EARLY ENTERTAINMENT PATTERNS IN NORTHERN ENGLAND

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To understand and assess an earlier community’s way of life requires a full set of historical tools, a set which has become increasingly diverse in recent decades. Historical analysis based on battles, political struggles, trade routes, buildings and monuments will yield gross information about general populations, but such studies, however necessary and even primary, seldom convey much sense of the individual citizen’s interests, values and activities. For those individual or communal details, one must use the tools of what is loosely called ‘socio-cultural history’, the attempted retrieval of a way of life from such mundane artifacts as clothing, refuse, utensils, personal ornaments and letters or accounts.

From those letters and accounts one often can reconstruct an accurate if incomplete picture of how earlier communities entertained themselves. To understand how people worked is important, to understand how they filled their leisure equally significant and a great deal more difficult to establish. People tend to preserve documents connected with their work, property, and income – indentures, bonds, title deeds, wills, inquisitions post mortem – while over time they discard or misplace the apparently frivolous records of their transitory amusements. From such frivolous records, however, are cultural and literary generalizations constructed. The more abundant the records, the more thorough their examination and publication, the more sound the generalizations.

Since 1975 the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project\(^1\) has taken on the task of locating, transcribing, and publishing by geographical locale all pre-1642 entertainment records. ‘Entertainment’, by REED editorial definition, includes drama, vocal and instrumental music, dancing, folk performances, bear-baiting, cockfighting, and pageantry with a mimetic dimension. Thus far, the

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\(^1\) The editors of the various REED volumes include British, American and Canadian scholars; the REED editorial offices are located at the University of Toronto, and the REED volumes are published by the University of Toronto Press. The observations here on northern entertainment are drawn primarily from the West Riding records currently in preparation for REED publication by the author and John M. Wasson, a project funded by the generosity of the United States National Endowment for the Humanities.
entertainment records of York, Chester, Norwich, Coventry, Westmorland, Cumberland, Gloucestershire, Newcastle upon Tyne, Devon, Cambridge (both town and gown), Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Lancashire have been published. As these volumes are supplemented by the earlier Malone Society records, which are minimally inclusive compared to the more exhaustive REED format, and by the REED volumes currently in press or in progress, some of the larger picture of pre-1642 entertainment is beginning to take shape. In the process, many cherished notions about medieval, Tudor and Jacobean culture need at least to be reconsidered if not completely abandoned.

One such notion, and the focus of this present preliminary study, is that English culture and drama were limited to London or, more generously, to the home counties: 'English drama' meant 'Shakespeare', which meant London, the Globe Theatre and Blackfriars. The provinces were a place for London actors to retreat from the plague. Whatever slight cultural or dramatic light ever flickered in the North was represented by medieval Corpus Christi pageants, calculated to move an illiterate, rustic, sentimental peasantry to religious devotion, and that singular dramatic light was extinguished by the Reformation. So ran the cherished but inadequately-informed notion on northern culture. An entirely unblameworthy reason for this southern bias is not difficult to discern. The British Library and Public Record Office offer a plenitude of accessible drama records, a plenitude so daunting that few earlier scholars, native or foreign, could imagine additional significant archival material elsewhere.²

To awaken a drama scholar’s northern conscience, however, one has only to note a few concrete dates: the Chester Corpus Christi Cycle of ‘simple medieval plays’ was last played in 1575; in 1576 the York Commissioners issued an injunction to Wakefield which prohibited ‘a plaie commonlie called Corpus Christi plaie’, another ‘simple, medieval’ dramatic effort; and the 1582 Doncaster Cordwainers’ guild articles include the provision that the Cordwainers bring forth their Corpus Christi pageant as before.³ In 1576 James Burbage, Sr., opened The Theatre, first professional stationary theatre in London and home to the Lord Chamberlain’s Men before they moved to the Globe and then to Blackfriars. Insularity of medieval and Tudor-Jacobean dramatic technique or provenance does not seem to be a reasonable conclusion. Communication bridges already had been built, between ‘medieval’ and ‘Renaissance’, between ‘northern’ and

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'southern', between 'professional' and 'amateur' entertainment, bridges which had been and would be well-traveled during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

At 1,776,064 statute acres prior to the 1972 redistribution of county boundaries, the West Riding of Yorkshire was the largest county in England.\(^4\) Many of its entertainment records survive, a sufficient number to be able to construct reliable generalizations about northern entertainment activity, which was rich, varied and diverse.\(^5\) First, one cannot overestimate the influential cultural role of the gentry and great households. Secondly, this entertainment and music pattern was not limited to secular households but extended as well to the Riding's pre-Reformation religious establishments. Thirdly, rigid categories of 'sacred' and 'secular', 'amateur' and 'professional' drama will not hold for these records. Fourthly, the extent of travel and communication between northern and southern England has been seriously underestimated and undervalued.

Various characteristics can be ascribed to northern gentry: they were numerous; they knew each other well, as their household books and letters attest; many were government officials of no little distinction and power; they intermarried; they were wealthy: and they were mobile, travelling regularly among their multiple households.\(^6\) These characteristics are reflected in their cultural lifestyles. Entertainment and the trappings of entertainment were not only a source of apparent pleasure to West Riding gentry but were also a mark of their political and social status. That the great households vied with one another to provide hospitality and sophisticated amusement can be inferred from the surviving records; that they spent large sums of money to insure the quality of that hospitality and to ensure their children's education in the social graces is a factual observation drawn from their account books.

The 1548 probate inventory of Thomas, Lord Wharton of Healaugh and Syninghamthwaite,\(^7\) which is representative of other gentry inventories, reveals the extraordinary importance of music and entertainment to the great households' tradition of hospitality, patronage

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\(^4\) Joseph E. Morris, *The West Riding of Yorkshire*, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1932), 1, citing the 1931 census return, which records Lincolnshire as second in statute acres and Devon third.

\(^5\) The complete West Riding entertainment records will be published with precise manuscript apparatus in the REED series; because of the summarizing nature of this present study, its notes refer only to the appropriate manuscript collection and its archival location.

\(^6\) See J.T. Cliffe, *The Yorkshire gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War* (London: Athlone Press, 1970) for approximate figures on gentry income and household size. West Riding gentry consistently were numbered as Privy Council members, Council of the North members, high sheriffs, and other national officers: the recurring names include Vavasour, Shrewsbury, Gascoigne, Neville, Plumpton, Ryther, Savile, Clifford, Wharton, Wentworth, Crewe, Slingsby, Ingram and numerous others.

\(^7\) Yorkshire Archaeological Society, MS 707. That Wharton maintained his own players and musicians is apparent from the Clifford account books, now the Bolton Abbey MSS at Chatsworth House.
and pageantry. His apparel for the revels included nine long gowns of Darinx, one gown of buckram laid upon with lace of straw, three fools' coats, six hats of paper, two bishops' mitres and two friars' caps, a coat of buckram garded with straw. two friars' hoods, six swords of wood with girdles, six beards, eight visors, two fools' daggers, two tipstaffs and a mace, two drums and one pair of 'stickers', seven pairs of red and yellow scarves, a sarcenet for masqueing, to the sum of £3 6s.8d.

Wharton also died possessed of a horn garnished with silver, to value £13.8d.; 'an instrument in the lobby', unspecified; a set of recorders, a pair of virginals, and the organs in the chapel, to the total of £13 6s. 8d.

Christmas time of course was a high season of hospitality and entertainment, perhaps nowhere more poignantly attested to than in the Saviles's Thornhill Hall accounts on almost the eve of its disastrous Civil War siege. Belts literally are tightened during the year, but at Christmas a plenty of food, drink and music flows forth. As one visiting musician writes in a c.1637 ode to Sir William, 'so long as I may touch the tight strings of the lute with flashing hand and sound a strain worthy of Savile's ears, I do not envy you your bounteous table, your dances and your tightly laced maidens'. The same ode also catalogues the holiday household full of neighbours; 'varied talk', laughter, jests and witticisms; glowing coals and glowing bread pan; pickled raisins, minced meat pies, swine's neck with mustard, saddle of ox, geese, swans and abundant wine; and hunting, card games and dicing as components of the Saviles's traditional hospitality.8

A great household's musick, its consort of musicians, seem to have been in required residence only over Christmas. The remainder of the year they traveled, as did unconnected minstrels, various town waits, entertainers of diverse genres, and professional players. One frequently does not find note of West Riding household musick in their patron's own records, but, rather, in the records of other households which they visited, often the only proof of their existence. For example, the Clifford records alone reveal household minstrels attached to the Clifford, Dacre, Gargrave, Gascoigne, Neville, Newmarch, Plumpton, Redmayne, Roos, Savile, Shrewsbury, Slingsby, Stapleton, Wentworth and Wharton families.9 Although West Riding household minstrels did not necessarily stay within the county,10 clearly the local gentry network provided their literal bread and butter.


9 The Clifford accounts, which are lodged primarily at Chatsworth House, have been collected by John M. Wasson for a forthcoming REED volume of great household entertainment records.

10 Household minstrels' travel patterns and the travel patterns of their patrons currently are in the process of evaluation as the REED collections progress.
The social uses of West Riding entertainment are apparent from two representative sets of early seventeenth-century accounts, those of Sir Henry Slingsby of Red House and London; and those of Sir Arthur Ingram of Temple Newsam, Sheriff Hutton, York and London. Slingsby’s entertainment expenses seem largely to have been incurred on behalf of civilizing his children. Master Thomas at Cambridge first requires twenty shillings ‘towards the show made by the scholars’, and then later expenses ‘to furnish him of the particulars whereof which include 12s. 8d. for five pairs of Spanish leather shoes and a pair of pumps; 20d. for mending the shoes; 14s. for borrowing a waistcoat and other necessaries; 12d. for a perspective glass; 2s. for gloves, knife, paper and ‘his trimming’; and 2s. 6d. for Ovid’s *Epistles* and *Silva Synonimorum*. Clearly some of these expenses are not connected with the scholars’ show, but equally clearly young Thomas exceeded his entertainment budget. Both he and his brother Henry were taught to dance, and young Henry also was taught to play the viol and to sing. Mistress Ellen, their sister, was taught to dance at York and to play the lute at Red House.

Slingsby’s other entertainment expenses substantiate a pattern of supporting local entertainment enterprise whether home at Red House or on the road. His payments are recorded to the waits or the musick of York, Royston, Bawtry, Grantham, Cambridge, Pontefract, Doncaster, Ware, Bishopthorpe, Newark, Stamford, Stilton, Knaresborough, Wanford, Worcester, Chesterfield, Northallerton, Durham, Darnton, Hickleton and Kendall, among others. In July 1620 he contributed 10s. ‘to the young folks of Scriven towards their rushbearing’ and another 12d. ‘to the boy at his going to Knaresborough to a rushbearing’. The profile of Slingsby one draws is typical: a Yorkshire nobleman committed to raising a cultured family, satisfying his local obligations, and maintaining his status as a generous patron.

In 1623 Sir Henry Slingsby laid out 50s. for six suits of buckram. The occasion was ‘an antick at Sir Arthur Ingram’s wedding at ye Twelfth Night’, and the entertainment is clarified by the marginal note ‘A masking suit’. The expense was extraordinary, but so too were Sir Arthur’s ambition and power: a neighbour could do worse than dress well for Ingram’s wedding festivities. Ingram’s surviving account books, usually written in the fractured hand of his steward John Matteson, bear further study (and, in fact, would bear complete publication), but the pattern of social and professional advancement is documented. Ingram paid entertainers what he thought the market would bear, what he thought their patron’s status deserved, and what he thought would underscore his own status.

On his regular treks from Yorkshire to London and back, the

11 The Slingsby records, which run from approximately 1612 to 1623, are at the Yorkshire Archaeological Society as MSS DD56; the Ingram accounts, from 1632 to 1642, are at the Leeds City Archives, Sheepscar, as MSS TN EA.
waits were waiting and were well rewarded for their knowledge of Ingram’s itinerary. His tastes were apparently eclectic. Over the years, his steward paid the Earl of Rutland’s men, who played at Ingram’s window; the juggler with flaming torches; the man who played the dog; the juggler and the dog; the man who played the birds; Pickering the musician and his company, repeatedly; York, Doncaster and Westminster waits, among many others on the path from North to South; masque and playhouse expenses in London; and King’s, Prince’s, and other nobility’s trumpeters, drummers and pipers. Payments vary with the prestige of the entertainers’ patron and with Ingram’s political fortunes at the nonce. He maintained his own musicians and their instruments. Payments are recorded for his singing boy Win, whose shoes require frequent repair (including a pair of second-hand boots when he follows Ingram’s coach to London), and for his singing boy Cesar, who has either lost or sold his black hat. Exceptional costs for musical instruments are noted: stringing to the instruments, transporting the instruments from one house to another, and setting up the organs at £12 the removal and tuning.

With the exception of the Clifford accounts, these West Riding household records are comparatively late and incomplete, but they provide abundant evidence of the importance of entertainment in gentry lives. What earlier records survive further support these entertainment patterns, and the correspondence of West Riding gentry attests to their rich interaction with each other, each other’s households, and each other’s way of life. This entertainment and music pattern, however, was not limited to secular households. It extended to the Riding’s pre-Reformation religious establishments and although, again, their records are incomplete, the level of activity seems intense. One fifteenth-century Selby Abbey account roll, translated here, is representative in its annual entertainment payments.

Gifts given by the Selby Lord Abbot include 12d. to two of the Queen’s histrionibus; 12d. given to a Selby parish priest for the vigil of St Nicholas, which may suggest Boy Bishop activity; 20d. to the ludatoribus at Christmas; 16d. to other players at another unspecified time; 12d. to a fiddler; 2s. to some four men of York for playing, although the record is not clear on whether they were playing music or drama; 12d. to a tumbler, servant of Sir Thomas Darcy; 4d. to the men who sang at Hogmany; 12d. to two histrionibus; 8d. given to William Bull at the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin, which does not seem to be an entry until one gets to the next entry, 4d. given to

12 The Clifford records now at Chatsworth House date back to 1510; the surviving Wentworth and Savile correspondence are representative of West Riding gentry communications and interaction.
13 Yorkshire Archaeological Society, MS MD 282.
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'ali histrioni', another actor; an odd entry, which may not mean anything, which gives 20d. to the Guild of the Blessed Virgin, rather than the customary guild's giving the money to the Abbey; and 6d. given to 'uni histrioni vocat Tomeller'.

That entry points to the difficulties of terminology with these records. In the first Selby entry, above, histrionibus distinctly is professional actors, the Queen's Majesty's Players, and presumably from London, although one yet knows little about possible 'provincial' sub-companies. Here, the histrioni is a tumbler or acrobat. Additionally in this single fifteenth-century account roll are payments of 8d. to a histrioni from Whitgift; 20d. to singers in the abbot's private rooms at the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross; 8d. to a histrioni named James Strangwyssh; 4s. 8d. to 'histrionibus infra Abbiam' at the Feast of the Translation of patron St Germain; 6s. 8d. to the Boy Bishop of York; 6s. 8d. to the King's Players; 2s. to the 'histrionibus Civitatis Eborum', who may be York actors, waits, or some other sort of entertainers; and, finally, 4s. to histrionibus at the Feast of St Germain 'advincula', which would seem to pay entertainers over the two days of one of Germain's feast days on July 31 and the Feast of Peter Ad vincula on 1 August. Entertainment at Selby Abbey was frequent and varied. One also needs to note that these are summary payments for hoc anno, this year: in some instances they yield firm payment information because there is, for example, only one annual occasion for the translation of St Germain, but in others, one has no idea how many times the York Boy Bishop visited Selby Abbey during the year.

The Selby entertainment records are not unique to northern religious establishments. During the fifteenth century, Rogation Sunday through the following Thursday, the Feast of the Ascension, seems to have been a continuous festival in Ripon: 'le tente', apparently surmounted by the magnificent banner of St Wilfrid, was carried out to the country in procession with a dragon, minstrels, and players. St Wilfrid's August feast likewise merited an elaborate procession, players, and minstrels. For both festivals, the 'ministrallis ville Ripon vocatis Wakemen' provided entertainment as well as 'diversis ministrallis et histrionis', presumably visitors from elsewhere.

Entertainment was not restricted to St Wilfrid's festivals. In 1440, fifteen players were paid a penny each for performing during Easter week, while a penny was spent on beer and bread for 'ludentibus le Pykestolle' during the same period. In 1447–48, chaplain Robert Brompton was paid 16d. for writing play scripts - 'pro scripicione lusorum hoc anno'. These Ripon drama and entertainment records

14 The Ripon Minster MSS are on deposit at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds; additional Ripon records are at the Public Record Office, London, and the Northallerton Record Office.
continue, interrupted only by missing account rolls, for nearly a century and a half, until the last surviving chamberlain’s roll in 1540-41. In the dim light of the Reformation, the record of Ripon revelry fades to ‘nihil’ paid to minstrels at the Feast of the Ascension, ‘nihil’ paid to minstrels at St Wilfrid’s feasts, ‘nihil’ paid to the men who formerly carried the dragon, and 2s. paid to a solitary Ripon wakeman.

Fountains Abbey, one of the wealthiest and most isolated of Cistercian monasteries, was not located on a major Roman road nor on a major waterway, yet its few surviving records prove that entertainers regularly sought it out. The 1456-59 bursar’s account reveals entertainment payments spectacular in their frequency and variety. One page alone from that bursar’s account records the Earl of Salisbury’s fool; a minstrel named Thyrkeld; various minstrels at Christmas; the players of Lord William Plumpton; the Boy Bishop of Ripon; Lord Clifford’s minstrels; Baron Graystroke’s minstrel; a certain minstrel; a minstrel from Boston; minstrels of the Prince of Wales, Lord Pembroke and Lord Warwick; the Lord Salisbury’s fool, yet again; a minstrel from Durham; a minstrel of the Lord of Norfolk; Lord Fitzhugh’s minstrels; another fool; and the minstrels of Edward Egremund.

The regularity of entertainment in West Riding great households and religious establishments cannot be challenged: the records are too abundant and too telling, however imperfect their survival. Those data in turn lead to two further generalizations. As noted above, rigid categories of ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’, ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ drama will not hold for these records. That the performance environment was integrated between sacred and secular is documented by the numerous professional companies who played in West Riding pre-Reformation religious foundations as well as in gentry houses and towns. Among Doncaster’s regular visitors, for example, were the players of Lords Montague, Leicester, Worcester, Darcy and other noblemen, the Queen’s Men, the Lady Elizabeth’s Players and the King’s Men. Their playing venue quite often was St George’s, the Doncaster parish church, regardless of the secularity of the play being performed.

Another example of an integrated sacred and secular performance environment is more speculative. Hubberholme’s Church of St Michael (which originally was dedicated to St Oswald and then to St Leonard in the fifteenth century) erected a wooden ‘rood loft’ in the rather extraordinary year of 1558. Although quite isolated on the northwestern corner of Craven, Hubberholme surely must have heard mention of the Reformation by the eve of Elizabeth’s ascension. The loft survives, the only one left in the West Riding ‘and probably the

15 Leeds City Archives, Sheepscar, Vyner MS 5497.
16 The Doncaster City Archives holds its borough documents, which include entertainment data from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries.
last to be erected in England', but its contemporary functions may have been multiple. The mortice-holes in the beam indicate that figures, perhaps of earlier date, were attached or were intended to be attached. Built of oak, it is eighteen feet long, six feet wide, and painted red, black, and yellow, colours more usually associated with diabolic iconography than with church rood lofts. Each side is enclosed by a railing and seems to have been mounted by a ladder or movable steps because there is no evidence of a staircase. Painted with thirteen panels of red and black tracery and two panels of Percy fetterlock within the horns of a crescent, the loft is inscribed ‘Anno Dom[ini] MDLVIII hoc opus erat Willi[el]m[i] Jake Carpe[n]-t[arii]’. Because of its erection date, its survival, and its colours, one wonders if the Hubberholme loft did not also serve as a musicians’ or players’ station.

As further evidence emerges from the records of other northern counties, the earlier scholarly distinctions between ‘minster and market place’ drama may continue to blur. Actors seem to have played where they found space, setting, audience, and local authority. Likewise, earlier scholarly distinctions between ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ entertainment have been unsettled by these records. Inferential evidence from the Clifford, Slingsby, Savile, Ingram, and other family accounts reveals an almost undiscriminating potpourri of entertainment type, status, and geographic origin. A blind itinerant harper, the York waits, a man who played the tongs and bones, the Princess Elizabeth’s Players could visit a great house within a fortnight and all be paid for their efforts, which suggests that definitions of ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ entertainers need serious reconsideration.

The modern distinction between professionals’ being paid and amateurs’ not being paid is almost useless with the reward system between gentry and entertainers. All entertainers seem to have been paid, even if only ‘to goe away and not play’. Even Bottom expected to earn a 6d. per day stipend for his histrionic efforts. ‘Amateur’ thus seems to connote local and less competent performers, somewhat on the ‘Pyramus and Thisby’ level, yet these performers return to play and to be rewarded year after year. An entry from the Clifford records suggests that the quality of local entertainers could be substantial. In 1609 ‘the boyes of the Revells . . . plaied a play before [his Lordship, Lord Clifford]’ while the waits of Doncaster ‘plaied vpon their instrumentes dureinge the tyme of the play’.

Presumably neither the Boys of the Revels nor Lord Clifford would have suffered inept accompaniment; the Cliffords regularly had employed the waits of Doncaster, York and elsewhere during the

20 Clifford records, now Bolton Abbey MSS, at Chatsworth House.
preceding century at both their Skipton and Londesborough residences. If this 1609 Revels' entry is representative, and there is no reason to think that it is not, travelling professional acting companies seem to have been complemented by local musicians, an observation which eventually may go far to clarify the provincial playing conditions of London troupes. One also should note that the schedules of travelling players were tight: they moved on quickly, and the Doncaster waits would have had precious little rehearsal time to achieve what must have been a satisfactory performance.

Finally, the extent of travel and communication between northern and southern England has been seriously underestimated and undervalued. As noted above, the Yorkshire gentry worked, married, entertained, competed with, and communicated with each other. The majority of them owned multiple residences to which they regularly removed, and the majority either owned or took lodgings in London. They educated their sons at Oxford, Cambridge or an Inn of Court: their account books record expenses for masques, shows and plays at those institutions. When in London they attended the theatre, they paid a variety of performers who called on them or whom they hired for a domestic occasion, and they dipped deeply (and often reluctantly) into their purses to participate in court masques. They wrote splendidly gossipy letters about these entertainments to their friends in the West Riding and elsewhere, letters which give the lie direct to any illusion of provincialism or isolation. On their way across the West Riding or to and from London, they paid the local waits, they paid travelling entertainers, and they paid travelling professional players who somehow anticipated where and when the gentry were likely to be in residence, anticipated to such accuracy that when all of the northern records are collected such players' or waits' travel patterns can be charted.

Those patterns will reveal a more sophisticated cultural intercourse throughout England than hitherto has been recognized. Some of that intercourse undoubtedly was fostered by political jostling within the Elizabethan and Jacobean hierarchies of power. The patronage, permanent or transient, of entertainers became yet another means by which the gentry sought the approval of their equals and betters. A surviving letter from Robert Dudley to Lord Shrewsbury in Sheffield illustrates this entertainment network:

My good Lord where in your servants the bringers herof unto you be such as are plaiers of interludes and for the same have the licence of divers of my Lordes here

21 The Wentworth, Shrewsbury, and Savile collections of letters at Sheffield City Archives, Lambeth Palace, and Nottingham Records Office are particularly important in revealing how eager West Riding neighbours and relatives were to receive court gossip and copies of the latest masque.

22 Purchase and shipping patterns of food, musical instruments, and art objects from London to Hull and then inland to West Riding estates similarly await further analysis as data accumulate.
under their seales & hands to playe in divers Shires of the realme under their authoritie [as maie amplie appere unto your Lordship by the same licence]. I have thought amongst the rest by my letter to beseech your good Lordshipp conformitie to them likewise, that they may have your hand & scale to the licence for the like libertie in yorkshire, being honest men & such as shall playe noe other matters I trust but tollerable & conveinent, whereas some of them have beeene heard here alreadye before divers of my Lorde for whom I shall have good cause to thanke your Lordshipp and to remaine your Lordshipsps to the best that shall lye in my little power. And thus I take my leave of your good Lordshipp. ffrom Westminster the tenth of June 1559. your good Lordshipsps assured, R. Dudley. 23

Although Leicester’s subtext to Shrewsbury would take the political events of many years to reveal itself, the frequent presence of his players in the North is explained.

A more geographically but no less politically farflung example rests within the Wentworth correspondence. Thomas Wentworth, later Earl of Strafford, was born at Wentworth Woodhouse and maintained his West Riding estates, responsibilities and communications throughout his life. By 1635 he was Lord Deputy of Ireland, and Archibald Archer was Charles I’s court jester. Whether desirous of exile or hopeful of advancement, Archie the Fool wished to visit Wentworth in Ireland and enlisted Wentworth’s brother George to plead his case to Wentworth. The outcome of the visit has not survived, but Archie apparently returned to London and closed his own comedic career by a drunken Westminster tavern diatribe about the Archbishop of Canterbury, which abruptly terminated both his life at court and also his Irish aspirations. The conclusive letter from one of Wentworth’s correspondents recounts that Archie called His Grace a monk, rogue and traitor, for which character sketch his coat was pulled over his ears and he was ‘kickt out of the Court’. 24

Gentry mobility and sophistication are not the only or perhaps even the primary catalysts of northern entertainment: local professional players moved throughout the North, and although much work remains to be done on their patterns and payments, the data thus far suggest that their proficiency, to say nothing of their numbers, has been insufficiently evaluated. As noted above, earlier research focused almost exclusively on the London stage, leaving one with the sense that only two sorts of actors performed plays outside London: travelling London players who ran to the provinces to escape the plague; and town amateurs of Bottom’s histrionic caliber, ranting and

23 This letter was found by West Riding antiquarian John Hopkinson in 1676 among Shrewsbury’s and Bess of Hardwick’s personal papers abandoned in Sheffield Castle when it was ‘made unfitt for habitation’ in the 1640s; Hopkinson’s copy is preserved at the Bradford Archives as MS 32D86/33. The original letter now is at Lambeth Palace, and the bracketed portion here appears only in the original.

24 George Garrard’s 1637–38 letter from the Strand to Strafford in Ireland, Sheffield City Archives, Wentworth-Woodhouse Collection.
raving their simple Corpus Christi mystery pageants in the street. The 1612–14 Star Chamber trial of Sir John Yorke of Gowthwaite Hall, Nidderdale, provides impressive evidence to the contrary. 25

From Egton Bridge, deep in the North Riding moors but with travel patterns into such West Riding locations as Gowthwaite Hall, were Sir Richard Cholmley’s players, local men who appear in the records primarily as cordwainers and, not incidentally, as recusants. By Christmas season 1609–1610, when the events at Gowthwaite Hall occurred, the company numbered fifteen players, very large for a provincial troupe; large enough to perform any of the London plays, including Shakespeare’s; and, indeed, one actor larger than the fourteen-member King’s Men who visited Lord Clifford at Londesborough in 1620. Twelve of these fifteen players were known recusants, and their playing circuit was based on northern recusant households. C.J. Sisson notes that their 1609 winter tour included Whitby through Pickering to Helmsley, on to Thirsk and Ripon, and so to Nidderdale, then to Richmond and back eastwards through Northallerton and so home again. . . . They found an audience in most towns in the shire. And I can make a list of some dozen or so great houses where they acted every year, with regular patrons, acting one or more plays and staying one or two nights accordingly at each house. 26

The company included, among others, its organizers, Christopher and Robert Simpson; four other Simpsons; two Simpson cousins; two boy actors, Thomas Pant and Robert Lawnde; and a reputedly very funny actor, William Harrison, who played the fool’s parts. If their size was not provincial, neither was their repertoire: at that 1609 Christmastide, Sir John Yorke had the choice of seeing King Lear (published in 1608), The Three Shirleys (published in 1607), Pericles, Prince of Tyre (hot off the press a few months earlier) and a play called St Christopher, which was the one Yorke selected for his some hundred guests. As the Star Chamber transcript makes clear, those guests consequently saw a protestant minister carrying an English translation of the Bible – this while the King James version was in preparation – confronted by a Catholic priest carrying a gold cross by which he banishes the minister to hell amidst devils and fireworks; the priest is wafted to heaven amidst angels and harmonic music.

Cholmley’s players are not singular, except in the good fortune of having some of their names, itinerary and repertoire recorded. From Lancashire came Distley’s Company, a full-sized group about 1615

25 The Yorke trial records are in the Public Record Office, London; the details cited here are from the West Riding REED transcriptions in progress. See also J.R. Cliffe, Yorkshire gentry; John L. Murphy, Darkness and devils (Athens, Ohio: Ohio U.P., 1984); and C.J. Sisson, ‘Shakespeare’s quartos as prompt-copies, with some account of Cholmley’s players and a new Shakespeare allusion’, Review of English Studies, xviii (1942), 129–43.

who originally had been Dudley's players, then the Earl of Shrewsbury's players, then Dudley's players again after Shrewsbury's death in 1618, who by about 1625 seem to have run out of patrons and were diminished to four actors frequently 'paid to go away and not play'. A 1632 Doncaster record pays 5s. to 'Dishley and his companie that they should not play in the towne': earlier that year, the dishevelled band had been arrested in Banbury, and the news of their licenseless state quickly seems to have spread North.²⁷ Part of that grapevine grew from the peregrinations of northern town players. Although the full list is by no means yet complete, from the Clifford papers alone comes documentation of the players of Halifax, Willoughby, Richmond, Lancashire, Kendal, Long Preston, Carlisle, Otley, Beverley, Kirkby Steven, Skipton and York, in addition to numerous noblemen's troupes, waits, musicians and other entertainers. In 1510 between 25 December and 1 January no fewer than eight different companies of players performed at Skipton Castle, not the most accessible of venues.²⁸

These data on northern entertainment patterns are rather like the proverbial unlicked bear cub: predictably wild, visibly woolly, a trifle shapeless and potentially enormous when fully developed. Twelve volumes of the Records of Early English Drama have been published; twenty more remain to be collected and written before the picture is as complete as it can be from the surviving documents. Nevertheless, the West Riding records summarized here point to their own tale. Northern gentry were wealthy, mobile and sophisticated; likewise, the northern pre-Reformation religious establishments contributed to a rich and varied cultural environment. Towns welcomed a diversity of entertainment from their own waits and folk events to travelling players. Rigid scholarly discrimination between 'sacred' and 'secular', 'amateur' and 'professional', 'medieval' and 'Renaissance' drama seems to be undocumentable from the records. Furthermore, earlier lines drawn between northern and southern entertainment are blurred, if not erased, by the records. The map of early English entertainment stands in need of revision.

²⁷ Doncaster City Archives  AB 6 3/5.
²⁸ Bolton Abbey MSS at Chatsworth House.