnston, James Stokes, C.E. McGee, and Audrey Douglas situate performative activity within the context of local circumstance as a means to enhance our overall understanding of the region. Johnston and Stokes explore the documentary evidence from Devon, Cornwall, and Somerset to reveal the many forms of performative activity from the early fourteenth through the early seventeenth century. Their work delves into the rich variety of civic-sponsored entertainment in the West Country, confronting the erroneous notion that so-called ‘Corpus Christi’ cycles, moralities, and saint’s plays were the performative norm. Likewise, their articles, along with those of Douglas and McGee, confirm the integral relationships between festive entertainments and local fund-raising, between display and the affirmation of episcopal and civic power, and between confrontational mimetic activity and religious and political conflict in the West Country. What emerges from these studies is a revised view of the relationship among performance, politics, and culture. While the articles’ findings corroborate many of the theories of regional historians, these studies of the dramatic

record of the southwest also call into question some long-held beliefs about the influence of the Reformation and puritanism on traditional entertainments and dramatic performance in the region and about the existence of a 'Corpus Christi' genre. But what these articles reveal even more are the patterns of social, political, religious, and performative change and continuity in the counties of Wiltshire, Dorset, Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall.

Editorial Principles

Because this collection features citations from published REED volumes as well as from unpublished documents in record offices, the article notes have posed a number of editorial challenges. The following editorial principles will, I hope, aid readers who wish to consult the research materials for themselves.

As a basic principle, when possible, the contributors have cited page numbers in published REED collections. Because the *Somerset, including Bath and Dorset/Cornwall* volumes represent the combined efforts of multiple editors working exclusively on particular parts of each collection, I have, for the sake of regularity, chosen to cite these collections as single entities with multiple editors rather than citing individual sections and their editors as has been done in past issues of *Early Theatre*. These citations should enable readers to find the REED collections (whose cataloging at many libraries is, regrettably, haphazard) more quickly in a library catalog or index search. Translations of longer Latin quotations have been provided, many of them produced for the REED collections by Abigail Young. These are indicated in endnotes by the word 'translation', followed by the REED collection page number.

Of course, unpublished documents present their own challenges. Chief among these are the problems of shelf marks that have changed and archives that have taken on new monikers. In *Early Theatre 6* readers will find shelf mark changes indicated for some Dorset Record Office documents. Likewise, the renaming of archives themselves has been noted for the Oxfordshire Archives (cited as the Oxfordshire Record Office) and the Public Record Office (cited as NA, PRO), which joined the Historical Manuscripts Commission as part of the National Archives on 2 April 2003. To distinguish between records deposited at the Dorset Record Office and those deposited at the Devon Record Office (both of which bear the designator 'DRO' in their respective REED collections), I have adopted the new designators 'DoRO' and 'DeRO' throughout *Early Theatre 6*.

Finally, to cut down on the number of endnotes (which could have been particularly high in articles incorporating a number of short quotations),

multiple citations often appear as one note. Readers should consult the first note following a block of text to find a series of citations pertinent to the previous material. In these cases, a semi-colon distinguishes between consecutive sources cited.

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Note

- 1 Nicholas Orme, *Unity and Variety: A History of the Church in Devon and Cornwall* (Exeter, 1991).