

SAA 2010 Seminar Abstracts for “Making History: Archives and Anecdotes”

Alan C. Dessen

Performance Workshops versus the Original Staging: Anecdotes or Evidence?

During my thirty-year obsession with how Elizabethan and Jacobean plays were staged, I have learned little from today’s productions, including those at supposed “historical” venues such as London’s Bankside Globe (since 1997) and the Staunton, Virginia Blackfriars (since 2001). As an alternative to such playgoing as research, I and others have resorted to workshops with actors, colleagues, and/or students that supposedly can function as laboratories to test possible onstage choices (including textual variants ignored or suppressed in modern editions). Indeed, in my paper at the first Globe planning conference (Northwestern, 1984) I argued for the assets of such an approach and subsequently participated in a series of events in the 1980s and 1990s. Those sessions were fun (for me at least) and Seemed a Good Idea at the Time, but in retrospect I have come to regard them as anecdotes, not evidence.

Ironically, my major insights from today’s performance have come not from experiments with what “works” or “doesn’t work” (to invoke the most popular anecdotal terms) but from actions or speeches that were deemed unplayable by directors and actors starting with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival shows in the 1970s. That kind of window into the past (what separates us from them?) proved more fruitful (and reliable) than pseudo-scientific experiments. Nonetheless, in my paper I want to pose the question: can the testing of items in a workshop situation generate findings that amount to more than anecdotes (“we tried this one out and it worked”) so as to provide evidence worth putting on the record. More specifically, in early February I will be part of a week-long workshop at U. of Toronto (with actors and a very knowledgeable director) that will focus on a series of scenes that involve some version of the psychomachia conflict. Will such an event be yet another self-fulfilling prophecy wherein the investigator gets the answers anticipated or can it add to the on-the-page evidence I have assembled? My plan is to set up the framework for my seminar paper and then add a final section on the results of the Toronto event as a basis for discussion in Chicago.

Richard Dutton

Hertford’s Men in 1603

My text from the archives is the entry in the Chamber Accounts for 1602/3 which tells us that £10 was paid to “Martyn Slater and his fellowes servauntes to the Erle of Hertforde” for a performance at court on Twelfth Night 1602/3. It is a perplexing item on any number of levels. Chambers called Hertford’s “among the most obscure of the companies” and only he and Andy Gurr (as far as initial enquiries suggest) have even commented on this oddity in any detail. Their place at court that night goes against the general understanding of the rules of the game in Elizabeth’s last decade,

when the Lord Chamberlain's and Lord Admiral's Men – by then largely London-based and tied respectively to the Globe and the Fortune – heavily dominated the schedules of the Revels seasons. The revived boy companies complemented them after 1600, without threatening the status quo. (In 1602/3 the Chamberlain's Men performed twice, the Admiral's three times [itself an interesting reversal of the normal predominance], and Paul's Boys once.)

Challenges to what I am responsible for dubbing “the duopoly” came from Derby's Men when they gained access to court in 1599/1600 and again in 1600/1601; they were replaced in 1601/2 by a mixed company of Oxford's and Worcester's Men, performing under the latter's patent. It seems likely that there was heavy lobbying for these court appearances from their illustrious patrons – we know for a fact that Oxford's intervention with the Queen played its part in securing the appearance of Worcester's Men. But in both cases the companies launched their campaigns from a London base: they successively occupied the Boar's Head. And Worcester's elevation to be Master of the Horse and (more critically) a Privy Councilor probably played its part in securing court patronage. The Chamberlain's, Admiral's and Worcester's Men of course went on to be the first three royal companies under James.

What then do we make of Hertford's Men suddenly appearing like this in the records? They had no regular London base, or even a very strong touring record. They had appeared once before at court, also in the coveted Twelfth Night slot, in 1591/2. But that can very probably be explained as some kind of quid pro quo for Hertford's lavish entertainment of the Queen on her progress earlier in 1591. There is no such circumstance behind 1602/3. The most obvious explanations would seem to fall either into commercial/professional frames of reference or into quasi-conspiratorial ones. The former would probably centre on the figure of Martin Slater, apparently an influential figure in theatrical circles, who seems to have moved between companies with remarkable ease – he had been in Scotland with Laurence Fletcher as recently as 1599 and was with Queen Anne's Men by 1606. The latter would dwell on Hertford's unique standing in relationship to the throne. He was the eldest son of Protector Somerset and had a pedigree which stretched back to pre-Tudor royalty. More critically his ill-advised first marriage to Lady Catherine Grey (sister of Lady Jane) brought his family potentially very close to the succession. Under Henry VIII's will Lady Catherine should have been heir if Elizabeth died childless. (This is why James was later so alarmed when Hertford's grandson, William Seymour, secretly married Arbella Stuart: the royal lineage of any children would be uncomfortably strong.) With Elizabeth's death looking increasingly likely – she was dead within three months of Hertford's Men's appearance – is it at all possible that someone saw fit, as it were, to fly Hertford's colours at court at this critical juncture? And if so, who? Gurr points towards Lord Admiral Howard, who was Hertford's brother-in-law (by his second marriage) from 1582 to 98. My paper will seek further evidence or explanations.

William Ingram

The Sacramental Token Books of the parish of St Saviour's Southwark

Alan Nelson and I have embarked on a project to transcribe the sacramental token books of St Saviour's parish, a valuable resource for theatre historians that have long been quarried for individual nuggets but never transcribed in their entirety, principally (we guess) because transcribing them presents numerous challenges to any transcriber. In my paper for the seminar I will try to explain the nature and function of the token books, the extent to which we might safely understand them as reflecting actual facts (the common assumption among researchers who use them), and the hazards of extracting individual items from them without regard for context or continuity. Any system of accounting, from Henslowe's Diary on, will of course be filled with misunderstandings or misinterpretations; these need not be deliberate efforts to fictionalize events, but none the less they may represent rhetorical rather than empirical constructs. The whole issue is quite slippery with respect to the token books, which had multiple authors and multiple informants; I will hope to make at least a preliminary first step in my paper.

David Kathman

The Life and Times of George Birche, Tudor Royal Interluder

Theater historians have long known the basic outlines of George Birche's career as a Tudor royal interluder from 1533 to 1559, including the deposition he gave in about 1530 in a famous theatrical lawsuit (*Rastell v. Walton*) saying that he and his company had played in some disputed theatrical garments. A newly discovered lawsuit from 1547-48 fills in many more details of Birche's life, and provides a glimpse at the reputation of players at mid-century. The suit involves a dispute between William Billingsley and Henry Barnes over a house, garden, and orchard at Mile End, Stepney. Birche, who had been present at two key meetings between the two men, gave a devastating deposition supporting Billingsley's version of the story. Barnes responded by viciously attacking Birche's character, calling him a raving madman, a counterfeiter, a horse thief, a former prisoner in the Tower, and "a common player in the country and on stages". Billingsley brought forth numerous witnesses who testified that Birche was none of those things, and that he had been one of King Henry VIII's players rather than a "common player in the country and on stages". Birche himself eventually gave a second deposition in which he told his life story in astonishing detail, including his childhood in Canterbury, several failed apprenticeships in London, many years as a player for Princess Mary and then for her father Henry VIII, and his current position at the royal mint, obtained through Mary's recommendation. Birche's autobiography, in addition to being fascinating in its own right, does not fit neatly into the skeletal narrative that we might construct just from the lists of royal interluders in which he appears, suggesting that we should not extrapolate too much about other players from the few theatrical records that survive from this period.

Roslyn Knutson

The Industrious Clumper: F. G. Fleay and the Identification of Lost Plays

F. G. Fleay is notorious among theater historians for wild guessing about too little documentary evidence. Just short of the label of “crank,” Fleay had opinions on every aspect of early modern English theatrical commerce. I am particularly interested in Fleay’s identification of lost plays. I will survey three of his influential publications—*Shakespeare Manual* (1876), *A Chronicle History of the London Stage, 1559-1642* (1890), and the two-volume *Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama* (1891)—in order to assess the degree of mischief in his treatment of lost plays. (* I am grateful to John Astington for this term.)

Bill Lloyd

“Mar a Curious Tale in Telling It”: Error, Assertion, and Confusion in Andrew Gurr’s *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*

The publishers of Andrew Gurr’s *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (1996) assert that his book “will take its place as an indispensable reference work and the authoritative history for all scholars and students of Renaissance... drama.” Gurr complains in his preface that Chambers’s *The Elizabethan Stage* and Bentley’s *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, “invaluable as they are for their scrupulous transcriptions and interpretations of masses of factual evidence, do read a little like *Hamlet* without the prince,” and claims that his book will provide “a longer historical perspective, some corrections of fact, and a large input of new material” from the archives.

Gurr, one of our leading students of early modern theatre history, was given access to a wealth of unpublished REED data, and was well-positioned to make good on these claims. Unfortunately, the book he produced is rife with careless—sometimes bizarre—factual errors, and its narratives large and small too often rely on assertion, blurring the distinction between casual supposition, supported hypothesis, and documented fact. One longs for a bit more “scrupulous transcription” and a bit less of the prince who knows not seems.

My paper is in two parts. One part, The List, is a long catalogue with running commentary of errors and confusions in *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, meant to be used in conjunction with an open copy of the book. Accompanying this is a selection of anecdotes: some are unreliable narratives constructed by Gurr, while others are instances in which scholars have been misled by the misinformation on offer in Gurr’s book.

Lawrence Manley

Genre in the Archive: The 'Company Style' of Lord Strange's Men

I will propose that the repertory of an Elizabethan acting company like Lord Strange's Men can be studied with reference to its "archive" and its "repertoire." These are the terms by which Diana Taylor designates the two modes of storing and transmitting knowledge that, in any culture, correspond to the world of writing and to the more ephemeral realm of embodied practice and knowledge. For the purposes of Elizabethan theater history, the archive can be equated with whatever survives in the realm of textuality (the playbooks that derive from the company's performances as well as other documents and archival materials), while the repertoire includes the skills, practices, performance styles of the company. From the scholarly standpoint of theater history, the latter must perforce be inferred from the former, but from the standpoint of acting companies themselves, it was the reciprocal influence of archive and repertoire, writing and practice, that produced what we might call the 'company style.'

In my paper, I will examine some of the 'archival' features of the repertory of Lord Strange's Men as we know it from playbooks and from Philip Henslowe's diary. I will argue that the company's plays comprised an intellectual archive for the players and their audiences. This set of materials that, selected from the much larger archive of Elizabethan culture, became in turn a distinctive element of that culture, a characteristic set of subjects, stories, interests, themes, and outlooks mediated by the company in its work. I will identify three strands of material – contemporary geopolitics and learning, Senecanism, and novella intrigue – that helped to form the company's distinctive archive, and, focusing on the genre of "gelyous comodey" (itself an archival trace appearing in Henslowe's diary), I will offer some suggestions about the ways in which the company's archive was matched to a repertoire of equally distinctive performance techniques.

James J. Marino

Burbage's Father's Ghost

Biographical readings of *Hamlet* have long striven to make connections between the Prince's grief for his father and William Shakespeare's own private griefs, especially the death of his son Hamnet in 1596 and of his father, John Shakespeare, in 1601. Although the Lord Chamberlain's Men had possessed some form of *Hamlet* play since their incorporation in 1594, biographical readings propose that Shakespeare rewrote *Hamlet* in response to private losses. But Shakespeare was by not the only member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men to lose a father between 1594 and 1603, and the other personal losses besetting the company were public rather than private events.

The company's patron, Henry Carey, died in 1596, and was succeeded by his son George. *Hamlet* had special resonances for the new patron, as well as for the poet.

Moreover Richard Burbage, who played Hamlet, lost his father in 1597. Since James Burbage had been a prominent playhouse owner and actor, the fact of Richard's loss would be well-known to the audience. Indeed, the Folio text jokes obliquely about his father's legacy. When Hamlet asks questions about the aerie of little eyases, many of the original audience would have known that the actor was the little eyases' landlord, and the aerie itself Richard Burbage's personal inheritance from his father, the Blackfriars playhouse, which Richard was forbidden to occupy himself. *Hamlet* in performance could not have been separated from the lead actor's public bereavement. Any revisions of *Hamlet* between 1597 and 1603 would inevitably consider Burbage's loss, both as private motivation and as public knowledge.

Christopher Matusiak

A Letter by "William Reeston" and William Beeston's Shakespeare Anecdotes

This paper examines a 1679 letter, now in The Centre for Kentish Studies, which solicits the theatrical patronage of Charles Sackville, sixth Earl of Dorset. Archivists have long identified its author as "William Reeston," a mysterious Restoration playwright about whom we know nothing else. The letter's internal evidence, however, strongly suggests that "Reeston" is a fiction and that the author was, in fact, William Beeston, the veteran theatre manager and acting instructor. Attributing the letter to Beeston provides insight into the dissolution of his long stage career. Moreover, it offers new contextual information with which to interpret the anecdotes concerning Shakespeare that Beeston shared with John Aubrey two years later, preserved in the antiquary's *Brief Lives*.

Alan H. Nelson

Comedy of Errors, Gray's Inn, 28 December 1594

According to *Gesta Grayorum* (published in 1688), a "Play of Errors" was performed at Gray's Inn on 28 December 1594, under circumstances so confused that the evening was known thereafter as "The Night of Errors." Presumably this was Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* as performed by the Lord Chamberlains Men. Several questions arise from surviving documents, which I propose to address: 1) How did this performance relate to the royal performance of a comedy or interlude by the same company on the same evening? 2) Was *Comedy of Errors* written for this occasion, or was the play already in the company's repertory? 3) Was the performance on 28 December (Innocent's Day) a one-off event, or was this a traditional day for an Inns of Court play by a professional company?

Kara Northway

“The Iest of George Peele at Bristow” and Early Modern Actors’ Downtime on Tour

The story theater historians tell about cities that denied touring acting companies’ performances, what Alan Somerset calls “negative” responses, is that town leaders instead gave the players gratuities not to play. Scholarship—including my own work—has taken for granted that those who put on drama always accepted these civic payments. However, in a few cases in Norwich, the mayoral council offered gratuities not to play, which the players rejected. For example, in 1616, Thomas Swynerton brought a patent for Queen Anne’s men that listed several names of players, but of them, only two were present. According to the *REED* account, “he was desired to desist from playing & offered a benevolence in mony which he refused to accept.” In a similar record from 1623 in *REED*, Norwich declined Gilbert Reason’s exemplification, supposedly because of the city’s desire to protect its health and economy; consequently, Reason “was offered a gratuitie which he refused.” Why did players, who, as Barbara Palmer and Peter Greenfield have claimed, toured for the profit motive, turn down payments not to play? As Greenfield and Siobhan Keenan have noted, payments were a declaration of a city’s authority. Furthermore, in her study of cities’ and households’ payments in northern England, Barbara Palmer contends that they were “made either with an eye to maintaining goodwill and mutually profitable visits on established travel circuits or perhaps to demonstrate Christian charity.” Was the refusal of cash thus a form of resistance to this authority and “goodwill,” a gesture indicating insult taken at the size of the gratuity, or an attempt to force renegotiation of the council’s decision? My paper will consider these questions, as well as why, if no payments were dispensed, a city would include non-payments in their archives at all.

Leslie Thomson

Mixing Memory and Desire: R. Willis and “The Cradle of Security”

In this paper I look at an anecdote which, partly because it is unique, has been cited and quoted repeatedly by theatre historians, who have mostly paid little or no attention to its original contexts. The story told by the aged R. Willis about seeing a play called “The Cradle of Security” in Gloucester when he was a boy is generally taken at face-value as providing credible facts about a provincial performance. In this paper I will provide some examples of how Willis’s story has been used as evidence, revisit what is known about its origins, offer some reasons why it should be questioned, and reconsider what it might actually tell us about early modern staging and performance conditions.

Michael Ulliot

Testimony in the Archives and in Early Modern Rhetoric

Testimonies, wrote Thomas Wilson in 1551, “are brought to confirm any thing, either taken out of old authors, or else such as have been used in this common life.” Just as rhetoricians drew on sources from learned *sententiae* to common opinions to persuade their readers, so cultural historians of “retrospective ethnography” like Keith Thomas weave fragments and anecdotes together to reconstitute “common thoughts about common things,” as the Victorian medievalist F. W. Maitland called them. The new historicism renewed this “thick description,” particularly for theatre history, but has suffered from the charge of irretrievability (renewed recently by the new aestheticists and formalists) that even Stephen Greenblatt acknowledged: “[A]n anecdote may conjure up reality, but will reality come when it is called?” This paper addresses the anecdotal and archival testimonies on which retrospective ethnography relies, focusing on the “common thoughts” of modern critical methods of archival testimony and the early modern rhetoric of exemplarity. It argues that the rhetorical example suffers from the problem of metonymy: any chosen part confounds our efforts to make it testify to other parts (let alone to the synecdochic whole). Such inconsistencies are a warning to rhetoricians and historians, but not a debilitating one.