Plays and Players: the Latin terms for performance

An essential element in any historical research project such as REED is lexical research. Words in any language change their meanings and connotations over time: unless we can have some certainty about their meaning and usage we cannot gloss, translate, or even select documents fully or accurately. For REED the key words for study are those used to describe ‘dramatic, ceremonial, and minstrel activity in Great Britain before 1642.’ The purpose of the present article is to report on one aspect of that research by an examination of some of the Latin terms known to refer to performers and performances. This is a more complicated procedure than appears on the surface.

There are four sources upon which to draw for information about medieval Latin vocabulary. A logical classification of them would be:
A. Word lists
   1. Modern dictionaries and lexicons of Latin
   2. Contemporary glossaries, Latin – Latin and Latin – vernacular
B. Texts
   1. Contemporary financial, legal, and administrative records
   2. Contemporary prose literary or classicizing texts

In practice, however, it is A.1 and B.1 which come first. A REED researcher begins with a mass of records and proceeds by consulting all the tools of modern lexical scholarship and by using internal evidence to read, understand, and translate the documents. It is the unavoidable shortcomings inherent both in the lexicography and the contextual clues provided by texts of this kind which lead one to the other sources, especially for help with the specialized vocabulary with which we are here concerned.

What then are the shortcomings of which we spoke? Many words, and many occurrences of words, are not included in modern dictionaries or do not form part of the available data for their creation. In most cases the selection of words depends upon the reading of the contributors, and most dictionaries are based upon printed rather than manuscript sources. These shortcomings are unavoidable; it is physically impossible for any comprehensive Latin dictionary to be composed on the basis of a full survey of all extant Latin writings in manuscript form. But they impose limits to the usefulness of such secondary sources for REED’s historical research. We draw upon types of documents which have not often been edited and printed, and whose vocabulary has not always found its way into published work on medieval Latin vocabulary. Thus we find that often words relating to our peculiar purpose are not in the dictionaries at all, or defined only in other senses, or defined in a way so general as to be useless. And so we are driven to seek definition within the sources themselves, an enterprise which has shortcomings of its own. Before going on, however, I should like to survey those dictionaries which do exist and have help to offer, since it is with them that our search for the meaning of REED terminology begins.

For most common Latin vocabulary of the classical period (and one ought not to forget that many, perhaps most, Latin words in common use in the medieval period are classical
words which have not changed their meanings very much) there are two excellent lexicons, each of which is one volume in length: Lewis and Short, and the new Oxford Latin Dictionary (OLD). The OLD is indisputably the better dictionary, but it has deliberately restricted its field of reference to authors and works prior to the end of the second century A.D. Lewis and Short remains the most accessible guide for Latin of the later period. On a much more detailed level is the immensely long and erudite Thesaurus Linguae Latinae (TLL) whose ambition it is to be comprehensive, both in its inclusion of words and in the authors surveyed, for the time period covered begins with the earliest Latin and continues well into the medieval period. However, despite the fact that the project has been underway for 100 years, the volumes published to date go up only to the letter P. It has been nevertheless the most useful of any dictionary discussed here for our research; indeed there are words listed in the TLL whose existence is not known to other Latin dictionaries.2

For specifically medieval Latin, lexicographic support is much harder to find and of a generally less scientific or comprehensive nature. The Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis of DuCange suffers from many limitations: it is 200 years old (and knowledge of medieval paleography, codicology, and Latin has improved since then), and it is largely limited to manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Attempts to present lexicons based on DuCange but in a smaller, more concise or more modern format suffer from similar limitations. Some lexicons have appeared for specific fields, such as theology, or with geographic limits, such as medieval Polish or medieval Irish Latin, but all these are restricted in their general usefulness by that very selectivity which characterizes them.3

For specifically English medieval Latin, one turns to Latham’s Revised Medieval Latin Wordlist, or to the fascicles which have thus far appeared of the full-fledged Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources (DML). To praise Latham too highly as a working tool is difficult: it is compact enough to carry to the record office or archive, full of well cross-referenced alternate spellings, and generally accurate in its definitions. But it is what it was intended to be, a wordlist based on DuCange but in a smaller, more concise or more modern format suffer from similar limitations. Some lexicons have appeared for specific fields, such as theology, or with geographic limits, such as medieval Polish or medieval Irish Latin, but all these are restricted in their general usefulness by that very selectivity which characterizes them.3

With the question of internal evidence for meanings, here as in the case of lexicography, the drawbacks are unavoidable. The type of document in which most REED records, and therefore most REED vocabulary, occur is not written in continuous prose very often: financial records and accounts never are, while administrative records and legal/judicial records are sometimes. But there is not much context. In certain circumstances these documents are helpful:

1. Use of synonyms or explanatory terms. Occasionally, a scribe will add inve and a synonym or an alternate title to a word. This is often but not always helpful, since the synonym may be a word about whose meaning one is equally unclear.

2. Use of vocatus or dictus. Sometimes to clarify an expression, the scribe will add a description, formed from an adjective meaning ‘called’ and another noun, whose purpose seems to be restrictive. These expressions can be extremely useful.

3. Multiple entries describing the same person or event in some detail. These are the most helpful of all.

When the resources of the dictionaries and the documents themselves have been exhausted, we know a great deal about certain terms, but not perhaps as much as we would like or need to know. That is where the wider contemporary context must be examined. The present article is divided into two parts; during the remainder of this first
part, I shall give a list of the terms to be discussed and then discuss the meaning of each one on the basis of the resources just described. In the second half, will be discussed the remaining contemporary sources, ie, wordlists/glosses and literary texts, and the information to be gained from them about these terms.

One remaining variety of internal evidence upon which I shall draw, does not really fit into any of these categories, and that is the evidence provided by the formation of the words themselves. Many of the terms are agentive nouns, formed from a verb or verbal root by the addition of an agentive suffix like -tor or -or. It is comparatively simple to get at least a preliminary sense of what an agentive noun means from the root verb; the terms which are not agentives are correspondingly more difficult to deal with.

The terms with which I will be dealing are: histrio, iocalis, ioculator, iocus, ludator, ludere, ludus, lusio, lusor, lusus, mimus, and ministrallus. Anyone who has worked with dramatic records will recognize terms that could have been included but were not. I have excluded words like fustulator, a piper, because they do not illustrate the sort of problem with which I wish to deal here. I have not included pagina because to discuss it fully would leave little room for anything else. And I have not included theatrum because I have little to add to the article by M. H. Marshall, 'Theatre in the Middle Ages: Evidence from Dictionaries and Glosses.' It is in any case not a common word thus far in REED records and will be commented upon further in the Latin Glossary in the forthcoming REED Devon volume. In short, the criteria are that the words be difficult enough of analysis to require discussion, common enough to deserve it, and not so complex as to require an entire article to say anything.

The easiest way to present these words is in the form of lexical entries: I shall give the word, its derivation, its definition with examples, and the frequency and distribution of its occurrence within the sample, if they are of interest. I have, of course, selected examples from a much fuller collection than appears here, and would be very happy to reply to queries seeking fuller listings for any word as well as to receive any examples of other senses than are indicated here. Where no examples whatever are given, a definition is based upon a word's meaning in classical Latin, its derivation, and the largest number of examples. The sample is composed of the following collections of records. In the Malone Society series, the records of Norfolk, Suffolk, and Lincolnshire; in the REED series, York, Chester, and Coventry; of the record collections available in the REED office but still waiting to be published, Devon and Shrewsbury. In quotations made to illustrate definitions, I have not indicated expansions. It will be noted that many examples in the following pages are drawn from the Shrewsbury records: they are more full than most other record collections of multiple serial entries pertaining to the same performance, and of expressions with siue and vocatus. It was in fact the checking and translation of the Shrewsbury Latin records which made me realize that an article such as the present one could be both possible and useful. But one can only assume that the town was blessed or cursed with generations of precise and pedantic town clerks and nosy town auditors.
Accounts 1430–1; Shrewsbury Bailliffs' 1432–3, 1438–9; and elsewhere 2) singer: 1520–1 Shrewsbury Bailliffs' Accounts, 'histriones pronunciantes melodiam' 1534–5 ibid, 'histriones pronunciantes melodiam et cantilenas' 3) ?player: 1525–6 Shrewsbury Bailliffs' Accounts, '... in regardo dato iij histronibus comitis arundell ... et in vino expendito super balliuos ... audientes melodiam et ludentes inspicientes'

The word is found in the sample from 1388 to 1561, and is found in records of Chester, Coventry, Devon, Norfolk, Shrewsbury, and York; and describes persons stated to be under the patronage of royalty or the nobility, those in the employ of towns, and those whose affiliations are not given.

iocalis, iocale adj derivation: cl iocus plus adjectival suffix -alis, meaning 'belonging or pertaining to'.

Pertaining or belonging to a play or to performers: 1519–20 Exeter St John's Bow Churchwardens' Accounts, 'Et de xiiij d receptis Tunicis iocalibus hoc anno ...'

This is a very rare word thus far, probably because its 'parent' noun, iocus, is less frequent than other words as a term for a play, but worthy of inclusion since no Latin dictionary other than the TLL lists it, and it appears that the fascicle of the DML will not include it. There is a somewhat more common noun iocalia, iocalium meaning 'jewels, precious objects' to which occurrences of this adjective in the plural might be mistakenly attributed by a cursory reading.

ioculator, ioculatoris n m derivation: cl iocus plus -ulus, diminutive suffix, plus -ator, male agentive suffix; forms: iogulator also occurs.

An entertainer, possibly a jester, which is the English cognate form; nouns and adjectives of seeing are sometimes applied to the performance of a ioculator, but there is not enough evidence to state that the performance was always or primarily visual in nature: 1369–70 King's Lynn; 1524–5 Shrewsbury Bailliffs' Accounts; and elsewhere. It is curious that thus far the noun always occurs in the singular.

The word is found in the sample between 1369 and 1540, and in Devon, Norfolk, Shrewsbury, Suffolk, and York. The persons described by the word are sometimes stated as having patrons and sometimes not. It is not of very frequent occurrence.

iocus, ioci n m (neuter forms often found in plural: ioca, iocorum) derivation: cl, see OLD sv 'iocus.' The cl. meaning was primarily 'joke, witticism.'

A) An entertainment, diversion; a variety of forms of entertainment can be referred to by iocus:
1) ?pageant of a Corpus Christi play: 1441 Coventry Leet Book I, 'Ordinatum est quod ... ommes ... qui ludunt in festo Corporis christi bene & sufficienter ludant Ita quod nulla impedicio fiat in aliquo ioco ...' 2) various sports and dancing, 1482 Coventry Leet Book I, '... omnino mo ioca & lucos sua ... videlicet ad sagittandum luctandum currendum cum hominibus & equis & trepidiendum ...' 3) tricks of a trained animal: 1525–6

59
Shrewbury Bailliffs' Accounts, reward given to a camel-ward for showing 'ioca istius cameli;' 4) dramatic and musical performance: 1532–3 Shrewsbury Bailliffs’ Accounts, a payment is made to players 'offerentes ioca sua,' and in the next entry wine is given by the city to civic officials hearing and looking at 'lusum et melodiam eorum'

The word occurs in the sample from 1440 to 1533, and in Coventry and Shrewsbury. It is not of frequent occurrence.

**ludator, ludatoris n m derivation: cl. ludus plus -ator, male agentive suffix; forms: luditor is also found.**

A) a player  B) an entertainer of various sorts: 1) a morris dancer: 1562–3 Grimsby Chamberlains’ Accounts, ‘solitus luditoribus in marisco;’ 2) an acrobat: 1478–9 Barnstaple Receivers’ Accounts, ‘... iiiij d ludatori vocato tumbeler;’ 3) a musician: *ibid,* ‘... iiiij d ludator’ in cyboll

The word is found in the sample from 1474 to 1563, and in Devon, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, and York. It describes both persons with and without patrons.

**ludo, ludere, ludi, lusum** v tr and intr derivation: cl., see OLD sv ‘ludo, ludere’.

A) to perform, as a form of entertainment:
1) with a direct object: a) such as *ludum, lusum, paginam,* to perform a play or pageant: 1388–9 York Pater Noster Guild, 1399 York A/Y Memorandum Book; 1421–2 Chester Coopers’ Records; b) to perform some other specified entertainment: 1573–4 Devon Tones Receivers’ Accounts, ‘... lusori qui ludebat le pochettes’
2) without a direct object: a) with prepositional phrases such as *in pagina,* to perform in a play or pageant: 1433 York City Chamberlains’ Rolls; b) with various other prepositional phrases, to perform in other specified entertainment: 1447 York City Chamberlains’ Books, ‘ludenti cum Ioly Wat & Malkyn;’ 1486 York City Chamberlains’ Rolls, ‘...Vadijs... clericorum... ludencium in dicto visu...’ (for a royal entry); c) used absolutely: i) without specification, as in primary sense A); ii) to play music: 1526–7 Shrewsbury Bailliffs’ Accounts, ‘histriones ludentes coram balliuis’

The participle *ludens, ludentis* is sometimes used as a substantive.

B) to play a sport or game of chance: 1432 York A/Y Memorandum Book, ‘... milites ludebant ad talos...’

**ludus, ludi** n m derivation: cl., see OLD sv ‘ludus’

A) a play: 1) without specification, the most common occurrence; 2) specifically: a) play based on an incident from the Bible or Apocrypha, eg, the magi, 1317–18 Lincoln Cathedral Accounts; the resurrection, 1383–4 *ibid;* i) a series of pageants or short plays all based on such incidents, eg, 1394 York A/Y Memorandum Book, and elsewhere; ii) sometimes one such pageant, eg, 1454 York City Chamberlains’ Rolls and Mercers’ Pageant Documents, b) an individual play based on a saint’s life or martyrdom: eg, 1515–16 Shrewsbury Bailliffs’ Accounts. c) an individual play based on historical or legendary figures such as King Robert of Sicily, eg, 1452–3 Lincoln Misc Rolls; d) religious didactic drama such as Pater noster plays or Creed plays: eg, 1397 Lincoln Misc Rolls 1; 1399 York Pater Noster Guild Account Roll; 1449–51 York Corpus Christi Account Rolls.
e) the performance of a play: 1417 York a/y Memorandum Book, '... ludus singularum paginarum esset ... ad portas prioratus sancte Trinitatis ...' f) a written form of a play: 1376 York Will of William de Thorp, '... libros meos de ludis ...'

The performance of a ludus is sometimes described by verbs of hearing alone, or by verbs of seeing alone, but there is no reason to suppose that this means that some plays were purely mimetic in the absence of other evidence.

B) a game of chance, or a sport C) a morris dance: 1576-7 Chester '... pro ... lud() vocato morris dawn ...'

lusio, lusionis n f derivation: cl, see old sv `lusio.'
A) a performance: 1) of a play or pageant: 1454, 1462 York City Chamberlains' Rolls: '... pro lusione pagende ...'; 2) of music: 1486 York City Chamberlains' Rolls, '... pro lusione organorum ...' B) a play: 1487-8 Exeter St John's Bow Churchwardens' Accounts, '... de alia lusione vocata Robyn Hode ...'

lusor, lusoris n m derivation: cl, see old sv `lusor.'
Player: A) in an unspecified entertainment, the most frequent occurrence; B) specifically: 1) a player in plays or interludes: 1388-9 York Pater Noster Guild, '... ludus dicte oracionis dominice ... cum lusoribus eiusdem ...'; 2) in some other specified entertainment: a) in a puppetshow: 1513-14 Mettingham College Accounts, '... vni lusori ad popynys;' b) in a mixed musical and dramatic performance: Shrewsbury Bailiffs' Accounts, see above, sv iocus, sense 4).

The term occurs in the sample from 1388 to 1585, and in Devon, Lincoln, Norfolk, Shrewsbury, Suffolk, and York. It is applied both to those with patrons, and those for whom no patron is given.

lusus, lusi n m derivation: cl, see old, sv `lusus'; forms: also found in fourth declension.
A) a play: 1421-2 Chester Coopers' Records, '... in luso Corporis christi'; 1478-9 York a/y Memorandum Book, '... ludum siue lusum ... ludendum in alta strata ...'; B) an entertainment, not necessarily dramatic, twice used in the Shrewsbury Bailiffs' Accounts, 1524-5 and 1534-5, to describe the performance of a ioculator

mimus, mimii n m derivation: cl, see old sv `mimus'. Its cl connotation was always more pejorative than that of histrio.

A) an entertainer of an unspecified sort, the most frequent occurrence; in 1473-4 Shrewsbury Bailiffs' Accounts, histrones, mimii, and ministralli are used to refer to the same group of entertainers. B) musician: 1496-7 Devon Receivers' Accounts, 'mimi' used as synonym for 'lez Trumpettes'; 1527-8 ibid, '... mimis ... qui ludebat cum a kitt & a bagge pype ...' refers to persons in the employ of the town, and hence probably to the town waits, frequently in the Exeter accounts.

The term occurs in the sample from 1447 to 1641, and in Devon, Norfolk, Shrewsbury, and Suffolk. It is extremely frequent in Devon. It describes persons stated as having
patrons, those in the employ of towns, and those with no stated affiliation.

**ministrallus, ministralli n m derivation:** from minister, 'servant' plus -allus, diminutive suffix.

A) An entertainer: 1) of an unspecified kind, most frequent occurrence; 2) of a specified kind: a) musician, of an unspecified instrument, 1450–1 Shrewsbury Bailiffs' Accounts; describes persons in the employ of towns, and sometimes those specifically designated as holding the office of wait: eg, 1416–17 Exeter Receivers' Accounts 1437–8 Shrewsbury Bailiffs' Accounts; b) of a specific instrument, eg, 1449 York City Chamberlains' Rolls, '... ministrallo vocato luter ...'; c) a juggler: 1447 York *ibid*, '... ministrallo vocato j Tregitour ...'; d) animal trainer: 1462 York *ibid*, '... ministrallo ducenti unum marmoset ...'; e) storyteller: 1449 *ibid*, '... ministrallo fabulatori ...'

The term is found in the sample from 1331 to 1540, and throughout the geographic range. It describes persons with noble patrons, persons without patrons named, and persons in the employ of towns.

(To be continued)

**NOTES**

1 *Norwich* 1540–1642, ed David Galloway, REED, (Toronto, 1984), statement of project aims, vi.

2 Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879); *The Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1982); *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (Leipzig, 1900–). The prefaces and introductions of the two former works provide an interesting contrast in the aims and methods of lexicography in the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries.

3 Charles du Fresne DuCange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* 6 vols (Paris, 1733). The best known shortened DuCange is J. P. Migne, *Lexicon manuale ad scriptores mediae et infimae latinitatis* (Paris, 1866). A dictionary with a theological specialisation is A. Blaise, *Lexicon latinitatis medii aevi* (Turnhout, 1975), which appeared as a companion volume to the on-going Corpus Christianorum Latinorum Continuatio mediaevalis. It gives only single word definitions, makes no attempt to show changes in meaning over time, and is extremely limited in the authors and works surveyed as the introduction shows: a lexicon to be used only by those to whom nothing else is available and yet which enjoys a good deal of credibility among theologians studying the Middle Ages. An example of a geographically-limited Latin dictionary is the *Lexicon mediae et infimae latinitatis Polonorum* 4 vols (A–H) (Wroclaw, Krakow, Warsaw, 1953–77).


5 *Symposium* 3 (1950), 1–39 and 366–89.


7 A Grimsby document using the word iocus, not found in *Collections viii*, has been printed in *REEDN* 1979.2 by Ian Lancashire; "Ioly Walte and Malkyng": a Grimsby puppet play in 1431, 6–8.