

Issues in Review

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Offstage and Onstage Drama: New Approaches to Richard Brome

Richard Brome had his dramatic debut in Ben Jonson's play, *Bartholomew Fair*, where he is described by the Stage-keeper in the Induction as skulking about backstage: 'But for the whole play, will you ha' the truth on't? I am looking, lest the poet hear me, or his man, Master Brome, behind the arras. It is like to be a very conceited scurvy one, in plain English' (Induction, 6–9).¹ So Jonson immortalizes Brome as being backstage, literally and metaphorically within his master's shadow. Beginning with Edward Phillips, writing twenty three years after the playwright's death, critical evaluation preserves Brome's literary and social status as Jonson's servant. For many years he has remained a shadowy figure in the tiring house and in Jonson's service, even electing servitude as a frame of self-reference.²

The introduction to Matthew Steggle's seminal work on Brome, *Place and Politics on the Caroline Stage*, identifies several good reasons why this relatively neglected Caroline playwright deserves attention. Among them are Brome's complex, stimulating, and entertaining plays; his relationship with key dramatists and poets (including his time in Jonson's service); the variety of his literary legacy and its theatrical afterlife; legal evidence, contributing towards Renaissance scholars' knowledge of the working lives of theatre professionals; and his rare status and example as a servant writer.³

This list summarizes many excellent reasons for studying Brome's work and life, and the dramatic and biographical importance highlighted by Steggle is reflected in the four varied essays which follow.⁴ The first paper concerns Brome's contract with the Salisbury Court theatre, while the latter three take an individual Brome play as their subject: *The English Moor*, *The Antipodes*, and *The Weeding of Covent Garden*. Each essay considers Brome and his writing from a different angle: Eleanor Collins re-examines Brome's theatre contract with the King's Revels company and the Salisbury Court

theatre; Karen Kettlich uses *The Antipodes* as the focal point of an assessment of improvisation on the renaissance stage; Farah Karim-Cooper analyses the use of cosmetics in *The English Moor* and the implications of black make-up in terms of race and gender; and Mimi Yiu explores the concept of gendered space and architecture in *The Weeding of Covent Garden*.

Study of Brome and his work is soon to be facilitated substantially by an online edition of his plays under the general editorship of Richard Allen Cave, answering T.S. Eliot's call for Brome's plays to be both more accessible and widely read.⁵ However, it is important to establish that the essays proffered in this Issues in Review do not simply take as their common focus 'Richard Brome: the man and his plays'. This would suggest that playwrights and their work exist in a vacuum, which of course they do not. As Steggle's study indicates, Brome operates within a web of social, theatrical, and political connections. A welcome increase in the forthcoming collected editions of major Caroline dramatists, in print and online, will stimulate both the discovery of previously inaccessible dramatic texts for new readers and opportunities for further connections between dramatists, playing companies, players, and audiences, the 'social network' advocated by Scott McMillin writing in an earlier Issues in Review.⁶

These new editions are also able to make use of new technologies, allowing them to unite and display a variety of textual and visual materials. Editions (such as *Internet Shakespeare Editions*) already exist on stand-alone internet sites, enabling 'users' to view different versions of texts (both transcriptions of original printed material and modernised versions with annotation). Texts in development are additionally being supplemented with pictorial images and, in the case of the Brome project, video clips of archived or specially commissioned performances of excerpts of text by professional actors.⁷ In this way, the traditional dramatist-centred study of theatre is increasingly providing opportunities for editors and users alike to make and infer interconnecting strands of meaning across theatrical, editorial, and cultural materialist discourse.

For the members of the editorial panel involved on the Brome project, the experience of editing these plays includes a symbiotic relationship between text and performance, editor and actor. The task involves (often delightful) reclamation of the performed text and explication of the printed. Exploration of Brome's plays as performed rather than solely authorial texts quickly reveals them as texts *about* performance, both explicitly and metaphorically: how to perform blackness, northern-ness, and gender, for example. They are

also concerned with the business of performance, most pertinently in *The Antipodes* but also, as Brome editors are currently finding, in delivery clues in punctuation, use of aside (sometimes specified, otherwise implicit in the dialogue), placing of marginal stage directions, use of dialect, and of large and small stage properties. The recovery of text is also, then, the recovery of drama and stage spectacle; the text is the dramatic skeleton to be fleshed out by action (in the form of acting or annotation). The Caroline theatre—its stage practice, company organization, relation to playwright, theatregoer and actor—is a site of ongoing investigation, and the recovery of functional information about that theatre needs the participation of all ‘scholars’, whether they be academics or theatre practitioners.

Perhaps the most valuable legacy of Brome’s offstage professional activity is his contract with the Salisbury Court Theatre, as discussed in Eleanor Collins’ essay, ‘Richard Brome’s Contract and the Relationship of Dramatist to Company in the Early Modern Period’. Although fairly little biographical evidence survives in relation to Brome, extant documents hint at plenty of legal drama.⁸ Collins examines the documentary evidence generated by the period when Brome was forced to look elsewhere for his income, during the closure of the theatres due to plague when Salisbury Court suspended his weekly payments. She stresses the need for contextualization of documentary material such as the contract, warning against generalizations, and she analyzes its terms in comparison with the workings of both playwrights and actors, pointing to the circumstantial factors which might affect a playwright’s productivity, including plague and the output of rival dramatists.

Collins suggests that Brome’s binding and specific contract is unusual rather than representative of common practice, a point exemplified by further cases and Brome’s own relationship with other companies, such as Prince Charles’ Men at the Red Bull. Her essay additionally assimilates recent work by Steggle and Martin Butler, who identify the broader context of Heton’s strained relations with the Cockpit and Brome’s place within the ‘theatrical machine’ as equally pertinent considerations.⁹

Steggle sees a natural progression from place to performance in Brome’s work: ‘Treatment of place, in particular, is often a matter of illusion, which leads one to another centre of critical interest in Brome: the treatment of theatre and performance’.¹⁰ Karen Kettlich’s essay, “‘Now mark that fellow; he speaks Extempore’: Scripted Improvisation in *The Antipodes*’, tackles both issues at once, describing Brome’s play as ‘the most overt exploration’ of such practice. ‘Scripted improvisation’ is an intriguing phrase here, flirting (as

Kettnich suggests English drama is prone to do) with spontaneity and prescription. Kettnich demonstrates that Byplay's performance is an example of spontaneous performance, but one that is fully scripted, and she also documents instances of this phenomenon in plays where improvisation is suggested. Yet to what extent would improvised action be a complete surprise to the playwright? It is likely that a playwright familiar with a particular theatre company and its actors might be able to guess (generally or specifically) how a given actor would fill this void. The written direction for an actor to 'speak anything' might not be such an unknown quantity. Kettnich's effort to adopt a more company-centric approach, with her juxtaposition of Brome's play with Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, begins to answer some of these questions.

Brome engages playfully with the fabric of the theatre building, and no less so than in *The Antipodes*, where the action of the play-within-a-play is taken offstage and into the tiring house. This incident is heightened by the desire to sustain the illusion of Peregrine's journey to the Antipodes. Brome takes the action offstage and backstage, inverting the expectation of the theatre as a site of illusion and façade: Peregrine finds the actors' collection of large and small properties yet absorbs them as part of his 'journey's' narrative and action. In this example, and in the essays which follow, Brome appears to be fascinated with binary junctures: actor/audience, illusion/reality, painted/natural, black/white, male/female, foreign/domestic, power/fear, native/alien, truth/deceit. But instead of constructing these oppositional points as fixed and unyielding, he questions their liminal interfaces with cunning and rigour, within the bounds of dramatic staples such as disguise, plot, and theatricality.

In "This alters not thy beauty": Face-paint, Gender, and Race in *The English Moor*, Farah Karim-Cooper analyses the use of make-up as disguise in 3.1, in which Quicksands, concerned that his wife Millicent's beauty makes her vulnerable to suitors, reveals his plan to paint her black as a method of concealment. Because of the combined fear of cosmetics permeating the skin, prompting 'ethnic mutability', and masking the physical manifestation of the soul's natural goodness, painting in the seventeenth century was stigmatized. The issue of mutability was also present in suspicions that painted women were deceitful and whorish, of the creation of such concoctions as similar to witchcraft, and in the altering of God's own workmanship.

Karim-Cooper offers various reasons why cosmetics, and, in particular, blackface, were considered with suspicion and concern in the early seven-

teenth century. Furthermore she points to Brome's questioning of this fear, identifying its origins in the 'mutability of identity' and departure from what is considered 'English'. She also points out, on a practical level, that the ingredients for blackface are much less harmful than those used as common ingredients for a white fucus, or base foundation. However, Karim-Cooper is at pains to highlight that while this scene might superficially seem preoccupied with race, actually its main concern is with gender and painting. Her essay also describes the material conditions of production in performance, whilst concluding that in society the primary function of 'painting' the female body was one of management and control. The anxiety surrounding a gendered inversion of power is explored in another of Brome's plays, *The Late Lancashire Witches* (written in collaboration with Heywood).¹¹ After various feats of witchcraft, involving shape-shifting, a magic bridle, and a stolen wedding feast, the chief witch, Mistress Generous, is caught, her hand cut off by the miller she is attacking in feline form. This scene requires 'painting' (of blood rather than cosmetics) to expose female subversion, impose male control and authority on the wayward witch, and restore social harmony.

Also interested in the 'strong evaluative emphasis on the visible surface' is Mimi Yiu's essay, 'Facing Places in *The Weeding of Covent Garden*'. Yiu describes the generation of new building in the Covent Garden area, suggesting that Brome's play was conceived as the buildings were being constructed: thus both Brome's mind and the play's London location appear to be sites of construction. As Karim-Cooper suggests of *The English Moor*, *The Weeding of Covent Garden* also demonstrates Brome's interest in 'destabilizing foreignness', in this case, of Inigo Jones's Palladian architecture. Yiu points to the investment of English money in London's buildings, rather than the hazarding of wealth abroad. So although the projects themselves display a foreign façade, the financial building blocks are native, encouraging the retention of English wealth on England's soil, in what Yiu describes as the 'domestication of the alien'.

Additionally, the play betrays cultural anxiety surrounding feminised spatial concerns and issues of display. In the light of Karim-Cooper's writing it is possible to identify connections between Brome's treatment of buildings and of women: both are artificially constructed, requiring foreign imports to heighten their beauty; both are objectified by men and traded for money as part of a process of exchange. In *The Weeding of Covent Garden*, Brome presents a juxtaposition of the two with the appearance of Dorcas as a Venetian courtesan on a balcony, aptly proving Karim-Cooper's point

concerning cosmetics as a stigmatized means of female control. The masculine economic space is in tense contrast with the spatial eroticism of the woman's body within it. This anxiety is also expressed by Rufflit of Josina in *The City Wit*: 'Her eye artificially spirited, her cheek surphuled, her teeth blanch'd, her lip painted, her neck carcanetted, and her breast bar'd almost to her belly. And shall a piece, thus put out to sale, stand unattempted, as not worth the purchase?' (4.1).¹² In *A Mad Couple Well Matched*, Alicia Saleware sits in her husband's shop, advertising his wares, and likened to the image of the Virgin in the Mercers' company arms (3.1.710–12).¹³ Behind Tom's back, Alicia illicitly trades more personal commodities for money or status.

These scenes also demand comparisons between the architecture of London's domestic, commercial and theatrical spaces: buildings *as* display and *for* display. Yiu identifies the Covent Garden complex as one of the first places to introduce the balcony to the domestic residence, despite its familiar integration in theatrical architecture (itself Italian). Brome takes the opportunity to create several puns on the appearance of this 'foreign' architectural novelty and the woman it supports (who is in fact a country girl in disguise), her dress, physical body, make-up, position on the balcony, and their moral implications. Brome has cleverly mapped this 'innovative' balcony phenomenon onto the obliging structure of the Renaissance stage, but in turn requires his audience to furnish the theatre spectacle with their knowledge of the current building project.¹⁴ Brome is at pains here and elsewhere in his plays to invite the energy of the city outside into the theatre.

These essays illustrate that we can use text and the circumstance of text to illuminate theatre practice—that is, the functioning of the theatre both on and offstage—drawing on a variety of documentary sources to chart a more fully fleshed picture than the textual witness alone. They also demonstrate various connecting themes: of spatial issues, theatricality, and performance, both within Brome's life and work and amongst his fellow Caroline theatre practitioners. Increasingly, Brome is lifted out of Jonson's shadow, emerging from the tiring house and onto the stage his own man.

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Notes

- 1 In Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist and Other Plays*, Gordon Campbell (ed.) (Oxford, 1995).
- 2 Matthew Steggle, *Richard Brome: Place and Politics on the Caroline Stage* (Manchester/ New York, 2004), 20.
- 3 Ibid, 1.
- 4 These essays were contributed to a seminar entitled 'Richard Brome and Caroline Drama', organised by myself and Lucy Munro for the 2007 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in San Diego.
- 5 T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920; London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 17.
- 6 Scott McMillin, 'Reading the Elizabethan Acting Companies', *Early Theatre* 4 (2001), 111. In addition to Brome, new editions currently in progress include work on the dramatists Ford, Heywood, Jonson, and Shirley; *The Works of John Webster* have been published in three volumes by Cambridge University Press; and the collected works of Thomas Middleton in one volume (Oxford, Nov. 2007).
- 7 The *Richard Brome Complete Works Online* project meets twice a year for workshops in which selected sequences are performed at the request of editors by actors from the RSC alumni list. The workshops so far have assisted editors in their own work, as well as providing the opportunity to share insights with the rest of the panel. The results are filmed for inclusion on the edition website as an additional method of annotating textual and dramatic issues, also functioning as an initial performance 'history' for Brome plays (other than *The Antipodes* and *A Jovial Crew*) which have lacked major productions.
- 8 New documentary evidence has recently been found amongst the records of Charterhouse hospital, proving that Richard Brome the dramatist died at Charterhouse in 1652; see Eleanor Lowe, 'Confirmation of Richard Brome's Final Years in Charterhouse Hospital', *Notes & Queries*, 54:4 (December 2007).
- 9 Steggle, *Place and Politics*, 107.
- 10 Ibid, 9.
- 11 Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome, *The Witches of Lancashire*, Gabriel Egan (ed.), (London, 2002).
- 12 *The City Wit*, Katherine Wilkinson (ed.), submitted as part of MA, Sheffield Hallam University, 2004 <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/renplays/witindex.htm>> accessed 29 August 2007.

- 13 *A Mad Couple Well Match'd*, Steen H. Spove (ed.), (New York, London: Garland, 1979). Another example is Victoria's performance as a courtesan in *The Novella*—'Give me my Lute; and set me for the signe / Of what I meane to be, the fam'd *Novella*' (1653 *Five New Playes*, sig. K1r). I would like to thank Lucy Munro for this suggestion.
- 14 Catherine Richardson considers the personal, economic and cultural significances of stage properties in 'Properties of domestic life: the table in Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*', in Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda (eds), *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge, 2002), 129–52. Although specifically concerned with household props in domestic tragedy, Richardson's exploration of the sorts of connections which could be made between the audience's imagination and the properties brought onto the stage raises useful and interesting issues when considering Brome's imaginative placement of a building (as large stage property) onto the fabric of the theatre.

Richard Brome's Contract and the Relationship of Dramatist to Company in the early modern period

In 1635, Richard Brome made a career decision that was to have significant consequences for the understanding of early-modern theatre history. He agreed to the contract drafted on the 20 July made with the King's Revels company, then under the leadership of Richard Gunnell, which bound his services as a playwright exclusively to the Salisbury Court theatre. Brome's contract has been interpreted as symptomatic of changing modes of theatrical production and regulation into the Caroline period, and as exemplary of the condition of the 1630s dramatist, bound under contractual agreement to impresarial management.¹ Andrew Gurr describes the impresario system, as exemplified by Philip Henslowe, Christopher Beeston, and Gunnell (and, later, Richard Heton) as 'an autocratic form of rule imposed on a profession which had grown into being by means of a long tradition of collaborative and democratic practices'.² This kind of management is placed in opposition to the 'collective responsibility' of the King's Men,³ and has contributed to the perception of the decline of drama and its quality into the 1630s, in which theatrical managers become 'entrepreneurs rather than players, individualists in commerce, not stars in the teamwork of performance', ruthlessly binding playwrights to their whims.⁴