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The Three Ladies of London: A Critical Play Review

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On 23 June 2015, a production of Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* played in the Robinson Memorial Theatre, performed as part of the conference 'Performance as Research in Early English Studies: *The Three Ladies of London in Context*' at McMaster University. Compared to other delegates at the conference, I am in the enviable position of being able to reflect critically upon this production in a piece of what Robin Nelson has termed 'complementary writing'.¹ While the contextual essays circulated prior to the conference provided a bank of scholarship and a measure against which to judge whether delegates' ideas about the play obtained in performance (although the performance's purpose was neither to address nor test delegates' specific concerns) the form of exegesis offered by complementary writing is determined by an ability to approach performance in a relatively open-minded way. Notwithstanding the fact that I too came to the production with particular expectations, there were no specific questions to which I wanted answers and I had not already made an intervention into the field of criticism surrounding the play. On 23 June, 2015, a staging of *Three Ladies* was postulated by Peter Cockett as the director alongside a cast of actors and technicians, and theirs is the hypothesis against which I have returned to read the play as a written text. In this way the criticism aims to evidence this piece of research, and is governed predominantly by the movement from the stage to the page, rather than vice versa.

Rob Conkie made the important statement in his keynote speech at the conference that critical responses to PAR should avoid belittling the production at the heart of the research by

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saying that it should have been *more* this or *less* that. To paraphrase his point, the sort of complementary writing described by Nelson should respond to the materialities of a watched performance and use these to question our own assumptions about a play. The version of a text produced through PAR or Practice-based Research couldn't and shouldn't be anything other than what it is, one version of a play, informed by various contingencies – research agendas, rehearsal availability, actors and casting choices, venues of performance, and budgets, to name a few. As Conkie asserted, theatre is not an ideal space in which to 'prove' what we already 'know' about a play. However, PAR productions also always produce the spectre of alternate stagings facilitated through critical reflection upon what happened in that specific performance. What follows is my response to the superb version of *The Three Ladies of London* at McMaster University with its clashes of style and form; part-modern dress and part-historical, its characters presented sometimes archetypically, sometimes stereotypically, and sometimes naturalistically. While I cannot do justice to every aspect of this provocative production, I will attempt to address some of the questions that it raised, as well as to reflect upon the practice of PAR more widely.

The definition of PAR used is the one suggested by [Jacqueline Jenkins in her paper](#) for the conference, despite the fact that early modern studies is still far from a consensus on what is meant by PAR's various incarnations, whether Practice-based Research, Practice-as-Research, or Performance-as-Research.² I am still unsure as to where I stand in this debate and indeed whether it is the most important one to be engaged in with regards to this methodology. Once a substantial body of such research into early drama has been built, perhaps we should then consider how to theorise and catalogue it. Whichever way we prefer to label our research, I do agree with Jenkins that there is a difference between an approach which sees performance as *primarily* the end-point of research and one which sees it *primarily* as the beginning; so, I am going to use Practice-based Research (PbR) when I mean

performance that is the basis of further written work or critical reflection, undertaken in order to explore some particular textual crux, or an aspect of a play that requires a dramatic rather than a scholarly solution. Conversely, when I invoke Performance as Research (PAR) I mean the sort of methodology that privileges performance as the outcome of a research process that, while of course stimulating further ideas, writing, performances and reflections, stands as a research output in its own right.

The Three Ladies and Domesticity

However profound and longstanding our knowledge of a particular written text is, there is always room for genuine surprises when we view it through the prism of PAR, and many delegates following the production remarked upon one such surprise, the dominance of Simplicity in the play. This dominance is partly by virtue of his lengthy speeches but especially because he enjoys so much time on stage alone. Wilson has endowed his actor with a particularly powerful tool in this respect, enabling him to build an intense relationship with the audience over the course of the play. It is extremely difficult when reading a text to gauge the dominance of and between particular roles and in performance it became clear that this really is Simplicity's play (despite the time enjoyed by Conscience, Lucre, and Mercadorus upon the stage). Simplicity's domination added a new level of complicity to performance. The strong relationship between audience and actor here was not simply a consequence of stage time, but also the strengths of the actor as an engaging and comedic presence, despite the character's questionable behaviour. In the McMaster production, it was fun to watch Simplicity fall. The effect of this stage business was to shift my scholarly concerns to Simplicity's concerns, which were overwhelmingly not about the city, or religion, or gender, or economics, but about food. I developed a heightened sense of what sort of food was and was not available in the world of the play, which then reinforced the text's concern with

hospitality, neighbourliness, and domesticity. In this sense London makes itself felt not so much in a geographical sense, but more conceptually in terms of the relationships between its inhabitants and, as delegates noted, in ways that resonate with the decline of hospitality that became the subject of an Elizabethan statute in 1596. The political elite's concern that migration to London was breaking down charitable infrastructures in the country was transposed onto London in such lines as, 'My friend, hospitality doth not consist in great fare and banqueting / But in doing good unto the poor, and to yield them some refreshing' (QLN 613-4).³

Cockett employed a pattern of entrances and exits in this production with characters always entering through one of the curtains situated top stage left, and always exiting through the other that was top stage right. Cockett used the same system for the productions mounted during the 'Shakespeare and the Queen's Men' conference at the University of Toronto in 2006, and, as he explains with regard to these multiple performances:

Given the time constraints and the fact that specific doors were not recorded for entrances and exits, I felt that early modern theatre professionals must have had some shorthand or protocol actors could follow for every play. I decided to experiment with the possibility that characters always entered through one door and exited through another ... The advantage of this simple system is that it avoids the possibility of collision and traffic problems as the characters get on and off the stage, since they will never try to enter and exit through the same door/curtain.⁴

This logic of entrances and exits means that in a busy play with a large number of characters, he established a grammar of the stage. However what this grammar didn't allow for was the construction of particular domestic spaces for different characters. In some ways therefore the blocking protocol guided the production away from the particular set of concerns that Simplicity foregrounds. Thinking in terms of the tents or pavilions used for medieval plays,

an alternate staging could capitalize on where particular homes or interiors are located within the space so as to produce the sense of desirable and undesirable domesticity in a play so concerned with hospitality, generosity, and welcoming interiors on the one hand, and bawdy houses, evictions, and the danger of the streets on the other. Does this play need a sense of the houses within London, and beyond this domesticity, a demarcation of larger geographical areas such as London or Turkey to perform its concerns with inside and outside and the moral timbres of particular places? Wilson displays an intense and nuanced interest in location in the play. Several times *Three Ladies* issues commands for certain characters to ‘go’ into certain places with each other (eg, QLN237, 333, 517), and the recurring concern about who is going to dinner with whom begs the next question of ‘where?’.

A sense of domesticity lost through the construction of specific houses was, however, reinforced in unexpected ways. In the interval I shifted seats so that I was to the left of the actors among the audience that flanked them on three sides. This meant that when curtains were drawn back for entrances I could see actors waiting in the ‘backstage’ area assigned between the two ‘doors’. Hearing their footsteps behind the screen and glimpsing the actors readying themselves became a highlight of the experience of the performance; there was something homely and homespun about this viewpoint that further blurred the distinction between actor and audience. Indeed, in a tweet about this subject, Omar Khafagy (Gerontus) told me that ‘As I awaited my scenes, I was intensely conscious of the audience just outside the curtains’.⁵ This consciousness worked both ways. My peeks backstage provided a viewpoint onto the backstage narratives so frequently neglected in early modern scholarship, and so much more important to this theatre than the contemporary practices that keep their audiences insulated from the labour of the actors.

***The Three Ladies* and Direct Address**

Another surprise of this production was the variation in modes of direct address. While it was evident that this medium of speech would be key to the performance from the Prologue's first instance of 'You marvel then' (QLN15), this means of audience engagement also worked in and across multiple registers. There was a striking contrast between when we were addressed in a sweeping mode – as was often the case during Simplicity and Dissimulation's speeches – and the times when that address held more personal appeal, as when the audience were exhorted to put money in the beggars' hats in Scene 13, or when the physical characteristics of audience members were picked on by actors, such as David Bevington's entirely imaginary large belly at QLN 1151. A particularly arresting instance of *direct* direct address (if we can call it that) occurred during Conscience's song at the beginning of Scene 10, when her question about whether we would buy her broom felt like a genuine appeal and thus made us complicit in her downfall when we didn't purchase. It is interesting that two of these notable moments of direct direct address happened around money, but also that Wilson appears to trust that in the instance of Tom Beggar and Wily Will (and via the mode of the money-making familiar to audiences of *Mankind* who are exhorted for coins to see Titivillus) the audience will subscribe to the conflation of character with the need for the actors to be paid, but in the case of the brooms, they won't, because if they do buy Conscience's brooms, then her descent into prostitution becomes unnecessary.

***The Three Ladies* and spatial allegory**

One of the particular benefits of seeing *Three Ladies* in performance was the ability to assess the way it extends allegory of theme and character into spatial relationships, or the way it materialized the proxemics of psychomachia. Allegorization of character had very strong presentation in the production, notably in Usury's mask-like unflinching grin – or grimace? – that gave this performance an archetypal quality. Similarly the use of costume and colour

worked well in terms of distinguishing vice from virtue; the pastels of Love and Conscience's robes opposing Dissimulation's strongly contrasting primary red and blue motley which the costume designer told me during the interval signified the clash between 'what he says and what he does'. However, while scholarship on allegory usually approaches it through either character or type, themes or plot, Wilson's play also points towards the allegorization of *space* in the morality play. He is not unique in this. That devils can swarm from beneath a booth stage or that God could be located in a heavenly scaffold is only the most obvious example of a moral patterning of space in medieval drama. Early audiences were consistently expected to read the signs emitted through spatial configurations in order to interpret allegory. In *Everyman*, for instance, Good Deeds is found lying 'colde in the ground'.⁶ Unable to assist Everyman she instructs her sister Knowledge to 'go by'⁷ his side for the remainder of his pilgrimage to death. Towards the end of the play, having been deserted by Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods, he draws the faculties of Five Wits, Beauty, Strength, and Discretion closer towards him as he reaches knowledge of the immortality of his soul: 'Come hyder and be present'.⁸ In each case, the proximity of characters as well as their location on both vertical and horizontal axes provide signs that the audience must decode to access meaning in the play.

The McMaster production of *Three Ladies* similarly engaged with the magnetic attraction and repulsion of allegorical types contingent upon their position on the moral spectrum. The allegory was expressed through spatial interaction from the outset of the performance, with an embattled Love and Conscience banding closely together from their first entrance. They were quickly outnumbered by the vices multiplying on stage – Dissimulation, Fraud, then Simony and Usury – who messily clubbed together centre stage (a clustering tendency mirrored in their shared lines) in an otherwise quite formally blocked production with an emphasis on staging in the diagonal. The fact that when Conscience was

encroached upon by the vices in her isolated position downstage left – nestled among an audience who couldn't, or wouldn't, protect her – meant that audience members in the middle and right flanks shared her sense of being backed into a corner. In his keynote, Conkie additionally noted the importance of the gesture touch in this production and what he called the 'transfer of desire' from Lucre to her followers in the opening sections of the play. In each instance spatial interactions carry the allegory.

There were also moments where such spatial allegories could have been developed further: Conscience's fall signified in the kiss from Lucre could have been more sexual, and Usury and Simony should have entered the space 'hand-in-hand' as in the stage direction (QLN145), though Peter Cockett openly admitted he had overlooked this in an email to me with a 'Darn!'.⁹ Both Lucre's kiss of Conscience and Usury and Simony's hand-holding can perhaps be seen as queer instances in the text – resonances explored through the representations of a camp Sir Nicholas Nemo and overtly homosexual Sir Peter Pleaseman in the production – and it would have been interesting to see how they played out against the heteronormativity of marriage and prostitution in the play (however deviant these manifestations of heterosexuality are). Clear examples of moral spatial patterning in the McMaster production nevertheless indicate that we need to widen out what falls within its remit when we invoke the term 'allegory' in our scholarship. The coding of interaction and gestural interplay between characters indicates a vocabulary of proxemics that signal existing and changing alliances onstage, and so we might also think of in terms of the allegorizing of space when we consider allegory in early drama.

The Three Ladies and PAR

While holding hands and kissing might be signs of the queerness of vicious types in *Three Ladies*, such an interpretation depends upon the presentation of the dramatic action. Certainly

in this production, Lucre's kissing of Conscience was relatively chaste, on the cheek rather than on the lips. The choice of a relatively innocent kiss was one, Cockett told me, dictated by the particular actors he was working with rather than his directorial preference.¹⁰ I asked if he thought this choice might have been due to their status as student actors rather than professionals, but he replied that such instances always 'have to be negotiated at the moment of rehearsal, although it would be easier' to negotiate these with professional actors.¹¹ I wonder, however, whether there is a potential conflict in our attempts to explore the full scope of a text through PAR when the actors are principally garnered from the student body. Enough space was not left in the performance, for instance, to explore a key aspect of medieval dramaturgy, the expectation that an audience can respond to or argue with a character (ie, at QLN 1331), and this omission seemed to be due to a lack of confidence on the actors' part. The skill required to know how long an audience might need to pick up the bait versus the danger to the production of disrupting the narrative is one borne of the experience of practice. [Kevin Quarmby](#) makes an insightful case for not diminishing the work produced through PAR conducted in an educational context, writing that 'PAR requires our acceptance that all performers, regardless of experience or prior knowledge, will create diverse embodied performances';¹² however, we could argue that the hierarchies inherent to pedagogy may obstruct the imperatives of PAR. Of course the theatre is not without its own economic, social, and professional hierarchies, but there is arguably an in-built inequality in the pedagogical PAR relationship and, in all likelihood, a disparity in terms of professional knowledge. While in rehearsing and staging a little-known play the learning process is undoubtedly shared, and all rehearsals rooms are determined by the transference of knowledge from director to actor and vice versa, the balance of the learning curve is still weighted towards the student actor. When a professional actor comes into a rehearsal room with probable prior knowledge of handling verse, working different stage configurations,

establishing multiple types of relationships with audience, doubling, acoustics, and interactions both on and off the stage, they bring the sort of ‘procedural knowledge’ (as Christian Billing termed it in his keynote speech at the conference) which means that those in the room are on a more or less equal footing.

In my own work on *The Play of the Weather* and *A Satire of the Three Estates*, the collaborations have been conducted between professional actors, directors, heritage specialists, and scholars, and all of them brought their own professional expertise to the project. There has therefore been compensation for the problems caused by a lack of experience in any one of these realms and each group has operated in trust that the others will contribute to the project at the same level. By way of example of what happens when different levels of knowledge collide, I’d offer up a PbR project that I directed with amateur actors, a semi-staged promenade reading of *The Late Lancashire Witches* in Lancaster Castle in 2012. While working with amateurs befitted this project, it was also frustrating in terms of the limited skillsets of those involved (I include myself in this as the director). This wasn’t just about the quality of acting – although it sometimes was – but also a lack of basic theatrical knowledge among some of the amateur actors such as how to cheat stage positions for audibility. While much was gleaned through this piece of PbR in terms of exploring notions of community in the play as well as the ability to fully explore the regional dialect that the play deploys, something was also lost in the lack of self-assurance to manage the non-theatrical and difficult spaces of the castle, a rougher final outcome because of the problems of scheduling rehearsal time around people’s jobs and availability, as well as a level of inhibition in some actors’ performances.

This is not to dismiss PAR conducted in pedagogical or amateur contexts. It can be a useful and critically productive research tool and, as Cockett writes, the use of amateur actors may well be preferable depending on ‘who is researching and what they are researching, and

at what level they are researching'.¹³ Amateur actors might be desirable if the experiment is concerned specifically with the sort of grammar school drama [considered by Elizabeth Hanson](#), for instance.¹⁴ It is also important to clarify that the success of PAR is not about how entertaining a piece of drama ultimately becomes, as entertainment is not necessarily the end-point of PAR and the will to entertain of the professional actor can sometimes detract from exploring historical modes of acting and staging. Indeed, at times, the director may encounter a fixity in the professional which hinders rather than helps the process of discovery. As Cockett writes in his email, professionals 'think they hold knowledge of universal best practices but they only know their own best practices which don't necessarily fit with our knowledge of the plays and their original context'¹⁵ and, in this sense the flexibility and openness of the amateur might be beneficial when approaching plays about whose performance practices we know relatively little. However PAR is always most productive when there is a meeting of minds, and in the gaps between a historically specific performance practice and our inability to reconstruct it in all its detail, the procedural knowledge brought to the rehearsal room by a professional actor and his or her adeptness to reanimate unusual dramatic forms granted through experience, does suggest to me that when we seek to ask questions about professional practice, they are usually best answered by professional actors.

Notes

¹ Robin Nelson (ed.), *Practice as Research in The Art: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 34-7.

² Jacqueline Jenkins, 'Practice-based Research and Early Period Theatre Histories: A performance Methodology', *Performance as Research in Early English Theatre Studies: The Three Ladies of London in Context*,

<http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/JacquelineJenkins>

³ All references to the performance script for *The Three Ladies of London* as edited by Jessica Dell and Chantelle Thauvette on the conference website,

<http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/3LLperformancescript/index.htm>

⁴ Peter Cockett, 'Performing Plays for Touring', *Performing the Queen's Men*,
http://thequeensmen.mcmaster.ca/performance_research/traffic/touring1.htm

⁵ Omar Khafagy (@PerfResearch15), Twitter post, 24 June 2015, 10:55 am,
<https://twitter.com/PerfResearch15/status/613737246655688704>

⁶ Anonymous, *Everyman* (1528), B5v. Note the *in* rather than *on*. Not only has she been crippled through neglect, but she may well further debased through a subterranean positioning in a ditch, or perhaps a grave.

⁷ Ibid, B6

⁸ Ibid, B7

⁹ Peter Cockett, email message to author, 15 July 2015.

¹⁰ Peter Cockett, email message to author, 29 July 2015.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kevin Quarmby, 'Enactment and Exegesis: Recontextualizing Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* through Performance as Research', *Performance as Research in Early English Theatre Studies: The Three Ladies of London in Context*,

<http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/par/KevinQuarmby.htm>

¹³ Cockett, email message to author, 29 July 2015.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Hanson, 'Early Modern Pedagogy and *The Three Ladies of London*, *Performance as Research in Early English Theatre Studies: The Three Ladies of London in Context*,

<http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/contexts/ElizabethHanson.htm>

¹⁵ Cockett, email message to author, 29 July 2015.