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The Performances of *The Three Ladies of London* and *1 Henry VI* as Research in Theatre History

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I am relatively new to the subject of Performance as Research (PAR), which formed the theoretical underpinning of the conference, 'Performance as Research in Early English Theatre Studies: *The Three Ladies of London* in Context' (23-25 June 2015). Consequently, I will be feeling my way across territory that is familiar to me as a theatre historian and occasional playgoer but unfamiliar as a commentator or analyst. I have some experience as dramaturge for two productions of plays by Shakespeare at UALR, but the arrangement was casual; mostly I answered questions about the text and performance conditions in the early modern period. I have not even seen many live productions of plays from Shakespeare's time. In Little Rock, The Rep offers a Shakespearean play every now and then. I have been to London and Stratford over the years, as well as Stratford, Ontario, and Ashland, Oregon. In a few cases, I have had the good fortune to combine the roles of playgoer and scholar. One was my participation in the conference, 'Shakespeare and the Queen's Men', in Toronto in October 2006. There, the productions by Peter Cockett, with complementary scholarly discussions, served as exemplars of performance as a medium of research. Another has been my association with the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, VA, both as participant in biennial conferences and as adjunct faculty in the graduate program in Shakespeare and Performance at Mary Baldwin College. Even so, when I am sitting

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down the row from Alan Dessen at the Robinson Memorial Theatre at McMaster University during performances of *The Three Ladies of London* and *1 Henry VI*, I am keenly aware of my inexperience as director/dramaturge/audience for the plays I study in the context of the Elizabethan theatrical marketplace. That deficit notwithstanding, I offer observations below on the questions raised for me as a theatre historian when I consider productions of *The Three Ladies of London* (3LL) and *1 Henry VI* (1H6) through the lens of PAR.

The Cockett Production of *The Three Ladies of London*

Venue

The Cockett production offered a flat stage with playgoers seated on three rows of risers on three sides of the stage. The tiring house wall had four partitions; the centre two were stationary, the outer two were doors. The door at stage left was used consistently by the players to enter the stage; the door at stage right was used for exits (or so it seemed to me). This space, simple and effective, was not a replica of a venue where 3LL might have been performed at its debut but rather a mix of features from those various spaces.¹ In fact, scholars do not know the specific venues where 3LL was performed (the title page claims only that it was ‘publicly played’). The odds are that it was put on in the provinces and London. If it belonged initially to Leicester’s Men ca 1580 (as scholars have assumed),² 3LL might have been played at any or all of the towns visited by the company between 1578 and 1583.³ These include the following: Norwich, Aldeburgh (twice), Ipswich (twice), and Cambridge (town) in East Anglia; Dover, Canterbury (twice), Faversham, Fordwich (twice), and New Romney in the Southeast; Coventry in the Midlands; Shrewsbury in the West Midlands; and Newcastle upon Tyne in the North. For the most part, these performances were likely given in town halls except in Shrewsbury, where the

record implies the Gullet Tavern. As a venue, the Elizabethan guildhall typically had a large room decorated with the trappings of civic and national power. One such is St. Mary's in Coventry, which survives relatively unchanged from 1500s. At the high end, this hall could have easily accommodated Cockett's set design, the plainness of which would have been accentuated by the cathedral-like décor of the room including its 'splendid windows and an intact minstrels' gallery'.⁴

In London, Leicester's company would most likely have played at the Theatre, a claim based on the assumption that the membership of James Burbage in the company would have provided access to the playhouse in which he was part-owner. No images survive of the Theatre, but C. Walter Hodges provided numerous fanciful drawings in *Enter the Whole Army* that reflect popular scholarly opinion on the interior of the playhouse. Two of these drawings are worth considering in terms of Cockett's two-door set, which in the Theatre would have been provided by openings on the tiring house wall. Hodges's Figure 10, described as an 'Elizabethan stage and tiring-house (conjectural)', has three openings; the ones stage left and right are arched, the centre opening is squared and eight feet wide. The second noteworthy drawing is Figure 7. Labelled a 'Diagram of Elizabethan stage conditions', it features two doors with a centred curtain 'attached to nothing' but included in the drawing to allow 'a large opening sometimes referred to as a "discovery", wherein prepared set-pieces could be revealed or thrust-forward onto the stage'.⁵ As Hodges knew, and as participants in the PAR conference also know, the existence of a middle (or third) door of the Elizabethan playhouse is one of those claims that evidence does not strongly support but many scholars believe anyway. Had I able to attend rehearsals, I would undoubtedly have learned much from discussions about the utility of a central curtained space for the reasons scholars usually give: the mass entry of characters, the discovery of a scene, or the thrust of

furniture onto the stage. Obviously, the Cockett production decided against – and managed quite well without – a middle door, or a curtain (attached to something) and furniture such as a bar.⁶

Company Business

Cockett used fifteen players in *3LL*. Nine were males; six were females. None were ‘boys’ in the Elizabethan sense of a youth between the ages of ten and eighteen. According to the playbill, eight players doubled roles; two doubled the same role (both Conscience and Lady Lucre played Love). Of the six female players, four were cross-cast as male characters. Omar Khafagy, who played Gerontus, observes that Usury and Gerontus could be doubled, a choice that would have reduced the Cockett cast to twelve.⁷ On the subject of casting, Lloyd Kermode, determining an ‘economy in casting’, counts seven as the minimum number of players required by the play.⁸ Cockett’s fifteen cross-cast and modestly doubled players, balanced against Kermode’s heavily doubled seven, raise questions about cast assignments in Wilson’s time. Most theatre historians assume that boys played female parts (and semi-mutes such as servants and messengers), yet one public-theatre casting chart that survives from the period suggests more flexibility. The title-page of *Cambyses* (1569) diagrams the ‘division of parts’ for the play: eight players (called ‘men’) divide thirty-four parts. One of the players appears to have been an apprentice boy, who was cast as Young Child (6 lines) and Cupid (6 lines).⁹ Another appears to have been an experienced boy; he handled six roles: Meretrix, Shame, Otian, Mother, Lady, and Queen. A third handled six roles, one of which was Venus. This chart corroborates scholarly opinion about the segregation of parts according to gender with the exception of the player who added Venus to his male roles. Of course, the chart also genders the abstract characters as male (even, perhaps, ‘Shame’, though played by the otherwise cross-dressed boy). In 1572, Leicester’s players petitioned their patron

to reaffirm their status with him by issuing a license that protected them from arrest while they pursued their profession. Six men, including James Burbage and Robert Wilson, signed the letter; presumably, the men were sharers in the company. Five of the same names recur on the patent granted Leicester's players on 10 May 1574 (the missing name is Thomas Clarke). In two years, Burbage's Theater would be open. Theatre historians have assumed that the regular availability of a London playhouse enabled companies to expand both in number of players and size of repertory. That principle, applied to Leicester's men by 1580, would mean that the company had increased to include boys and hired men who were now part of daily business but apparently absent from the documentary record. Therefore, if the company attempted as generous a casting scheme for *3LL* in 1580 as the Cockett production, their resources were likely to have been sufficient.

But would Leicester's men have taken a company of thirteen on the road? Theatre historians have been coupling small-cast plays with touring for more than a century. Kermode articulates orthodox opinion when he links an economy of casting in *3LL* with the observation that 'some cutting [of the text] ... may suggest accommodation for touring'.¹⁰ Proof that companies by the 1580s were redesigning – and thus shortening – their scripts for fewer players was supposed to come from data recovered through the Toronto-based project, Records of Early English Drama (REED), but it has not. No one knows that data more thoroughly than Sally-Beth MacLean, director of research and general editor at REED, and no one has given the lack of REED evidence on touring scripts more thought. It is thus telling that, in the section, 'Road Shows: Plays for Touring', in *Lord Strange's Men and Their Plays*, MacLean has no choice but to rely on the venerable claim of 'reduced-cast texts' and its corollary of reduced company size as one means of identifying the plays *Strange's Men* took on tour.¹¹ Regarding the Cockett production

of *3LL* as real-life evidence of a portable text, I suggest that the reliance on hand-held props, the two-door set design, and a script that allows a variable number of players brings the question down to simple economics: would a company have been willing to pay for six extra players on the road in order to be able to mount a more robust set of offerings? REED is teaching us that troupes were creative about financing a tour. Sometimes they got meals, drink, lodging, or stabling in exchange for a lesser remuneration. In the best scenario, companies matched bookings in towns near great houses, for, as Barbara Palmer proved with REED data, 'playing in houses paid well'.¹² And the script of *3LL* is a reminder of another commercial strategy: both in the Prologue and the begging scene, the players ask for money. The hawking may be more subtle in *3LL* than the hat-passing in *Mankind*, but the motive is the same: 'we shall your custom have' (Prologue, 18).¹³

Dramaturgy

Many aspects of the Cockett production prompt me to think more intelligently as a theatre historian about my opinions on stage action in the 1580s, but I will focus here on two: the complexities of performing allegory and violence. In my opinion, a significant challenge for the director in a production of *3LL* is to balance the allegorical dimension of characters with their narrative identity, especially with the four jacks and three ladies. The Cockett production underplayed (or I just missed) the card metaphor of 'cards ... knaves ... ruffling out' that makes a foursome of Dissimulation, Fraud, Usury, and Simony (2.89-90). Rather than signal their wild-card brotherhood through costuming and shared gestures, the production differentiated each with apparel that suggested their individual allegorical identity. I do not mean this observation as criticism; I thought the dramaturgy was terrific (ie, Dissimulation's keeping a hint of the jester in

his cap as he changed his station to that of groom; Usury's relentless grin, which Rob Conkie insightfully called a mask). But was I seeing an attempt to capture the sense of allegorical figures by the theatrical norms of 1580s or by those of 2015? Cockett's choices worked perfectly for a modern audience. However, I suspect that Wilson's audience saw four jacks who were visually less individualized and who acted less realistically. Of course, it is very possible that my expectations are skewed by the old bias that acting styles in Wilson's time were stiff and mannered.¹⁴

Staging Lucre, Love, and Conscience in *3LL* exacerbates the tug-of-war between allegory and theatrical realism. In 2006 Cockett offered the scene in which Lucre spots Conscience as a kind of show-and-tell for the scholarly audience.¹⁵ The players were male, and they were dressed in bourgeois Elizabethan apparel. These choices approximate the norm in companies of the time with youths cast as women and with clothing more or less contemporary. In the 2015 production, Cockett cast women in the female roles and differentiated the clothing. Conscience wore a long, pale blue, ribbon-sashed robe, vestal-virgin-like in its gauzy softness. Lucre wore a relatively plain gold evening gown with one sleeve provocatively off-shoulder. Several attendees at the conference submitted papers arguing that Wilson's characters degraded women by depicting Lucre as a madam whom men desire and by turning Conscience into a bawd. However, in Cockett's production, Lucre did not exploit her allure through overtly sexualized stage business. There were dominatrix gestures, some touching, and the cupid-bow lips, but she remained aloof. Conscience, despite her ruined economic circumstances, remained chaste; her voice did not coarsen as might have suited a woman now fallen to the status of whore. For me, then, the Cockett production kept the abstract identity of these two characters visible to the audience, not

allowing the allegory to degenerate by gratuitous stage gestures into caricatures of sexualized women.

Elizabethan allegory is hard to stage for modern audiences, but violence (I think) is harder. The problem is that we laugh where Wilson's audiences would not have. The salient moment in *3LL* is the whipping of Simplicity. Was this meant to be comic in its own time? Surely not; surely Simplicity's whipping is supposed to be theatrically real to dramatize the systemic severity and injustice of Justice. The Cockett production managed this moment by making it intentionally funny. The constable cracked his belt, and there was a girl with a whip, while Simplicity (it seemed to me) sat in astonished disbelief that no blows came his way. The audience laughed, as it was supposed to do. However, it also laughed when Conscience could not sell her brooms and when Lucre was taken off stage to begin her punishment. Georgina Lucas, reviewing a performance of *The Massacre at Paris* given to an audience of Marlowe scholars at the Blackfriars Playhouse in 2013 points out moments 'of hilarity unsolicited by the production' and 'gales of laughter ... [at] ... scenes of murder and massacre'.¹⁶ The whipping of Simplicity did not come up during Cockett's workshop on *3LL* at the conference, but that would have been an opportunity for me to hear theatrical professionals discuss the treatment of scenes obviously serious in their own time but **funny to audiences now**.

The Roberts-Smith Production of *1 Henry VI*

The Roberts-Smith production of *1H6* necessarily addressed the factors of venue, company, and dramaturgy in the performance of an early modern play, but the structure of the play and its narrative demands resulted in different choices. For example, the large and porous tiring house wall enabled a more complex choreography for entrances and exits (coupled with the use of the

Commented [HMO1]: Again, I'm not sure all the audience found it funny: Simplicity's howls were pretty unnerving. The first time I saw it in rehearsal, I was completely shocked. So yes, it's funny because we see the staging mechanics, and we know Simplicity is acting, but what he enacts is shocking, understood allegorically.

auditorium stairs). The wall also doubled as battlements. Hodges has drawings for *IH6*, specifically Figure 8, that address the stage business of onstage battles (of which there are many in *IH6*). He imagined a two-story structure between the doors at stage left and right that is thrust forward, with a curtain below and a rooftop large enough for fight scenes.¹⁷ The Roberts-Smith tiring house wall, or set of curtains, was more like a jungle gym, which required considerable athleticism from the players as they fought off enemy attacks. Without drawings from Shakespeare's time that depict battle scenes, scholars and theatre professionals are on their own in devising workable solutions to the numerous siege scenes in early modern drama. The solution in the Roberts-Smith production, which made no claim of imitating early modern practice, was nonetheless theatrically effective. This production met the challenge of casting a play that requires twenty-two players – nearly half of whom were doubling three roles – with a company of fifteen and a lively disregard for realism: women played men with no attention to rank, and they played children (Talbot's son, the gunner's boy).¹⁸ In one instance of partial early modern authenticity, a man (but not a youth) played Joan of Arc. The playbill, overwhelmed by the multiple doublings, generally listed the actors by their primary role, adding 'and others'; as a result, the audience gave up early on tracking the doubling and just enjoyed the show, as surely an early modern audience would have done from the start.

The huge cast demands of *IH6* raise two questions about the play as a repertory piece: would it have been taken on the road, and might there have been a shorter version that might have rendered it suitable both for London and the provinces? (There is one of its serial mates, *2 Henry VI/The Contention* and *3 Henry VI/The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*.) Manley and MacLean prefer a 'no' to the first question. As mentioned above, MacLean leans toward constructing a touring repertory primarily from small-cast plays, probably also shortened.

Identifying *IH6* as ‘the single most profitable and most frequently performed of [Strange’s] plays’, she observes that it was not scheduled when the company resumed playing at the Rose in December 1592.¹⁹ She continues: ‘This suggests that upon returning to London the company might have been in a better position, in terms of cast, stage management, and currency of rehearsal, for an immediate staging of [a small-cast play such as] *A Knack [to Know a Knave]* than for a full-blown revival of the large-cast ‘hairy the vj’.²⁰ Perhaps; but in fact their first and second offerings on returning to the Rose were ‘*mvlomulluco*’ and ‘*Ioronymo*’; their fourth (after *A Knack to Know a Knave*) was ‘the Iewe’. These plays, by Manley and MacLean’s own charts, require a cast of eighteen (‘*mvlomulluco*’, identified as *The Battle of Alcazar*); nineteen (‘*Ioronymo*’, identified as *The Spanish Tragedy*); and seventeen (‘the Iewe’, identified as *The Jew of Malta*).²¹ Setting aside the unanswerable question of a cut-down provincial version of *IH6*, now lost, theatre historians should ask this: why would Strange’s moneymen acquire a play that they knew was not suited to touring when they also knew that summer was coming and summer often meant a departure for the provinces due to plague and the closure of London playing venues? Was it a viable business plan to maintain, in effect, a double repertory: one for London, and one for the road? Or were companies better at adapting large-cast plays for the road than we have been able to discern?

In the spring of 2008, I was an enthusiastic participant in a project that took four of Marlowe’s plays on the road. The Marlowe Project (as it was called) grew out of a seminar at UALR, team-taught by Stacy Pendergraft (Department of Theater and Dance) and me (English). In the seminar, we read all of Marlowe’s plays. I ran sessions on theatre history, and Stacy directed the performance work based on techniques developed by Anne Bogart, specifically the technique of Compositions.²² From these students’ exercises, Stacy crafted a script that distilled

features of *Tamburlaine* (part 1), *The Jew of Malta*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *Edward II* into a one-hour show with seven players plus a stage technician. In the summer, we staged the show at the Sixth International Conference of the Marlowe Society of America in Canterbury, England. The knowledge-creation process of taking Marlowe from the classroom through rehearsal to performance as the Marlowe Project was as close to putting the methodology of PAR to work as I can expect to experience. Stacy directed the project, but I attended many rehearsals and saw the show develop. There were moments when my familiarity with the theatre history of Marlowe's time, and my knowing which lines from the plays *had* to be in our script, were helpful to the final product. In regard to the productions of *3LL* and *IH6*, I needed the kind of participation in script and rehearsal that I had in the Marlowe Project to gain more insight into the dynamics of PAR, but that Marlowe experience did nonetheless prepare me to imagine the layers of directorial choice in these shows and appreciate the scholarly repercussions for me as a theatre historian.

Notes

¹ The Cockett venues for 'Shakespeare and the Queen's Men' varied from play to play. *The Famous Victories of Henry V* was offered in a tavern on a raised stage with the standing audience a blend of dignitaries and hoi-polloi. *King Leir* was offered in a large rectangular hall with dignitaries seated at each short end and ordinary playgoers along the lengthy sides. *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* was offered in an auditorium with a raised proscenium stage; dignitaries, sitting onstage behind the action, watched the performance as if it were a play-within-a-play, looking as well beyond to playgoers seated in the auditorium. Select scenes from *3LL* were given workshop-like in the auditorium where scholarly discussions were held.

² Robert Wilson, who wrote the play (the title page of the 1584 printing advertises R.W.), belonged to Leicester's Men before he joined the Queen's Men in 1583; the prevailing opinion among scholars is that Wilson brought the play to his new company, which subsequently performed it, perhaps in some serial order with *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London*, ca 1588-9. However, no extant document confirms that opinion. It is worth mentioning that Leicester's Men continued as a company post-1583 (there are provincial records into 1588), and it is just possible that the heralded revival of *3LL* in advance of its second printing in 1592 was with Leicester's Men. Even so, in this review, I am focusing exclusively on the performance history of *3LL* with Leicester's Men to 1583.

³ Unless otherwise specified, provincial stops are documented on the REED Patrons and Performances website (<https://reed.library.utoronto.ca>). The stops at Ipswich and Aldeburgh are documented in *Malone Society Collections XI* (Malone Society, 1980/1).

⁴ Lawrence Manley and Sally-Beth MacLean, *Lord Strange's Men and Their Plays* (New Haven, 2014), 255. Photos of many of the town halls where Leicester's players performed are included in this work; see also individual entries on the REED Patrons and Performance website.

Subsequent citation is given in the text.

⁵ C. Walter Hodges, *Enter the Whole Army: A Pictorial Study of Shakespearean Staging 1576-1616* (Cambridge, 1999), 25, 20, 21.

⁶ See Leslie Thomson's essay on the conference website, "["As it hath been publicly played": The Stage Directions and Original Staging of *The Three Ladies of London*](#)", n. 15, for comments on staging a bar without the actual property.

⁷ Omar Khafagy, 'The Irony of Gerontus', *The Three Ladies of London* blog, *Performance as Research: The Three Ladies of London in Context*, 14 June 2015, <http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/3LLblog/index.htm>

⁸ Lloyd Edward Kermode, 'Introduction', *Three Renaissance Usury Plays* (Manchester 2009), 33.

⁹ I don't see a part for an apprentice boy in *3LL*, and that strikes me as odd. There is obviously one place where such a boy might appear – the doubling of Lucre as Love in the final scene, in which Love has two speeches of ten words total – but the stage direction makes another choice.

¹⁰ Kermode, 'Introduction', 33.

¹¹ Lawrence Manley and Sally-Beth MacLean, *Lord Strange's Men and Their Plays* (New Haven, 2014), 272-78, esp. 275.

¹² Barbara D. Palmer, 'Early Modern Mobility: Players, Payments, and Patrons', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56.3 (2005), 259-305, esp. 271.

¹³ Quotations from *3LL* are taken from Lloyd Edward Kermode (ed.), *Three Renaissance Usury Plays* (Manchester, 2009), 18, and subsequent citations are given in the text.

¹⁴ Katrine Wong discusses the connection between playing cards, street cries, and *The Three Ladies of London* in her paper '[A Dramaturgical Study of Conscience's Broom Song in The Three Ladies of London](#)', also on this website.

¹⁵ I apologize if I remember these details too faintly or inaccurately.

¹⁶ Georgina Lucas, 'The Massacre at Paris dir. By Jeremy L. West (review)', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 32.1 (2014), 130-3, esp. 132.

¹⁷ Hodges, *Enter the Whole Army*, 22.

¹⁸ Manley and MacLean's casting chart specifies twenty-two, then appends a candid note that the play needs an even larger cast (356-8). T.J. King, whose casting charts are notoriously bloated,

calls for thirty players (*CASTING Shakespeare's Plays: London actors and their roles, 1590-1642* [Cambridge, 1992], 159-61).

¹⁹ Manley and MacLean, *Lord Strange's Men*, 274.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 274-5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 347-8, 352, 349-50.

²² Pendergraft explains her process in developing The Marlowe Project in detail in 'Marlowe Mee: Constructing the Marlowe Project', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 27.1 (2009), 51-62. She quotes Scott Cummings's description of 'Composition as follows: 'a way to generate raw material, test out creative impulses, and experiment with themes ... any or all of which might contribute to the creation of a large, more polished piece. As a shared activity, it has the added benefit ... of inviting actors to take a creative role in making the piece, thereby generating a stronger, more active ensemble and a greater sense of individual responsibility' (from *Remaking American Theatre: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company* [Cambridge, 2006], 126-7).