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Performance beyond Drama

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When the field of performance studies first emerged, it borrowed from older disciplines, like the social anthropology of Victor Turner and speech act theory of J. L. Austin, to propose something entirely new—that scholars decenter the written word and focus instead on the embodied actions that also constitute meaning and identity. At once simple and revolutionary, the exhortation to study performance *as* performance, rather than through interpretive practices born of formalism and literary theory, has had far-reaching implications. On the one hand, performance studies encourages a consideration of theater as a social practice, one among many; on the other, it encourages a consideration of social practice as theater—a set of encoded, iterable behaviors we tend to follow whether onstage or off. Like an actor on a stage, we perform while we are in line at the grocery store or, to invoke Austin's famous example, while exchanging vows in a marriage ceremony.[1]

In medieval and early modern studies, this approach has inspired critical reevaluations of drama as a tangible, as much as textual, medium. However, apart from a few dazzling exceptions, premodern scholarship has yet to embrace the full implications of this intervention and examine *nontheatrical* performances with the same rigor afforded plays and dramatic entertainments.[2] This special issue of *JMEMS*, "Performance beyond Drama," addresses this gap in our field. What, we ask, might closer attention to offstage cultural performances—quotidian and ritualized, occupational and festal, carefully prescribed and improvised—reveal about medieval and early modern culture? What is the role of the premodern spectator in ostensibly nondramatic performance, and in what ways does the fluid and disruptive nature of performance redistribute authority? What work does cultural performance do to initiate, reform, or ratify community? And how might an emphasis on "performance" as decidedly nonmetaphorical, that is, not as

a conceit that *represents* social practice but as something that is *itself* a form of social practice, amplify voices otherwise silent in drama-focused studies?

To offer a more concrete sense of the affordances of this approach, we want to contrast it, briefly, with more typical approaches to a famous scene in early modern drama: the deposition of Richard II in Shakespeare's history play. A traditional textual analysis might invoke "theatricality" as a rhetorical trope located in Richard's linguistic patterns ("Nay, all of you that stand and look upon me, / Whilst that my wretchedness doth bait myself . . .").[3] A new historicist might think about Richard's performance more broadly by considering the scene's relationship to historical episodes of political subversion, like the Essex Rebellion. And while this constitutes a step toward a reading of performance, it remains in the clutches of a textual emphasis that treats the play as the primary subject and other forms of theater as subservient to it. This would likely reduce the actual scenes of social disruption that occur beyond the confines of the theater building to interesting, if diffuse, referents for the more self-consciously aware action depicted or described on stage. In contrast, a scholar influenced by innovations in performance studies might read the play text in a way that grants primacy to the embodied enactment of the scene by incorporating theatrical practices into her study: she may enlist classical actors, study performance histories, search the early modern dramatic record for hints about the bodies of the actors who initially fleshed out the play, or explore period accounts of actual depositions and coronations to recover a sense of the performative conventions of these milieux. She might revisit the play with one of the following questions: How might diverse artistic choices in staging the scene highlight particular thematic elements? (she could collaborate with a director to help explore this line of inquiry). How might historical productions change our understanding of the scene's social importance? (here she might draw on promptbooks of a nineteenth-century production, or sixteenth-century accounts of Richard Burbage's acting style). What actual rituals might the blocking of the deposition scene evoke for its first audiences?[4] Seen in this light, the theater no longer feeds vampirically on social practice, but is itself a social practice.

To extend this line of thinking, what if, instead of valorizing Shakespeare's play as the ultimate realization of certain social phenomena, we were to see it as simply one among many types of political performance that play out across medieval and early modern culture—in courthouses, town squares, and along royal thoroughfares? Such an approach would take the play as a starting point rather than the main target of its efforts, and present an inverse of the new historicist approach: rather than bring in "real"

examples to bolster a reading of the play, it would bring in passages from the play to help analyze other social performances. In this way, we could employ the same critical eye we typically train on the play text, but the "script" would now be the ephemeral repertoire captured tenuously by the archival record of particular scenes of subversion: carnivalesque mockeries, public beheadings, and, of course, actual depositions. Why not read such accounts with the same attention to the semiotics of movement, apparel, gesture, and ritualized language we would give such an action in formal drama? Certainly, the two modes have significantly different conventions and expectations: one does not enter into the same spectatorial contract when viewing, say, a beheading within and outside of the playhouse, but both scenes are ineluctably linked by the similarity of their choreographed actions. In short, we view the play text and the performances it echoes and anticipates as related in subterranean ways, not least to the common and exalted bodies whose iterable behaviors would have helped make the Ricardian deposition scene legible as such. The essays in this volume take this principle to its logical conclusion: to do away with the primacy of the dramatic text altogether and train a critical eye entirely on nondramatic performances.

This is not to advocate for a simple model of substitution or replacement—to read pamphlets *instead* of plays—but to foreground, in one of performance studies' definitive moves, what Diana Taylor calls the "repertoire" of gestures, movement, orality, and other ephemeral signifiers invoked in a plethora of nondramatic texts. And while repertoire is ultimately irreducible to any "archive" of recorded texts—e.g., the manuscript illuminations, handbills, trial proceedings, liturgical and civil ceremonies, printed debates, epic poetry, newsbooks, and secret society rituals that our contributors examine—we acknowledge that repertoire is also always in tension with, and mutually constitutive of, the archive.[5] It is possible, as Taylor has demonstrated, to focus on the traces of repertoire embedded in the archive as if the two function independently. To do so offers a temporary but efficacious way to think through the repertoire's embodied transmissions of cultural memory and identity.

Taylor's emphasis offers a powerful corrective to belief in textuality's capacity to fully capture or even reiterate performance. Our approach, while indebted to these ideas, offers a historical perspective that complicates some of Taylor's working assumptions. For one thing, familiarity with premodern practices, from codex-making to the theatrical repertory system, tends to quash any idea of texts as either unmediated or static.[6] Our contributors and readers are well aware that premodern texts are sociable (they travel,

borrow, and talk among themselves). They are rife with traces of the oral cultures that helped render them legible in the only partially literate worlds that shaped them. Furthermore, familiarity with the multiple forms of domination and resistance embedded in everyday medieval and early modern rituals make us reluctant to view an institutionalized archival form like a public play as significantly more "weighed down" by normalizing ideology than everyday social performances.[7] Finally, accustomed as we are to reconstructing events from textual remnants, the long-vanished horizon of a premodern repertoire seems less daunting than stimulating. Supported by the limiting factors of local and historical patterns of thought and behavior, we advance recuperative strategies of reading around, through, and between the archive's marks to locate and amplify the repertoire's traces. In this way, the differences between archive and repertoire become constructive rather than constrictive. And as the title of our forum "Whither the Bodies?" implies, we are keen to share some of the more innovative approaches to recovering the performing bodies often missing from explorations of the archive.

Before we proceed, we want to contextualize this project within some major lines of thought in performance studies today. Such self-localization seems at once necessary and mildly futile, as the interlocutors of performance-based approaches have always been interdisciplinary, with interests ranging from genealogies of architectural features to the semiotics of dance or political assembly. There is, consequently, no single theoretical "framework" so much as a series of inquiries all loosely motivated by the impulse to grant interpretive primacy to the nonliterary critical practices of our respective historical fields, which may draw on linguistics, jurisprudence, semiotics, cultural anthropology, or psychoanalysis. While insights from the latter fields certainly appear in other performance-targeted collections, they are often quickly absorbed into more traditional literary or historical interpretations of "theatricality" as a mode of highly stylized representation that tends to tell us more about a literary character, convention, or history than about an action's relation to the larger performative universe in which it initially conveyed its message.

"Performance beyond Drama" insists that performance is always a constitutive part of the making, shaping, and undoing of larger performative cultures at both ideological and material levels. In short, historical and literary practices *augment* our efforts to place everyday performances in the milieu of their initial presentation, but we remain committed to stimulating a more bracing and unorthodox disciplinary conversation through an emphasis on the repertoire.

"Performance beyond Drama" seeks to enrich the discourse between medieval/early modern studies and performance studies—vibrant fields that too often talk past one another. In view of this, we find ourselves among those interested in defining the conceptual topography of performance studies with greater precision.[8] In the latter vein, several venues for premodern scholarship have hosted reexaminations of the terms "theatricality," "performativity," and "performance." One salient example, Henry Turner's collection *Early Modern Theatricality*, responds, like our volume, to the literary emphasis predominant in premodern scholarship.[9] The anthology's expansive call for a flexible and ludic understanding of theatricality is welcome, but the contributions on the whole tend to limit the collection's scope to theater; even its more catholic considerations of theatricality rely on examples from dramatic writing to anchor claims about nondramatic texts.

Similarly, Gina Bloom and Susan Bennett's 2017 special issue of *Shakespeare Bulletin* investigates connections between performance studies and early modern theater.[10] While the contributors identify a number of productive sites for the exploration of Shakespearean performance, ranging from amateur dramatics to digital media, their emphasis remains, naturally, on the work of Shakespeare, that most canonical of dramatic authors. Furthermore, their collection still attaches performance overwhelmingly to the stage rather than thinking through the everyday performances that so vividly filled the streets beyond the theater buildings. In general, premodern scholarship has been slow to take up W. B. Worthen's 2008 call to resist privileging the literary and written archive over the repertoire.[11] There have been individual chapters and journal articles, including recent work by Erika T. Lin, V. K. Preston, Clare Wright, Julia Fawcett, Miles Parks Grier, Matthew J. Smith, Ellen MacKay, and Carol Symes, that explore more capacious versions of performance in premodern records, but they are stand-alone pieces or sections rather than part of a more sustained and far-reaching call to rethink the ideological and material effects of nondramatic premodern performance.[12]

On the performance studies side, a towering example of scholarship that approaches early modern nondramatic texts with questions generated through performance theory is Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead*.[13] This influential work, with its powerful understanding of "surrogation" as a form of both forgetting and carrying on cultural practices, locates many of its case studies in the eighteenth century. Yet, while Roach's ideas have proven popular in performance and theater studies, they are often mobilized transhistorically, as ideas that carry currency in an almost universal array of sites

and eras. Our efforts, while indebted to the work of Roach, rigorously attend to the specificity of our periods and localities; we seek out and tarry with the particular culture of each premodern social performance as its own viable site of inquiry. However, fidelity to the historical moment need not preclude investment in more conceptual issues, like the ramifications of social performance or "performativity" on our understandings of subjectivity, identity, and agency. Despite our attention to the texture of the historical moment, then, we recognize that the recovery of social performances comprises a project with political consequences in our present. Quite often, to study social performance itself is to be *a priori* political, attuned to the complex negotiations of authority and license that occur between performing and spectating bodies.

Certainly, performance and politics have proven a powerful amalgam in the work of scholars like Judith Butler, whose recent turn to reading the political function of assemblies, from vigils to protests, has necessitated a productive revision of her earlier thinking about "performativity" as a largely unconscious, internalized, and enacted form of identity making. Articulated most emphatically in her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler's initial conceptualization of "performativity" might be said to have squared the circle of J. L. Austin's performative speech act with Derrida's iterability and Foucault's theory of power relations.[14] This synthesis heralded feminists' and other thinkers' more abstract forays into Continental philosophy and cognitive theories of performance. Butler's recent pluralization of performativity broadens her definition of performance, drawing in part on the pioneering innovations of performance theory to place greater emphasis on embodiment and the way collective action can disrupt discursive fields and their norms.[15] Our use of the term "performance" in "Performance beyond Drama" as an iterative action inclusive of, rather than subordinate to, "theatricality" flickers between these two understandings of performativity: on the one hand, performance marks the indelible historical impression of ideology onto bodies; on the other, those bodies, acting collectively, can still take part in a radical reshaping of dominant cultural norms. We can view, then, records of early modern history not as calcified units of historical data but as remnants of once vital and alive assemblies of willful actors who speak to us of a time both fundamentally distant from our own *and* as part of a tradition that extends to today: a repertoire of resistance that links the Great Rising of 1381 and the Diggers' occupation of St. George's Hill in 1649 to Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter.[16]

Our contributors historicize the political charge of performance studies and use it to illuminate the past in new ways, with an awareness of both performance's inescapable embodiment and the body's dual susceptibility and resistance to political forces. Making sense of the tactics, aims, and effects of the performing body's radical ambiguity is precisely the kind of work to which performance studies is best suited, whether differentiating the cultural work done by painted iterations of a medieval scenario involving pigs and blind men with Marla Carlson, or tracing, with Simone Waller, the paradoxically aural effects of "liveness" in an particularly guarded articulation of a humanist dialogue. With Sarah Mayo, we discover that the early modern mountebank's very "occupational ambiguity" as actor-doctor-rogue offers some protection from the ire raised by his quack cures. And Laura Levine's essay reveals how the trials of two "conjurers" accused of sexual assault end up generating performances of the crimes in an attempt to locate evidence as well as lay groundwork for future legal performances that look to the past for precedent. Pannill Camp, in his analysis of Freemasonry, finds its rituals constitutive of collective lodge philosophy rather than reflection of fixed doctrine, and Jill Ingram describes how perambulations publicized legal rights, viscerally imprinting collective boundaries and claims on a new generation. In other words, the habitual reenactment of social performance is not simply window dressing for "important" historical phenomena: the performance itself does historically significant work on material reality.

Midway through our contributors' studies, we present a forum of three briefer essays that tackle some of the broader theoretical issues in "Performance beyond Drama." "Whither the Bodies?" asks three leading early modern performance scholars, D. J. Hopkins, Erika T. Lin, and W. B. Worthen, to discuss productive approaches and limits to the seemingly irresolvable paradox of our enterprise: how to recover and analyze an embodied, temporally remote action whose remains are necessarily impressionistic and incomplete.

We have opted to present all but the forum essays in chronological order as a sign of our commitment to the forces of historical specificity. And yet we resist simple explanations that ignore the transhistorical functions of performance. Performance both captures and does something to time. Whether it is to anticipate an action's future iteration, dilate the present moment, or awaken what W. B. Worthen calls the "living deads" of a dramatic text, performance asks us to cross temporal thresholds. In this spirit, we end the issue with an afterword by Carol Symes, a historian of medi-

eval media performance who, in reflecting on the preceding studies, locates commonalities, distinctions, patterns, and potentialities that anticipate fresh work in the field.

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Notes

1   J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 5. In addition to cultural anthropology, performance studies has long been invigorated by the social sciences of sociology and psychology. See Erving Goffman's seminal *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

2   Trailblazing medieval studies include Jodi Enders's *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); Sarah Beckwith's *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Claire Sponsler's *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). In early modern studies, this crucial groundwork appears in works like Stephen Mullaney's *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Linda Woodbridge and Edward Berry's collection, *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); and Jean Howard's *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

3   William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. Charles R. Forker, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 4.1.237–38.

4   Naomi Conn Liebler does some of this work by going beyond the common identification of the deposition scene "as an inverted coronation ceremony" to read its semiotics in relation to the social and political function of movement and gesture in official coronations; see "The Mockery King of Snow: *Richard II* and the Sacrifice of Ritual," in *True Rites and Maimed Rites*, ed. Woodbridge and Berry, 220–39, at 229.

5   See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

6   Taylor herself discredits such thoughts as common "myths" about the archive (19).

7   Taylor, 15.

8   See, for example, Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait's admonition that theatricality "is in danger of being yet another grand theory of everything," in *Theatricality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 32.

9   Henry S. Turner, ed., *Early Modern Theatricality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

10 Gina Bloom and Susan Bennett, "Shakespeare and Performance Studies: A Dialogue," special issue of *Shakespeare Bulletin* 35, no. 3 (2017).

11 W. B. Worthen, "Antigone's Bones," *TDR: The Drama Review* 52, no. 3 (2008): 10–33.

12 Erika T. Lin, "Social Functions: Audience Participation, Efficacious Entertainment," in *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Early Modern Age*, ed. Robert Henke (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 35–50; V. K. Preston, "Mad Methodologies and Community Performance: The Asylum Project at Bedlam," *Theatre Topics* 26, no. 2 (2016): 221–37; Clare Wright, "Ontologies of Play: Reconstructing the Relationship between Audience and Act in Early Modern Drama in Performance," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 35, no. 2 (2017): 187–206; Julia Fawcett, "Unmapping London: Urbanization and the Performance of Personal Space in Aphra Behn's *The Lucky Chance*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 50, no. 2 (2017): 155–71; Miles Parks Grier, "Inkface: The Slave Stigma in England's Early Imperial Imagination," in *Scripturalizing the Human: The Written as the Political*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 2015), 193–220; sections of Matthew J. Smith's *Performance and Religion in Early Modern England: Stage, Cathedral, Wagon, Street* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018); Ellen MacKay, "Richard III in the Parking Lot," *Upstart: A Journal of English Renaissance Studies* (August 2013), upstart.sites.clemson.edu/Essays/richard-forum/richardiii .xhtml; and Carol Symes, "The Medieval Archive and the History of Theatre: Assessing the Written and Unwritten Evidence for Premodern Performance," *Theatre Survey* 52, no. 1 (2011): 29–58.

13 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

14 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Among the more helpful disambiguations of Butler's initial notion of "performativity" from related strands of theory are J. Hillis Miller's "Performativity as Performance / Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida's Special Theory of Performativity," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (2007): 219–35; and Mary Thomas Crane's "What Was Performance?," *Criticism* 43, no. 2 (2001): 169–87.

15 See, for example, Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Judith Butler with Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political; Conversations with Athena Athanasiou* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

16 We are not arguing for continuity between these very distinct flashpoints, but rather between the scenarios of assembly, collective occupation of public space, assertion of rights, etc., upon which these social movements draw.