



EARLY PERFORMERS AND PERFORMANCE IN THE NORTHEAST OF ENGLAND

Edited by

DIANA WYATT and
JOHN MCKINNELL

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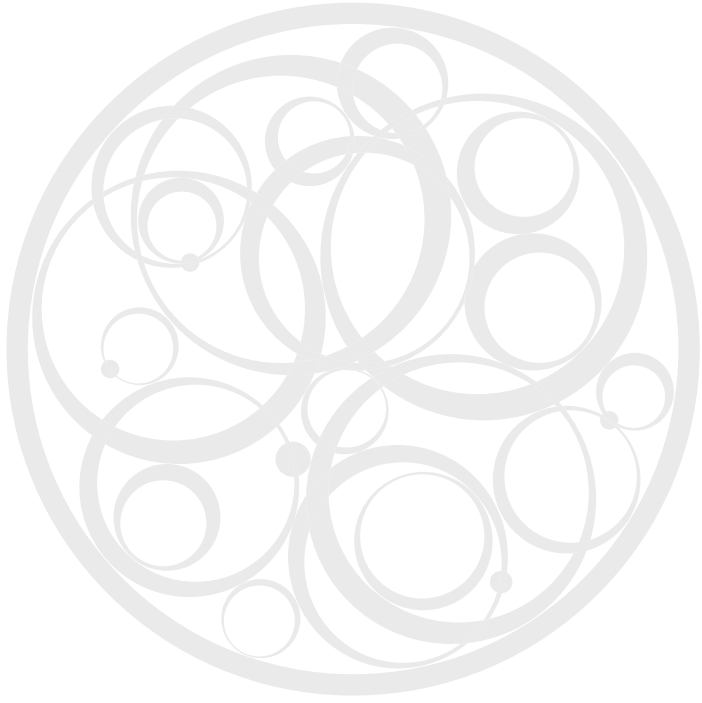
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All the contributors to this volume are members of the research project *Records of Early English Drama North-East* (part of the Toronto-centred *Records of Early English Drama*, regularly abbreviated hereafter to *REED*). REED N-E is based in the Department of English Studies and the Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies (IMEMS), Durham University.

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN MCKINNELL and DIANA WYATT

UNTIL ABOUT THE middle of the twentieth century, early English drama was often labelled “pre-Shakespearean,”¹ a designation which was unsatisfactory in a number of ways:

First, it tended to define its material as secondary rather than worthy of study in its own right, and to assume a “prophetic” knowledge of what was to come which none of its performers or audiences could possibly have shared. As Peter Happé has memorably put it: “often they were so overpowered by Shakespeare, and indeed so ‘literary’, that they condemned the material before them even as they studied it.”²

Secondly, because purpose-built theatres evolved in Elizabethan London, the label “Pre-Shakespearean” imposed a highly centralized view of early performance, dominated by what was happening in the capital and at court, with little analysis of performance elsewhere. Admittedly, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the mystery cycles which were performed in provincial cities such as York and Chester, but recognition of these was often tinged with the patronising assumption that they were the naive work of uneducated tradesmen.³ Similarly, the gradual discovery of the effectiveness of some morality plays in performance, which began in the 1930s,⁴ was too often ignored by scholars who condemned all plays of this genre as irredeemably boring without ever having seen them performed.

Even more seriously, it assumed a view of what drama is which required any performance to have a fictional or historical plot, appropriate scenery and props, impersonated characters wearing costumes suitable to their roles, and a firm separation between performers and audience. This encouraged an anachronistic view of drama as the product of a largely middle-class culture, and excluded many types of performance which were significant in the culture of the time, including liturgy, public ceremonies and

1 See, for instance, Adams, *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*.

2 Happé, “A Guide to Criticism of Medieval English Theatre,” 326. Even the most learned and perceptive critics of the period provide examples of this, e.g., “Any attention we can give to the material that lay behind Shakespeare—and often enough we shall be dealing with somewhat primitive material—will make us more fully alive to the uniqueness of Shakespeare’s own achievement.” (Clemen, *English Tragedy before Shakespeare*, 18).

3 See, for instance, Wilson, *The English Drama 1485–1585*, 3: “yet though sometimes pedantic, sometimes dull and crude, they often interpret the drama of the Christian religion with a moving simplicity which has triumphed over all the mutations of taste and belief.”

4 Notable examples are Neville Coghill’s production of *Everyman* in Oxford in 1934 and at Tewkesbury Abbey in 1935, and Cecil Quentin’s production of *The Castle of Perseverance* in Oxford and at Windsor Castle in 1938; further, see Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 234–38 at 235.

processions, performances at weddings and on other celebratory occasions, dramatic and musical performances by resident fools and travelling *ministralli*, sporting contests, and activities that would nowadays be regarded as circus acts, such as performances by tightrope walkers and those who trained animals. Contemporary records often make no distinction between these different types of performer, and a narrow definition of what we would now regard as “the theatre” fails to understand the large extent to which they flowed into each other.

These attitudes gradually came to seem quaintly outdated, and some critics began to protest against them, though not altogether consistently.⁵ Writers about early drama began to look for literary and liturgical sources, but were still often inclined to express value judgments based on reading in the study more than on productions that the writer had seen or on historical records.⁶ The lack of modern experience of productions could only be solved by time,⁷ and much practical experience of what “works” has been gained from reconstructive productions over the last fifty years or so.⁸ But most of the documents in which historical records of performance might be found remained unstudied, so that ideas about who the performers were and the conditions in which they worked were often based on mere supposition. To remedy this problem, the Toronto-based project Records of Early English Drama (REED) set out to discover and publish all the surviving evidence for performance in Britain up to the government’s closure of the London theatres in 1642, city by city and county by county, beginning with York and Chester in 1979. Thanks to the dedicated work of a large number of researchers, the project had by 2010 published collections of records from two nations (Wales and the Isle of Man), eight provincial cities (Bristol, Cambridge, Chester, Coventry, Newcastle, Norwich [but only from 1540 onwards], Oxford and York), two categories of London records (Ecclesiastical and Inns of Court), and thirteen English counties (Cheshire, Cornwall, Cumberland, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Shropshire, Somerset, Sussex, Westmorland, and Worcestershire).⁹

5 See, for instance, Hardin Craig’s *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages*, 10–11: “Let us get rid of the idea that the Corpus Christi cycles were written, managed, and acted by ignorant peasants and townspeople of low class”; but also p. 9: “when one considers how these plays passed into the hands of very simple medieval people—authors, players, managers, and all—one can see that their technique was inevitably naïve and firmly conventional.”

6 Thus Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, often states a preference for one cycle’s treatment of an episode over another’s on literary or philosophical grounds, as when she condemns the Chester *Fall of the Angels* as “much the least convincing, since he inevitably raises in his diffuse play a moral and psychological problem that it was well beyond his capacity and intention to answer” (Woolf 107).

7 Even Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, who is well aware of the need to see the mystery plays as “scores for speech and action,” lists only four productions which he has had the chance to see (Kolve 7).

8 For an annotated list of productions of medieval drama between 1901 and 1977, see Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 234–38; for a critical discussion of productions up to 2004, see John McKinnell, “Modern Productions of Medieval English Drama.”

9 See the REED website <https://reed.utoronto.ca/>. Since 2010 four more collections have been

These volumes provided scholars with a rich variety of newly discovered records from all over England, Wales and the Isle of Man, but still left some large English regions, notably the North East and East Anglia, unrepresented except for collections from the cities of York, Newcastle, and Norwich, whose civic nature was likely to make them untypical of their regions as a whole. As the northeast was large, diverse, and far from the capital it always seemed likely that its traditions of performance would show many differences from those of London and the court, and that any balanced view of medieval and early modern performance in England as a whole would have to take account of them. To deal with this problem, an international group of REED scholars coordinated by Durham University's Department of English Studies and Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies (IMEMS) made a successful funding bid to the British Arts and Humanities Research Council to make it possible to compile and publish six collections of records, from Durham, Northumberland, the former East, North, and West Ridings of Yorkshire, and the Percy family papers. The AHRC funding, which ran from October 2013 to September 2018, also facilitated the organization of an international conference and festival of early drama, with an exhibition in Durham Cathedral (2016), the funding of two PhD students, the sharing and discussion of new discoveries at a succession of summer meetings, and the compilation of a volume of academic studies based on these discussions. Our brief from the AHRC also encouraged consideration of the possible significance of our material, both for the academic understanding of the period in which the records were written and for their continuing cultural relevance in our own time.

This book is that collection of studies. Because the boundaries between types of performance are so fluid, we deliberately take the word "performance" in the broadest sense, to include not only drama and music but also any other kind of meaningful public ceremonial activity, including processions like those of the Young Maids in Durham and the rush bearings of West Yorkshire, symbolic assertions of social status such as contests in horsemanship and Lord Neville's stag ceremony, and even examples of conspicuous "performance of the self" like John Taylor's advertisement of his wherry voyage from London to York via Hull.¹⁰

Many of the types of performance that were popular in the North East during the late medieval and early modern periods were commissioned or encouraged by noble families. Our first two chapters consider aspects of performance that are illustrated by documents from the households of the Percy family, earls of Northumberland. Bob Alexander considers the range of comic performers who visited or were employed by the family in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Some were visiting entertainers who were paid for single performances, and although they are often named as and/or said to be the servants of other noblemen, the records usually give little information about what they performed, although they clearly varied considerably in social

published (Civic London to 1558 in hard copy, Staffordshire, Berkshire, and Hampshire in a new online format), and many more are in preparation, including two of records from Scotland.

10 See the chapters in this volume by John McKinnell (the stag ceremony and the young maids), C. E. McGee (rush-bearings), Gašper Jakovac (contests in horsemanship) and Diana Wyatt (Taylor's wherry voyage).

status, from John Garrett, “the Prince’s fool,” who was rewarded by the thirteenth earl in January 1604–5, to the anonymous “tomfoole” and the blind harper who entertained him when he was imprisoned in the Tower of London, accused of complicity in the Gunpowder Plot. Variety in the status of performers had existed for centuries,¹¹ but the Percy papers can tell us more about the performances and careers of some of those who were retained by the family on a more permanent basis. These included the fool Thomas Wiggan, who accompanied George Percy, the younger brother of the thirteenth earl, on his visit to the colony in Virginia. Even more interesting are payments to “Iacomo the Italian,” a solo performer, possibly in the tradition of *Commedia dell’Arte*, who presented comedies in which he seems to have played every role himself.

Suzanne Westfall’s chapter studies another of the Percy papers, the Second Northumberland Household Book (now Oxford Bodleian MS Eng. hist. b. 208), a collection of ordinances which specify in great detail the rules for ceremonial activities in the various households of Henry Algernon Percy, fifth Earl of Northumberland. Usually dated to some time in the first two decades of the sixteenth century, it includes instructions to household servants for procedures at religious and secular celebrations and at the family’s very public observation of supposedly “domestic” occasions such as weddings, christenings and funerals. The focus in this chapter is on the ceremonial prescribed for noble weddings (articles 10–12 of the book), which may have been derived from the wedding of the fifth earl’s sister Eleanor to Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham in 1480. Here it is difficult to draw any clear distinction between customary ceremonial and dramatic performance, since the instructions governing the wedding involve assertion of a hierarchical order in which everyone present was expected to perform a prescribed role, usually one quite different from their duties in everyday life. The revels therefore become a form of theatre, with specific sets, hierarchical characters, precise blocking, linear structure, and costumes appropriate to the literal and/or symbolic roles played by each participant. Even the chapel is transformed into a “set” of shining white linen, colourful tapestries and carpets, and glowing silver and gold, in which there are roles for a dean, subdean, gospeller, Lady Mass priest, master of grammar, riding chaplain, almoner, six additional chaplains, a choirmaster, a “pistoler” (who presumably read the Epistle), and an organist, with Percy’s chapel choir of at least twenty-eight singers performing elaborate polyphonic music. The bride’s procession to the chapel is then described in minute detail, with many variations according to the social status of her family, and the rules for the wedding mass and supper are carefully specified, after which there is an afternoon of dancing to music provided by the earl’s minstrels and an evening of entertainment performed by disguisers and players. Such disguisings often included mock intrusions by supposedly exotic masked foreigners who were actu-

11 For example, payments to entertainers in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Durham Cathedral Priory bursars’ accounts range from Robert Pelidod, who had been the fool of King Edward II (bursar’s accounts 1333–34 and 1341–42), to performers with the stage-names “Modyr Naked” and “Jestour Jawdewyne” (bursar’s accounts 1433–34 and 1362–63); they also include several blind harpers and “Thomas stultus,” the prior’s fool, whose funeral was paid for by the priory (bursar’s accounts and brior’s expenses 1356–57).

ally members of the earl's family and friends, but the plays were probably presented by four semi-professional actors, permanent members of his household, who certainly performed as part of his Twelfth Night celebrations. A traditional "modern" view of drama might exclude all of this except the plays acted by the earl's players, but this would be to misunderstand the whole occasion, which was clearly designed as a dramatization of the splendour of the earl and his family.

The chapter by Sylvia Thomas also looks at weddings, beginning with some of those which took place at court in the reign of James VI and I. The letters which preserve contemporary gossip surrounding these occasions often give the sort of information about the content of dramatic presentations which is lacking from the Second Northumberland Household Book. Many of these entertainments were hugely expensive masques, such as Thomas Campion's *The Lords' Masque* (performed at the wedding of the king's daughter Elizabeth in February 1613 at a cost of £400); Campion's *The Somerset Masque*, Ben Jonson's *A Challenge at Tilt* and *The Irish Masque* (all performed at the Earl of Somerset's wedding to Frances Howard, daughter of the Earl of Suffolk in December 1613 and January 1614); and the lost masque *Juno and Hymenaeus* (performed at the wedding of Sir Philip Herbert to Susan de Vere in December 1604). The wedding of Viscount Haddington to Lady Elizabeth Radclyffe in 1608 was accompanied by a masque performed by five English and seven Scottish lords, which was thought to have cost the participants £300 each.

Weddings of the gentry and nobility in West Yorkshire, such as that of Elizabeth Neville in January 1526 at Chevet Hall, near Wakefield, (described in the Nevile Memoranda Book¹² and in John Croft's *Excerpta Antiqua*) were less ostentatious, but still included a feast, masque, and dancing. Considerable sums might be spent on music; for example, the Clifford archives at Chatsworth contain accounts for music at Elizabeth Clifford's wedding to Lord Dungarvan at Londesborough in July 1634 which include payments of six pounds to a group of French musicians and a singer, and of no less than fifteen pounds to the waits from Stamford, Lincolnshire for playing for nine weeks in connection with the wedding. Noble households might also pay for music at their servants' weddings, as when the Saviles of Thornhill paid five shillings for music at the wedding of Gilbert and Ann Hodson, both members of their household, in June 1642. Entertainment at the weddings of untitled gentry was on a smaller scale, but still usually included payments to musicians, which might come from wedding guests as well as from the head of the household, and there is one payment for what look like masque costumes, when Sir Henry Slingsby of Moor Monkton pays for six suits of buckram "for an antike" at the marriage of his daughter Eleanor in January 1623.

Music and dancing were not always approved of, however, especially when they became indications of domestic or public rebellion. Francis Stringer of Charlston near Wakefield complains in his commonplace book for 1604 that his wife Dorothy has been keeping him awake all night by quarrelling and singing foolish songs such as Surrey's pastoral "Phillida was a fair maid." Dorothy Stringer's unhappy marriage seems to have remained a private matter, but accusations of riotous dancing in public, espe-

12 Beverley, ERALS DDWS/8/1/1/1.

cially against members of the clergy, could have legal consequences. When John Birchie of Moor Monkton was accused at the Ripon Visitation of 1567, the charge against him included the wearing of ostentatious clothing and nocturnal dancing with “lewd women,” but this was probably because some puritan members of his congregation thought it immoral for a clergyman to dance at all. But when Tristram Tildsley of Rufforth was accused at the York diocesan court in 1581, the complaint against him alleged that when the dancing at a wedding had continued at a nearby ale house he had tried to kiss the innkeeper’s daughter (possibly as part of the dance?), and that this had caused an affray in which swords were drawn, so this may have been seen as a deliberate breach of normally acceptable behaviour.

The next two papers analyse the evidence for companies of travelling players in the North Riding of Yorkshire (David Klausner) and the East Riding (Diana Wyatt); this is a logical progression, since such companies relied on noble patronage whether they were performing at weddings or for other special occasions. Patronage could consist either in the performers being identified as the servants of a nobleman (although they usually travelled without their patron), or in invitations from noble and gentry families to perform in their houses. Thus the Fairfax family at Gilling Castle were visited by the Earl of Worcester’s men in 1571 and by Lord Berkeley’s men in 1581; the Cholmeley family at Brandsby hosted Lord Wharton’s men in 1615 and 1617/18 and the King’s men in 1622; and the Bellasis family at Newburgh Priory were entertained by Lord Monteagle’s men in 1611 and the Queen’s men in 1615 and 1616. This sort of patronage, which protected the players against the possibility of arrest for vagrancy, was very old, though in earlier records it is often hard to tell what kind(s) of performer they were.¹³ It is not usually possible to identify the nature of individual performances, or even to say whether the performers were actors and/or musicians, but Richard Cholmeley’s notebook reveals that in January 1618 Lord Wharton’s men performed Gervase Markham and Lewis Machin’s play *The Dumb Knight*, which had been published in 1608. However, this play has thirty-eight speaking parts, little doubling is possible, and when Lord Wharton’s men played for the Cliffords at Londesborough in 1599 and 1600 they numbered only between eight and twelve. It therefore seems likely either that they performed a radically pruned version of *The Dumb Knight* or that a large number of members of Cholmeley’s household were conscripted to take part, which would probably have involved a good deal of rehearsal in addition to the performance. In his 1615 entry, Cholmeley identifies the (presumed) leader of Lord Wharton’s men as “Iarvis,” but nothing more is known of him to date.

The travelling companies who performed at Gilling, Brandsby, and Newburgh Priory cannot all be identified, but they probably had noble patronage and would not have found it difficult to travel from one of these noble households to another, since one could cover all three of them in a journey of less than twenty miles over the relatively flat terrain of the Vale of York. However, there were also two locally-based companies which had a more precarious existence. One of them, based at Egton near Whitby and orga-

13 For examples in the fourteenth-century Durham Priory bursars’ accounts see Mark Chambers’s chapter in this volume.

nized by a family called Simpson, existed by 1595 and seems to have been reliant on invitations to perform at country houses owned by recusant families. The other, which was smaller and not overtly Catholic in sympathy, was led by a weaver called Richard Hudson of Hutton Buscel, five miles southwest of Scarborough. Neither had an official patron and both were prosecuted at the court of Quarter Sessions under the Statute on Rogues, Vagabonds, and Sturdy Beggars, largely because of the officiousness of an unpopular puritan magistrate, Sir Thomas Posthumous Hoby. This makes it possible to trace the detailed itineraries of the Simpsons' company at Christmas, 1609, when they performed at Gowthwaite Hall and then at seven towns in the North Riding, and in January 1615, when their tour took in nine country houses owned by recusant gentry families. The itinerary of Hudson's company from December 1615 to February 1616 was even more ambitious, taking in no fewer than thirty-two locations, which were again carefully planned to avoid long distances or steep hills between performances. Although the hosts who invited these two groups to perform were regularly fined ten shillings each, the players themselves usually escaped punishment, except that Hudson himself was condemned to be whipped.

Diana Wyatt's chapter on performance in the East Riding of Yorkshire considers and refutes the common idea that this area was (and to many people still is) remote and inaccessible. She begins with what might nowadays be regarded as a publicity stunt, when a Thames ferryman known as John Taylor "the water poet," who had links with the professional theatre companies in London, set himself the challenge of rowing his river wherry from London to York. He incorporated a diversion to the port of Hull, to whose mayor he had letters of introduction, and this involved rowing along the potentially dangerous stretch of the Humber estuary from the mouth of the River Trent to Hull; Taylor celebrated his own achievement and the warm hospitality he received in Hull in the lively verse of his *Very Merry Wherry-Ferry Voyage*, published in 1622. Such exploits were theatrical rather than actual theatre, but Taylor was not unique: another well known piece of self-publicity by a performer is Will Kemp's *Nine daies wonder*, in which this famous clown describes how he danced from London to Norwich in 1599.¹⁴ But if Taylor could reach Hull after setting himself such a tough challenge it cannot have been too difficult for professional acting companies with noble patronage to get there. It is therefore surprising that there are no records of visits by any of the major acting companies in the surviving Hull bench books (corporation minute books) or chamberlains' accounts. There are two small payments for wine for visiting players from the nearby villages of Cottingham and Hessele in the 1440s, but later evidence from Hull is decidedly negative: an explicit prohibition in 1599 imposes a fine of two shillings and sixpence on any inhabitant who goes to see a play and of twenty shillings on the owner of any house where a play has been allowed to take place; and in 1629 a man who presented the mayor with a licence to perform plays and interludes purporting to come from the Master of the Revels was dismissed, apparently because of a suspicion that the document was not genuine. The overall impression given by the Hull records, at least during and after the Reformation, is that visiting players were not welcome.

14 *Kemps nine daies wonder*, 1600.

However, the records from Beverley give a quite different impression: between 1560 and 1629 its accounts and minute books record visits, all rewarded, from players under the patronage of twenty-four different royal or noble patrons, including five of the companies who visited Gilling, Brandsby and Newburgh Abbey in the North Riding (those under the patronage of the Earl of Worcester, Lord Berkeley, Lord Monteagle, and the Queens Elizabeth and Anne of Denmark).¹⁵ Surviving records from smaller towns in the East Riding are sparse, but the fragmentary chamberlains' rolls from Hedon include a payment of six shillings to the Earl of Worcester's men for a play, probably in 1563; and the records of the Cliffords of Londesborough Hall near Market Weighton show that between 1594 and the 1620s they welcomed visiting performers of all kinds, including troupes patronized by the king, Queen Anne of Denmark and other members of the royal family. It seems, therefore, that although Hull was the largest borough in the East Riding, its (probably puritan) objection to acting companies was not shared by other centres in the area.

Gašper Jakovac's chapter shows that the demonstration of control over a "great horse" was a way of publicly asserting noble status, *which vndoubtedly [...] importeth a maiestie & drede to inferior persones / beholding him about the common course of other men / daunting a fierce and cruell beast*,¹⁶ and that this could be most effectively achieved through hunting and horse-racing contests. Many of the northeastern gentry were recusants, and the fines and restrictions placed on them during Queen Elizabeth's reign no doubt sharpened a sense that they needed to assert their traditional social authority, even when their hunting and racing activities provoked suspicions that they were planning a rebellion. On one occasion these suspicions were actually justified, when a hunt meeting on Dunsmore Heath in Warwickshire was arranged in 1605 as part of a plan to support the Gunpowder Plot. This produced an instant Protestant over-reaction by figures such as Dean William James of Durham, whose letter to Robert Cecil in December 1605 reveals that he suspects that many members of the Northumberland and Durham gentry, including some who are not open recusants, are still looking for an opportunity to rebel. But Dean James was also concerned that the demonstration of their equestrian skills might lead the general population to sympathize with the recusant gentry, although in fact most of them seem merely to have enjoyed competing against one another in a way that would uphold their traditional status. This is exemplified in many entries in the diary of Thomas Chaytor of Butterby near Durham. During the first half of the seventeenth century many annual hunting or racing meetings sprang up, the distinction between the two types of contest became more definite, and horses were deliberately bred to have greater stamina for hunting or more explosive speed for flat races.

In Jamie Beckett's chapter the focus moves from activities sponsored by the gentry to those controlled by civic authorities, and parts of the York and Towneley mystery cycles are considered in the light of changing fortunes in the economics of the wool and

¹⁵ See David Klausner's chapter in the present volume.

¹⁶ Elyot, *The booke named the gouernour*, fol. 68v.

textile trades. In the early thirteenth century York held an unrivalled position as a centre for collection and export of high-quality wool from all over northern England, but by the middle of the fourteenth this pre-eminence was being challenged by the consequences of the Black Death and by competition from other centres, notably towns in the West Riding whose woollen textiles were often exported through London. This led the city of York to diversify into the production of textiles, often made from the poorer quality wool produced by small-scale farmers. This meant that money was still coming into York but was being shared between a large number of artisans rather than concentrated on the much fewer large-scale merchants of earlier times. The earliest records we have of the York Corpus Christi performances come from the late fourteenth century, and the cycle may have developed at that time as an attempt to counter the city's perceived economic decline, to reinforce civic pride, and to emphasize York's position as a religious centre. Certainly, its Corpus Christi performances drew in large numbers of spectators from elsewhere: for example, *The Book of Margery Kempe* records a conversation between Margery and her husband on Friday, June 23, 1413, the day after Corpus Christi, when they were walking from York towards the port of Bridlington on their way home to King's Lynn.¹⁷ Margery does not actually say that they had gone to York to see the cycle, but that would be the obvious reason for being where they were on that day. Most visitors were probably less pious than Margery, and as they followed the pageant wagons from Micklegate to the Pavement the tradesfolk of York would certainly have invited them to engage with commercial as well as spiritual opportunities.

In the York pageants of the *Nativity* and the *Offering* the distinction between the fictive city of Bethlehem and the actual one of York is deliberately blurred, as is that between the first two shepherds as prophets of the birth of Christ and the third as a blunt Yorkshire herdsman. The wagons on which these two pageants were played probably processed together, so that the rural location of the angel's appearance to the shepherds was contrasted with and subordinated to the presence of the Christ-child in the "urban" setting of the Nativity in Bethlehem (and York). In the *Offering*, each of the shepherds expresses the hope that his offering will result in material benefits for him personally, and this may reflect a forced optimism in the face of the increasing difficulties experienced by the city's wool and textile trades during the mid-fifteenth century.

By way of contrast with this, the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum* plays concentrate mainly on the tribulations and foibles of their distinct characters: hostile weather conditions, unhappy marriages, and the tendency of masters to defraud their apprentices of wages and food. Here the shepherds are joined and sometimes outwitted by trickster figures (Jak Garcio in *Prima*, Mak the sheep stealer and his wife Gill in *Secunda*) who also seem firmly anchored in the rural life of the West Riding. All of them are in very evident need of redemption, but the gifts of the shepherds to the infant Jesus are offered without any suggestion that they expect a material return. There is thus a consistent difference of viewpoint between, on the one hand, the York play's emphasis on "Bethlehem" as a trade-oriented urban centre to which the shepherds come in hopes

17 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 23, 269n.

of material profit, and on the other, Towneley's focus on the hardships of the rural background from which they come and to which they will have to return.

Mark Chambers's chapter on some aspects of performance in medieval and early modern Durham makes use both of civic records and of expenditure in the voluminous accounts of the cathedral priory and its cells and manors. The government of the Palatinate and City of Durham was highly centralized and even its civic institutions were dominated by the bishop (who had quasi-regal powers over the city's trade companies and borough courts) and the priory (which controlled most of its public ceremonial). In some respects, payments made by the prior to resident and visiting performers resemble those made elsewhere by secular lords, but the information that can be gathered from each run of accounts has its own strengths and limitations: for example, the surviving bursars' accounts begin as early as 1278 and preserve a huge number of payments to performers, but are much less useful in the fifteenth century, when the large scale of the priory's financial affairs led to gifts to visiting and resident performers usually being lumped together into the single summary item of *Dona et exennia ministrallis et alijs pauperculis*, "Gifts and grants to performers and other poor people of low status," except for a brief period in the 1430s when an incompetent bursar tried to conceal the priory's financial problems in a mass of minor details, and in the early 1530s, when some items of the bursar's running expenditure survive in rough notebooks.

It is sometimes difficult to be certain whether recipients who are given labels such as "Harpour" were actually performers, or whether they merely had these surnames, but when such names appear more than once over a relatively short period it is often possible to reach a conclusion about this from differences of wording between one entry and another. We must also pay attention to changes in terminology over time. Until the 1360s performers are usually called *histriones* except when a more specific term is used, but this term is gradually replaced by *ministralli*, the last payment to *histriones* appearing in the account for 1395–96. There is no evidence of any difference in meaning between the two terms, or that one referred to actors and the other to musicians, as has sometimes been assumed. There are also many instances of payments to musicians who played specific instruments, especially harpers (sometimes said to be blind), but also tabor players, *rotours* (psaltery players), *crowders* (players on the Welsh-derived stringed instrument known as a *crwth*), *cytharatores* (probably cittern players), lutenists, vielle players, pipers, trumpeters, waits, and at least one female singer who was accompanied by her lutenist husband.¹⁸ But other specific terms indicate people who were not necessarily musicians: visiting and resident fools,¹⁹ illusionists,²⁰ a wrestler,²¹ a tumbler,²²

18 For most of these, see Chambers's chapter; pipers include William Piper of Brancepeth, who was the leader of a group and appears in the bursars' accounts between 1334 and 1360.

19 Bishop's fools (bursar's accounts, 1334 and 1478–9); Thomas *fatuus*, the prior's fool (bursar's accounts between 1330 and 1357).

20 For example, bursar's accounts 1349–50.

21 Hostiller's accounts 1376, 1379).

22 Bursar's accounts 1381–82.

animal keepers and trainers,²³ and several groups of *lusores* “actors.”²⁴ At least one term is ambiguous: *jugulatores* may have been jesters, actors, or both, and some performers were probably both musicians and actors, for example “Master” Nicholas Dwery of York, a harper who was probably also a dwarf.²⁵

This chapter also investigates two other themes that crop up in the Durham records. The parish register from St. Nicholas’s Church, Durham for 1569 notes that “a certain Italian” showed off a “greate, strange & monstrous serpent” in the city, which, it was claimed, had been killed “in Æthiopia within the Turke’s dominions.” Chambers shows how this took advantage of a widespread northeastern fascination with dragons which is also evident in their prominence in Rogationtide or St. George’s Day processions at Ripon (between 1439–40 and 1540–41), Newcastle (1510 and 1511), York (1554) and elsewhere. They are also prominent in northeastern folktales such as that of the Sockburn Worm, first recorded in the early seventeenth century, according to which the Worm was killed by Sir John Conyers with a falchion which until 1832 was used by the family to affirm their loyalty to each prince bishop when he first arrived in the Palatinate, and which can still be seen in the cathedral treasury. Chambers contrasts the exotic “other” represented by the Italian showman’s dragon with the more mundane practical “other” represented by the Scots. All the surviving ordinaries of Durham trade companies impose heavy fines on any member who employs a Scot or teaches him their craft, and this was legally inevitable, since membership of a Durham trade company involved a declaration of loyalty to the kings of England, and therefore support for their claim to lordship over their Scottish counterparts, which was usually incompatible with loyalty to the Scottish crown. The Durham bursars’ accounts include few payments to Scottish performers, and most exceptions either pre-date Edward I’s attempt to annexe Scotland (a payment to a minstrel of King Alexander III in 1278–9), relate to *histriones* of Edward Balliol, a puppet claimant whose claim to the Scottish throne had English support (three payments in the period 1332–36), or may relate to the presence of a Scottish king in England (a payment in 1363–64 of ten shillings to three *histriones* of David II, who was in England trying to secure a peace treaty). Two payments to Scottish *ministralli* and one to a *rotour* in 1394–95 are harder to explain, but overall, there are rather few payments to Scottish performers, and attitudes towards them in Durham seem always to have been guarded at best.

The next chapter, by John McKinnell, looks at rural and urban ceremonies in County Durham which may be described as “folk” performances, although one of them was actually led by a nobleman. Robert Graystones’s chronicle history of Durham Cathedral Priory describes a curious dispute between the priory and Lord Ranulf Neville of Raby, who claimed a traditional right to process into Durham Cathedral with his foresters blowing their hunting horns on the Feast of the Translation of St. Cuthbert (September 4), and to offer a recently hunted stag at the shrine of St. Cuthbert, in return for which they

23 Bursar’s accounts 1379–80.

24 Bursar’s accounts 1408 onwards.

25 Bursar’s accounts between 1347–48 and 1358–59.

received the prior's hospitality, while Neville's men took over the kitchen and organized the feast. In 1290 Prior Richard Hoton disputed this right, claiming that it was not an offering but part of the rent for the estate, which as landlord he had the right to refuse. The dispute became even more embarrassing when a fight broke out, in which monks wielding candlesticks drove the foresters out of the cathedral. Both sides then resorted to law, but the dispute remained unresolved until Ranulf's son Radulf (later first Earl of Westmorland) tried to revive the custom in 1331. An inquiry then found that although it had existed before the death of Ranulf's father, Lord Robert Neville in 1280, the offering had traditionally taken place on Holy Cross Day (September 14). The prior took this opportunity to abolish the custom, almost certainly because it was (correctly) regarded as pre-Christian.

A rural custom which went on in many more places was the plough ceremony (Latin *dies carucarum*, English *ploudrawe*, *forthdrawe* or *ploughday*), which took place on the day after Epiphany, January 7, although there is occasional evidence for an additional performance as part of harvest celebrations. There are plough ceremony payments in the accounts of sixteen different manors in County Durham, beginning with one of the earliest manorial accounts (Pittington 1277–78), and the custom was clearly well established by then. It is not completely clear what the custom involved, but it certainly included the plough being pulled by a group of men known as “les Boves,” led by their *custos*; they were often rewarded for this demonstration of strength with bread, cheese and ale provided at the expense of the manor, and at least in some instances they also begged for money from bystanders. No evidence has yet been found of more elaborate plough plays like those collected in the nineteenth century, which often featured characters such as St. George and the Turkish knight, but the *custos* may have resembled the “caller in” who introduces the characters in many plough plays. One manor (Pittington 1390–97 and 1433–52) also preserves evidence for a female character known as “le Garthwoman,” who seems to have been connected with harvest celebrations and may have presided over the harvest feast; she was evidently a female servant, sometimes the woman who tended the manor garden, and she is sometimes named. However, we have found no evidence from other manors to confirm her ceremonial role.

Moving from the countryside to the city, the treble part of an extended musical piece known as the Durham Song survives in MS BL Harley 7578, a composite manuscript from the latter half of the sixteenth century, and this provides an account of May games, including two competitive events between the young people of the Durham city parishes. The first, for young men, is centred on piping, dancing, songs, and *dysgysyng* about Robin Hood; it may have included a performance of a Robin Hood play or ballad and possibly a mock fight with quarterstaves, and it certainly incorporated several “Robyn” songs. This is followed by a Young Maids procession and song, in which the young women of the North Bailey (the church of St. Mary le Bow) claim victory with the refrain *The bayly berith the bell away*. In the course of a bitter diatribe against fellow members of the cathedral chapter, the early seventeenth-century puritan Peter Smart claims that his high-church Laudian enemies have brought back into use at least two of the priory's medieval copes, one of which had been used for many years by the young people of Durham in their May games. He does not say how they used it, but one obvious possibility

is that it was worn by the “authority figure” who adjudicated the competition between the parishes. There seems to be a difference of function between the rural ceremonies, which probably helped to reinforce the ancient loyalties between lord and retainer, and the later urban ones, which gave young people of both genders the opportunity to show off to potential marriage partners.

The next chapter, by C. E. McGee, looks at another type of festive ceremonial which was popular at parish level throughout much of northern England, namely the custom of processing to the parish church and strewing its floor with fresh rushes. Previous studies of rush-bearing have concentrated mainly on the northwestern counties of Lancashire, Cumberland, and Westmorland, although Barbara Palmer identified six seventeenth-century examples from the West Riding of Yorkshire and one from Brandsby in the North Riding. McGee’s chapter, which also uses documents from proceedings of the Court of Star Chamber, identifies eleven rush-bearings from ten parishes in the West Riding and considers how they were influenced by debates about the proper uses of the sabbath, the parish church and the churchyard. In his 1571 *Injunctions*, Edmund Grindal, Archbishop of York, orders ministers and churchwardens to forbid a variety of popular celebrations including both rush-bearings and May games, but his real objection seems to be less to the customs themselves than to the dancing, irreverence, and lewdness which often accompanied them and interfered with church services and prayers. The patterns of what went on at rush-bearings varied from one parish to another, but commonly seem to have included a piper and drummer leading a procession (often only of young women) who carried garlands or towers of rushes and flowers, and decorated and draped pieces of wood which were carried like banners. Some of the additions made in individual parishes resemble the description of May games in the Durham Song (see McKinnell’s chapter described above); these include a play of Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham (Brandsby), a young maids’ procession (Heptonstall) and a *disguisement* (Cawthorne). In 1596 a sabbatarian objector, Sir Charles Barnby of Cawthorne, objected to any Sunday performances of *playes, interludes, showes, disguisements, rishbearinges or sommer games*. It seems that in puritan eyes, all such activities were lumped together, but King James’s *Book of Sports* (written in Lancashire in 1617 but published and extended to the whole realm in 1618) declared rush-bearings on Sundays to be acceptable provided that the participants had attended divine service first. However, this did not prevent further dispute, and within two years the Court of Star Chamber had to decide a number of cases in which parishioners complained that their puritan opponents had either impeded legitimate rush-bearings (as at Leeds in 1618 and 1619 and Fewston in 1619) or had denied the king’s right to pronounce on the issue, as William Clough, vicar of Bramham, did after a rush-bearing at Thorner in 1619. If the witnesses were all telling the truth, both sides were probably at fault in the Fewston case: the objectors had assaulted several members of the rush-bearing procession, while the women in the procession had been accompanied by a group of young men who had climbed onto the communion table and overthrown the communion cup. The Leeds case was fuelled by personal animosity between John Metcalfe, a burgess of Leeds, and Alexander Cooke, the vicar, who was vehemently opposed to the rush-bearing. In 1618 his supporters are said to have attacked the musicians who led the procession and to have

destroyed their instruments, and in 1619 it was alleged that Cooke had tried to lock the church to prevent the rush-bearers from gaining access. He argued in response that the king would not have allowed rush-bearings in his *Book of Sports* if he had realized that they would lead to violence in towns like Leeds, but since he and his supporters had allegedly been responsible for that violence, this argument seems rather hypocritical. Elsewhere the custom seems usually to have enjoyed general support and proceeded in an orderly way, and it is clear from the Slingsby papers and the commonplace book of Richard Shann that rush-bearings at Scriven, Knaresborough, and Methley were enjoyed and supported by local gentry families.

The evidence for rush-bearings shows that ceremonial processions could be very adaptable. Another notable instance of this can be seen in the evidence for the almonry or boy bishop of Durham, which can be seen in hundreds of small payments by obediendiaries and masters of the cells of the cathedral priory, as Mark Chambers and John McKinnell demonstrate in the next chapter. The York Minster Statute Book shows that the custom was already established there by about 1225, and late-fourteenth-century accounts show that the York boy bishop (called the *episcopus innocencium*) and his “officials” (all children) were required, at least in some years, to fulfill an exhausting schedule of ceremonial and visits to places outside York which might last from Holy Innocents’ Day (December 28) until Candlemas (February 2). There is also evidence that the “barne bishop” of Beverley also visited noble houses outside Beverley itself.

The boy bishop ceremony at Durham probably began shortly after the founding of the Almonry School in 1338. In most centres it was attached either to Holy Innocents’ Day or to the feast of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children (December 6), and a payment to *clerici Sancti Nicholai* in the account of the prior of Holy Island for 1342–43 may suggest that at Durham it was initially observed on St. Nicholas’s Day, although it is not certain that this entry refers to the almonry bishop and his entourage and the earliest payment which certainly refers to him appears in the prior of Lytham’s account for 1346–47. Whichever feast the custom was attached to when it was first introduced in Durham, it soon moved to a date in early summer. The earliest evidence for this is a payment to the almonry bishop in the hostiller’s account for 1355, which covers only the period from the Octave of Easter (April 12) to Ascension Day (May 14), but the most conclusive is in the hostiller’s account for 1405–6, which records a nil payment *quia non erat propter guerras eo tempore* “because it did not take place on account of the wars at that time”; this can only refer to Archbishop Scrope’s rebellion in May 1405, which was defeated by a force levied in Durham by Ralph Neville, first Earl of Westmorland. Other years in which the custom did not take place are 1438–40, when the priory was experiencing a financial crisis, and 1459–61, when the northeast was caught up in the Wars of the Roses. From 1475 on, all almonry bishop payments were made to the office of the feretrar, the guardian of the shrine of St. Cuthbert in the cathedral, but the feretrars’ accounts do not include any corresponding outgoings; it seems probable that the ceremony (or at least the involvement of children) actually ceased in 1475, becoming no more than a tax levied by the feretrar on the heads of cells. This may explain why the custom is not mentioned in *The Rites of Durham*, which gives a detailed account of ceremonies in and around the cathedral and the city just before the Dissolution in

1540. However, the *Rites* does describe processions to the city churches of St. Nicholas, St. Oswald, and St. Margaret on the three Rogation days in Ascension week, following each of which one of the monks delivered a sermon. It seems likely that before 1475 these processions and sermons were led and delivered by the boy bishop of Durham; this probability is strengthened by evidence in the accounts of the hostiller, the prior of Finchale and the Elvethall manorial accounts that between 1424 and 1479 the parish of St. Oswald's had its own boy bishop, known as *Episcopus puerilis ecclesie Sancti Oswaldi*, "Boy bishop of the church of St. Oswald" or "Bishop of Elvet." Parish boy bishops are very rare, and it seems probable that both the almonry bishop of Durham and the "bishop of Elvet" discharged their duties in and after the Rogation days processions in Ascension week. There is no evidence in the Durham records to suggest any element of burlesque or entertaining extraneous material; the participants may have been children, but the liturgy to which they contributed seems to have remained completely serious and may even have reminded onlookers that "of such is the kingdom of heaven."

Our volume concludes with a consideration by Barbara Ravelhofer, one of the two Principal Investigators of the REED North-East project, of the significance and potential uses of performance of northeastern drama and ceremony as part of the intangible cultural heritage of the region. One of our aims has been to remedy the widespread neglect of the area in academic accounts of early English drama and ceremony; we have sought to do this in academic articles and exhibitions, but also by organizing an international conference and festival in which both discussions and productions of northeastern drama took a prominent part. Wherever possible, these productions were filmed and added to the project website; they include the "Lindisfarne" *Harrowing of Hell*, Lawrence of Durham's *Peregrini* (neither of which had been seen before in modern times), the *Antrobus Souling Play* and combinations of regional traditions, including ballads and folktales in our compilations *Theatrum mundi* and *Lost Voices of the North-East*. However, our most important aim has been to encourage knowledge of and pride in the culture of the region among its modern inhabitants; our website has also been useful for this purpose. We have also worked with schools (for example at Kirk Merrington) and given talks to local societies such as the local history societies in Beverley, Durham, Hexham, and Hull. All these contacts suggest that there is an abiding interest in the historical culture of our region which has not yet achieved full expression. We hope this project may help to awake the sleeping giant of our intangible regional heritage, and that this will inspire regional pride and self-confidence in the future.