“THE ACTORS ARE COME HITHER”: LITERARY ANALOGUES OF ITINERANT PLAYER TROUPE PROCEDURES

Hundreds of itinerant players under civic, ecclesiastical, and aristocratic patronage were criss-crossing England from at least 1426, when Henry VI rewarded a troupe of the Duke of Exeter's boys playing interludes, to the closing of the public theatres in 1642. Public and private financial accounts mark the passage of such troupes, but rarely provide any information about them beyond what year they appeared and who acted as their patron. We know that the players existed and that they travelled, but we know virtually nothing about the day-to-day lives of the touring players, about their touring strategies and methods. How many plays were in a typical repertoire, ready to be performed for any audience? How did players gain admittance to performing spaces, and how were they received? Who was responsible for the administrative details governing rewards, bed and board, and production procedures? Who decided what, where, and why the players performed, and what kind of reception could players expect? No extant primary source document addresses any of these questions.

Renaissance chronicles and accounts do, however, contain a number of omissions that may prove significant. For example, Hall’s Chronicle, Giustinian’s Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII, Leland’s Collectanea, and The Great Chronicle of London all describe many entertainments that occurred at the royal courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII, yet I have been unable to find one instance in which itinerant entertainers are mentioned as contributing to the revels. On the other hand, the names of royally retained writers and players, such as the Cornishes, the Children and Gentlemen of the Chapel, and royal interluders, appear frequently, implying that performances for important occasions were commissioned specifically for the occasion, and thus became the responsibility of household troupes, rather than opportunities for visiting artists to insert themselves into the festivities.

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The few extant documents that describe or prescribe entertainments at the households of the nobility reinforce the idea that the Great Households retained strict bureaucratic, financial, and probably aesthetic control over their revels, and did not simply allow any visiting troupe to spoil their design. This theory is supported by the *Second Northumberland Household Book*, preserved in the Bodleian Library as MS Eng. hist. b. 208, a collection of ordinances circa 1500-19 that delineate the structure of ceremonials on important social or religious holidays at the household of Henry Algernon Percy, Fifth Earl of Northumberland. Two of the twenty-three orders, those dealing with Twelfth Night and Wedding celebrations, have been transcribed; both orders require the assistance of household troupes and imply the exclusion of visiting troupes.

Percy's Twelfth Night Festival, for example, specifically delineates the decoration of Great Hall, the structure of the evening's revels and banquet, and the responsibilities of each retainer, from gentleman usher to Chamberlain, for executing the orders. Twelfth Night was celebrated by a hierarchically arranged procession of the entire household, a concert by the Earl's minstrels and Gentlemen of the Chapel, an interlude by the Earl's players, followed by a disguising, which was interrupted by a pageant device that spewed forth a morris dance by the Earl's henchmen. A three-part banquet, carols and songs from the Chapel, and another procession completed the evening. Nowhere are entertainers external to Percy's household even mentioned.

Yet Percy did expect and welcome visiting performers during the twelve days of Christmas, for his *Household Book* records a complex system of payments for itinerant troupes, and his accounts show that during the Christmas season in 1511 he rewarded approximately twenty troupes. The Earl ordered that rewards to musicians and players be based upon the rank of the troupe's patron and upon the relationship between the Earl and the troupe's patron. Thus, an "Erlis Players" received twenty shillings "If he be his [Northumberland's] speciall Lorde and Frende ande Kynsman." "Lordis Players" received ten shillings. The amount of rewards to itinerant minstrel troupes dictates still another criterion: whether they visited "yerely," in which case they received three shillings four pence, or whether they visited "seldome," in which case they received double that amount. Northumberland's precise schedule of rewards indicates special interest in the quality of the patron rather than the quality of the players or their texts. Further, the schedule demonstrates that both player and treasurer were aware of financial procedures beforehand, and could budget accordingly.

This is about all we can deduce about the relationship between noble households and itinerant entertainers from primary source documents. While Renaissance accountants and chroniclers may frustrate attempts to understand
the itinerant troupes, playwrights are more helpful. Plays are, of course, artistic constructs and not historical documents, yet the consistency with which itinerant troupes are described in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries testifies that portraits of travelling players in the plays are fairly realistic. Since Shakespeare was undoubtedly basing his art upon his own experiences, either as he saw itinerant troupes within noble households or as he visited noble households as a travelling player himself, his observations can be trusted. Plays such as *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* contain lively scenes that depict the arrival and performance of itinerant troupes in the households of "Tudor" aristocrats, preserving many details that can contribute significantly to our understanding of how the touring players actually operated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare's observations are supported by those of other writers, including the anonymous author of *The Book of Sir Thomas More* and Robert Armin in his *Nest of Ninnies*.

Act II of *Hamlet*, which contains one of the most famous imaginative accounts of the arrival and performance of a troupe of touring players, also communicates valuable observations about the motives of players for touring, the reasons for which noble patrons might hire them, the expertise of players, the quality of their scripts, and the ambiance of the event. Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have already warned Prince Hamlet that the players have arrived and have explained that the players are forced to tour because of competition from the children's companies, it is Polonius, the Chamberlain of the royal household, who actually ushers the players into the presence of the prince, just as Northumberland's Chamberlain orchestrated the proceedings at ceremonial occasions in Percy's great household.

The "tragedians of the city" are well known to Hamlet; he immediately accepts their offering to play because he knows their quality and because it suits his purposes. After ordering Polonius to see that they are "well bestowed," Hamlet, aware of this particular group's repertoire, makes specific requests about the play they shall enact, confident that they are adaptable enough to add his own verses to their text. In Act III, when "The Murder of Gonzago" is performed, the players must contend with interruptions from the audience, including Hamlet's running commentary and Claudius's hasty retreat. As Kernan notes, these actions are identical with what we know of court procedures, with the notable exception that the prince is acting as the bureaucratic functionary rather than the privileged audience.

The Induction of *The Taming of the Shrew* also enacts a scene in which travelling players enter a noble household. Here, a servingman ushers the players into the Lord's presence. The troupe is unidentified, but the Lord is nevertheless familiar with their expertise, so the players are welcomed, given
food and lodging for the night, and warned to behave themselves. Like Hamlet, the Lord has a purpose in hiring the troupe, for the performance nicely fits into the jest he intends to play with Christopher Sly. Once again, players are welcomed because their quality is known and because they suit the purpose of the nobleman.

A Midsummer Night's Dream presents a slightly different scene of player-household interaction, one almost as famous as that in Hamlet. In this case, Philostrate, Master of the Revels to Duke Theseus, presents to his lord a list of four entertainments from four different visiting groups. Theseus rejects three of the four: he had told Hippolyta the harping eunuch's story of Hercules; he has seen the "old device" of the tipsy Bacchanals; he suspects that the critical satire of the Muses is "not sorting with a nuptial ceremony" (V, i, 44-55). The titles of these entertainments may seem far-fetched and satiric, but in reality they resemble titles of actual entertainments; compare, for example, disguisings of "The Pavillion in the Place Perilous" or one of "Old men and nymphs" performed at the courts of Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey. Disregarding Philostrate's admonitions, the Duke selects the "Pyramus and Thisbe" of the "hard-handed men that work in Athens" believing that "never anything can be amiss,/ When simpleness and duty tender it" (V, i, 83-84). Nevertheless, the Duke leads his court in a lively critique of the play, interrupting it so thoroughly at points that the amateur players themselves break the illusion of the play to respond to the noble audience. Unlike Hamlet, Theseus does not request a particular text. But nevertheless, the Duke's rationale for the selection he does finally make reinforces the idea that from the patron's perspective, aesthetics were definitely subservient to political concerns.

In Hamlet and The Taming of the Shrew, the arrival of the players is an unexpected, albeit welcome occurrence; in A Midsummer Night's Dream the arrival of players is expected because of the occasion. Historically, the details of the entertainment at so important a wedding would certainly have been arranged in advance, yet Shakespeare shows us the process of that arrangement. The ordinances in Percy's Household Book make it quite clear that not only the marriage ceremonials, but also the marriage entertainments, were prescribed and executed more as business ventures than as religious observances or artistic events.

The same patterns emerge in the anonymous Sir Thomas More, ca. 1590. Here, More's wife introduces the players into her husband's presence, but before Sir Thomas will accept the players, he asks the identity of their patron, hiring them only after they have identified themselves as Cardinal Wolsey's Players, after they have established their social degree, political persuasion, and artistic quality. As in Hamlet, the arrival of the players is unexpected, but
happily coincides with a prearranged banquet for the mayor and aldermen of London.

The play *Sir Thomas More* also gives us an indication of the size and nature of the repertoire of a travelling troupe. When Sir Thomas inquires what texts the players have prepared, he is told they have a repertoire of seven plays, all moralities and interludes, including "... the Cradle of Securite, hit nayle o'the head, impatient povertie, the play of foure Pees, dives and Lazarus, Lustie Juuentus, and the mariage of witt and wisdome."6 From this list of plays (many of which are extant, further testimony to the author's attempt at verisimilitude in depicting the lives of the itinerant players), More selects an appropriate offering.

The fictional repertoire listed in the anonymous play does reflect the style of the few texts that theatre historians have actually attributed to itinerant troupes in the sixteenth century. We know that the King's players performed the "play of Self-Love" at Sir Thomas Chaloner's household on Shrove Monday sometime between 1551 and 1556. We know that Lady Honor Lisle purchased a text of an interlude entitled *Rex Diabole* for her household in 1538. We know that the Queen's players acted "the market of mischief" at Norwich in 1546, and that "Bale and his fellows," probably under Cromwell's patronage, were enacting Bale's virulent scripts in 1538 and 1539. Norwich records have yielded a reference to a play "at the gyldhall of zacheus," probably by the Marquis of Dorset's players about 1551-52. In 1542 "the Suffolke men" performed "their play of the battle betwixt the Spirit, the Soul and the Flesh." Hick Scorner was probably commissioned for Suffolk's players, and Youth seems to have been composed by the Earl of Northumberland's almoner.7 These titles, like those in the play *Sir Thomas More*, appear to be moral interludes rather than saints' lives or biblical plays.

During the performance of an almost unrecognizable *Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*, Sir Thomas restrains himself no more than did Hamlet and Theseus; in fact, Sir Thomas enters the play himself, assuming the role of an actor who has gone to fetch a forgotten beard. This incident is perhaps based upon Roper's apocryphal anecdote of More, as a youth in Cardinal Morton's household, stepping into an interlude and making "the lookers-on more sport than all the players beside."8 In the play of *Sir Thomas More*, More stops the play entirely when the banquet is served, requesting that the players begin again after supper, just as the players of *Fulgens and Lucrece* did at Morton's household in 1497. A marginal direction notes that the players are rewarded as their audience disappears to dinner; presumably the actors refreshed themselves in the kitchen while their betters enjoyed a fine repast.

Although *Hamlet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's
Dream, and The Book of Sir Thomas More are imaginative creations rather than historical documents, they are remarkably consistent about some facets of the relationship between touring players and the households they visited. In all cases, an intermediary representing the household management makes the initial contact with the troupe. In all cases, it is the noble patron himself who accepts the players and selects what shall be played. In addition, the visiting troupes are, in three of the four, carefully identified within the context of the play: Hamlet's players are professionals under civic patronage; The Book of Sir Thomas More's players are professionals under private patronage; A Midsummer Night's Dream's players are amateur locals. The social identity of the troupe becomes a factor in the patron's decision to accept them.

This dramatic touch coincides with historical fact, for the social identity of an itinerant troupe was the one item that Renaissance civic accountants invariably recorded. As many critics have noted, we frequently forget that the real focus for a performance at a noble household was not the play itself, but the courtiers watching the play. Consequently, the audience dialogues, actions, and reactions are more than response, they are subtext, and frequently overtext for the entertainment at hand. Once the play begins none of the troupes can expect quiet, attentive audiences unless they, like Sly, are asleep. This caustic comment upon Renaissance audience reception is unfortunately omitted in most modern productions, further indication that we understand very little about the dynamics of the theoretical relationship between stage, actor and audience in the sixteenth century courts.

After a troupe of players requested admission to the household, after the patron had accepted them and selected an appropriate text, the players required space for playing and preparing. Richard Southern and David Bevington have thoroughly investigated extant texts to show that most are adaptable, suited to performance in various Tudor Great Halls that may have differed in size and design, but followed the same basic architectural patterns. Visiting players, then, also knew generally what facilities they could expect at any household they visited, but were prepared to adapt to specific surroundings.

This short-notice adaptability, combined with the close proximity of audience and player that both Southern and Bevington stress, argues for a degree of unpredictability, perhaps informality, in the dramatic offering. As we have seen in Hamlet, The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and The Book of Sir Thomas More, Tudor audiences, even if they were members of the aristocracy, were not the mute restrained types that we find in theatres today. The "fourth wall" concept was non-existent; consequently, audiences could and did interrupt and interact with players. Henry VIII was famous for entering into the spirit and space of the disguising; Sir
Humphrey Ferrers of Tamworth Castle suffered a broken shin at a local play in 1536;\(^\text{10}\) Rastell designed *Four Elements* to be played with or without a disguising, in case the household that purchased the script wanted to get into the act.\(^\text{11}\) In his *History of Richard III* Sir Thomas More links actor, audience, patron and politics with his canny observation that demonstrates the insubstantial boundaries of theatre, philosophical conventions, and life:

> And in a stage play all the people know right well, that he that playeth the sowdayne is percase a sowter. Yet if one should can so lyttle good, to shewe out of seasonne what acquaintance he hath with him, and calle him by his owne name whyle he standeth in his magestie, one of his tormenters might hap to breake his head, and worthy for marring of the play.\(^\text{12}\)

No matter how carefully arrangements for reward and selection had been made previously, the household performance itself was subject to surprises, an atmosphere vividly communicated by Robert Armin in *Fool Upon Fool*. A troupe of players was dressing in “the Gentlemans kitchin” in preparation for an entrance “through the Entry into the Hall.” An itinerant fool, Jack Miller, was also waiting in the kitchen and noticed several freshly baked pies. The “Players boy... in his Ladies gowne” persuaded the fool to purloin a few pies for them, whereupon Jack stuck his face into the oven, burning off all his hair. This ludicrous event affected the entire evening’s performance:

> ...the Lady of the Play being ready to enter before the Gentiles to play her part: no sooner began, but remembring Jacke, laught out, and could goe no further: the Gentleman muzed at what hee laught; ...  

The boy explained his mirth, and the fool was produced, entertaining the gentleman but effectively ending the play. Later that night, “the Players drest them in another place,” and tried again.\(^\text{13}\) Armin’s anecdote expresses not only the informality of the occasion, but also the adaptability of the players. The boy did not hesitate to filch a pie or to break character in order to share a jest; the whole troupe responded to the wishes of their host, postponing their play so that the “Gentiles” could share in the laughter.

In all the plays I have mentioned here, and in Armin’s *Fool Upon Fool*, disruption of the play is the rule rather than the exception; were we to take fiction as historical evidence, we might well wonder whether a complete play was ever performed before a household audience. If Shakespeare is being realistic here, the lives of the itinerant players cannot have been easy, and their artistic sensibilities must, for survival, have been rather thick-skinned. More likely, Shakespeare is employing convention to indulge himself in that most
favorite of actor pastimes: "criticize the obtuse audience." Or perhaps these facts indicate that sixteenth-century spectators and patrons had a remarkably different attitude toward theatrical art than we do; we must remember the etymology of the word "play" and understand that to a sixteenth century audience, the primary denotation of "play" as game, complete with all the improvisational impulses that the term suggests, was inexorably linked with its secondary denotation, "play" as fixed dramatic text.

In our post-copyright-law times, an age of unprecedented respect for and power of the playwright, it is perhaps difficult to understand the noble Renaissance spectator, to whom the text was not sacred and disbelief was not unconditionally suspended. If the sanctity of the of the text had been respected, surely more manuscripts would have survived the sixteenth century intact, what did survive would be less corrupted by the variant memories of the actors who helped compile them, and Shakespeare would never have had to warn "...let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them..." On the contrary, theories of Renaissance audience reception cannot simply dismiss the phenomenon of "ludus interruptus" as an opportunity for exaggerated authorial spleen.

At this point it is helpful to recall the structure of Percy's revels, the structure of "old-fashioned" drama such as Gorboduc and The Murder of Gonzago and the etymology of the word "interlude." The Northumberland Household Book is very specific about the nature of the Twelfth Night entertainment, and interruptions seem far more frequent than completions during the evening. The ascending order of the initial procession is "interrupted" in the middle by the appearance of the Earl, after whom follow only those lower in social standing, an order that does not correspond with our conception of climax. Further, every artistic entertainment is nested within another event: the plays and disguisings within the banquet and the holiday/holy day, the entertainers themselves surrounded by performers on a political stage. Most significantly, the only entertainment performed by the nobility, the henchman's morris, earns the right to interrupt the disguising, performed by common entertainers. Virtually every description of an entertainment at a royal or great household makes it quite clear that the play is only a part, and in many cases a minor part, of the banquets, dances, conferences, and negotiations that surround it.

We must also recall that suspense and suspension of disbelief were not the overwhelming focus of the theatrical experience during the early Renaissance period. Those plays admired by such scholars as Sidney, which contained the same type of dumbshow performed by Hamlet's "tragedians of the city," effectively short-circuited audience interest in the content of the play and shifted focus to the form. Audiences for the cycle plays would not wonder whether the flood receded, whether Christ survived the crucifixion, or whether
human beings were ultimately redeemed. As a result, interruption in the action, for whatever purposes, would have little disturbed our Medieval and Renaissance forebears, whose attention was focused by other matters than wonder at the outcome of the mystery. For the audiences of the religious drama, there was only one mystery which had long ago been solved; for those at the noble courts, the crucial mysteries were not on the stage, but around the stage, in the seats with Gertrude and Claudius or Henry and Elizabeth, not with the “insubstantial pageants” that might or might not complete themselves upon the stage.

Third, although scholars do not agree precisely on the meaning or etymology of the term “interlude,” there is little doubt that “inter” means between or among, and that “ludus” means game or diversion. Whether the play claimed the title of “inter” or the title of “ludus”, it is clear that, at least in the noble courts, the entertainment was specifically intended to fit among other events, to interrupt or be interrupted by eating, hunting, dancing or rest.

Rastell and Medwall, who understand the delicate fabric of dramatic structure better than most, use it to their advantage: in *The Nature of the Four Elements* Rastell designs a place within his text for the potential interruption of a disguising; and in *Fulgens and Lucrece*, Medwall metatextually plays with the identity of the “players” A and B. In support of the aesthetic theory of these playwrights, both dramatic texts and contemporary historical accounts demonstrate that the theatrical artists who performed in the great households were considered patronized servants, frequently wearing the livery of their masters, and as such their products were subject to the whims, ideologies, and schedules of those they strove to please.

Many Renaissance plays contain references to performers visiting noble households, an occurrence quite frequent in the Tudor era. In the absence of primary historical source materials, these literary analogues are invaluable to the theatre historian as vivid recreations of the methods and procedures that affected the hundreds of itinerant players who were touring the provinces in the sixteenth century. The treatment of itinerant troupes seems to have been paradoxical; some details, such as the financial arrangements and the selection of appropriate material, were strictly and bureaucratically arranged. Other details, such as the performance itself, which seems to us the most important facet of the tour, were approached with relaxed decorum, to say the least.

Tudor players were marvels of adaptability; they continually adapted to new playing spaces, to new audiences, to new situations that threatened the survival of their art. By the time of the flourishing of the public theatre, actors like Shakespeare, with more than a century of tradition as travelling players behind them, were not only fully prepared for any contingency, but also acutely aware of the political difference between playing for the public on the
south bank and playing for the court at Whitehall. Modern actors often react with fury at the slightest disturbance in the silent cathedral of the contemporary theatre, but their sixteenth-century forebears were expert at coping with distraction and turning it to professional profit and advantage. The groundlings were no match for them.

NOTES