Prolegomenon to a study of provincial touring and acting styles in seventeenth-century England

An invitation last year to participate in a Shakespeare Association of America Seminar on 'Professional Performance in the "Provinces"' sparked my re-interest in an issue I had visited some time ago, namely the persistence into the twentieth century of certain acting traditions traceable back to the late seventeenth century, or earlier. Prior research into eighteenth through early twentieth century acting had suggested to me that provincial performers preserved traditions that had previously fallen from favor in major urban centers; might this be true for seventeenth century acting as well?

I initially picked up a trail left cold long ago in my dissertation research. Why did cast lists for the Robert B. Mantell Shakespearean Company, which was touring the American provinces as late as 1928, occasionally contain the name 'Abraham Ivory,' an individual
whom Mr. Mantell (himself trained in the English provinces in the 1870s) never employed? I now know Abraham Ivory was an actor named (and mocked) in the key to Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* as a notorious drunk. He was also in all likelihood the actor 'Abraham' arrested in a 1649 raid on the Salisbury Court theatre and probably a performer of women's roles in Caroline times. How was it that Mantell kept alive the tradition of concealing with this stage name a performer who otherwise did not wish to be identified? This 'homage' to Ivory was no isolated example: in his portrayal of King Lear, Mantell preserved bits of stage business traceable back to the early eighteenth century and he continued to perform Cibber's *Richard III* long after the Shakespearean text had reclaimed the English-speaking stage. What was going on here?

In what follows I propose to share my curiosity about three intertwined skeins of speculation about the continuity of acting traditions in the hopes that my REEDers will direct me to additional data relevant to the following questions:

1) How did performing in the provinces impact on restoration acting style?

2) What is the current state of evidence concerning the continuity of acting traditions from pre-commonwealth to post-restoration?

3) What (if anything) can the evidence of pre-commonwealth provincial performance tell us about 'Elizabethan' acting style?

(1)

Hotson, and after him Milhous/Hume and Dale B. J. Randall, have shown that London playing was not entirely squelched during the commonwealth. Surreptitious, unrecorded (because illegal) playing might logically have continued in the provinces, though whatever records have survived would probably reflect a small portion of actual activity. In any case, provincial touring resumed immediately after the restoration. Murray reproduces an exchange of letters in September-October of 1660 between the Mayor of Maidstone and Master of the Revels Sir Henry Herbert, in which the former proposes to prohibit players on his own authority and the latter vigorously demurs. It was, of course, in Herbert's self-interest to reassert his authority and guarantee his income from licensing fees. This is why he resisted the institution of patent monopolies for Davenant and Killigrew, contributing to the complex political maneuvering around the issue. For our purposes, the result of the politics was to promote provincial performance: George Jolly is to be found in Cambridge in 1662 with *Philaster* and *The Changeling* in his repertory and in Norwich in 1663 ("'Tis Pity She's a Whore, A New Way To Pay Old Debts"), having in the meanwhile (January 1663) been granted a license to perform 'throughout England with exception only to the Cities of London and Westm' (Hotson, 182). The prologue to Etherege's *Comical Revenge* (1664) warns jokingly that hostile criticism will send the players off to Norwich or Ireland.

Until after the turn of the century, and as was the case before the restoration, provincial players performed in fitted-up venues, ranging from pig-sties on up, rather than in theatres. After 1700, activity was regular, safe and profitable enough to warrant the construction of the first provincial theatres – Bath (1705), Greenwich (1709), Richmond (1718), Canterbury (1726), Bristol (1729), York (1734), Ipswich (1737) – a development.
which the 1737 Licensing Act stalled. According to Rosenfeld (3), provincial companies retained the sharing system, giving way to the salaried system adopted by the London companies only gradually in the course of the eighteenth century. It is likely that not only plays but roles were part of the 'stock' in which company members 'shared.' Burge finds the first use of the common term for 'inheritable' type-casting – 'lines of business' – in the mid-eighteenth century, but evidence of the practice (under the terms 'specialty,' 'caste' or 'walk') much earlier. The practice was, in effect, a casting rule governing all performance until well into the nineteenth century – or into the twentieth, in tradition-bound companies like Mantell's.

As apparently was the case pre-restoration, it is deceptive to speak of 'provincial companies' without attempting to draw some distinctions. There is ample evidence that the King's Company and Duke's Company toured almost intact in the summer months. There were also companies like Jolly's which, because of the patent monopolies, could not play London. (When the King's Company visited Oxford in the summer of 1680, they found an unnamed rival troupe in residence and solicited a letter from the Lord Chamberlain asking him to disallow the other troupe.) There were also pick-up companies of lesser players from London troupes who moved from 'walking gentleman' up to Romeo when they toured. And there were, towards the end of the eighteenth century, circuit players fanning out from provincial 'Theatres Royal' (Rosenfeld, passim).

If we reconfigure, then, our idea of restoration (and later) theatre to include a vast and extensive touring establishment, we may be able to recognize how provincial practice reinforced an already weightily conservative acting tradition. Both the sharing system and 'lines of business' encouraged the codification of traditions associated with a role. Charles Harold Gray's study, Theatrical Criticism in London to 1795, indicates that the earliest critical discussions of acting focused on whether a role had been played authoritatively. The source of authority in new plays would likely be the author and in older plays the master actor who 'instructed' his apprentice. The younger actor then inherited the role upon the retirement of the elder. Though both Betterton and Elizabeth Barry were of the younger generation of restoration actors, both studiously took note of previous interpretations of their various roles, according to the former's biographer, and Betterton once rewarded a lesser actor in his company for recalling the exactness of 'Hart's key' in delivering a line of Nathaniel Lee's The Rival Queens with which Betterton was having difficulty. In the early years of the Restoration period and until at least 1682, a 'Nursery' company existed (and toured, sometimes under Jolly's leadership) to train young actors in the traditions (Hotson, 192 ff. and BD, viii, 216–18).

As Randall has recently shown, the surprisingly large volume of new plays written during the Interregnum and immediately post-restoration 'tended to be outgrowths from something earlier' (375). Early in the restoration, old plays (i.e., pre-commonwealth) made up most of the repertory – another conservative factor. Negotiating the 'rights' to these plays was an important aspect of the patent arrangements (Milhous, 1978, 15ff). The future, of course, ultimately lay with new plays and changeable scenery – the weapons Davenant swiftly employed against Killigrew's more seasoned actors – and there is evidence that the provinces saw new plays not long after London (Rosenfeld, passim). But it stands to reason that until there were theatres to tour to, the old play repertory (with
its less stringent scenic requirements) must have lasted in the provinces, and that when newer plays were performed they were staged in an older manner, placing more emphasis on the acting. Burner has looked at several promptbooks identified with restoration touring companies and noted that they are bare of the scenic indications found in contemporary London promptbooks.  

It would take us far afield of the immediate subject to follow these provincial practices forward in time, but I note in passing that Otway, Settle, Quin, Macklin, Garrick, Mrs. Siddons and Kean all served in the provinces before 'making it' in London. Though the new-fangled Garrick expressed 'contempt for the affectations bred in youngsters by country companies,' he regularly sent out talent scouts to look for prospects in the sticks.  

The ineradicable fact of the Interregnum and the 'closing of the theatres' (something of a misnomer, as we know from Hotson) has enforced a periodicity in theatre history in which the terminus ad quem of one era is invariably 1642 and the terminus a quo of the next is 1660. This formulization is in need of reconsideration, if not revision. Might we think of the puritanically contentious period from Prynne to Jeremy Collier (1633–98) as from the long view (in light of the expanse of Histriomastix) to the Short View? How about periodizing the tenure of Sir Henry Herbert (1622–73)? Or from the King's Men to the King's Company (1603–60), recognizing the continuity of personnel? It might make sense, in terms of theatre architecture, to think of 1617 (Jones's Cockpit in Drury Lane) to 1747 (the alteration of Wren's Drury Lane) as a period. Or perhaps we should dub the entire seventeenth century the 'Age of Fletcher,' the performance of whose perennially popular plays may have encouraged an acting style requiring rapid transitions of feeling.  

Continuous factors affecting acting style are numerous and well-documented within the period (whatever name it may go by). Hotson found players performing at the Fortune and Salisbury Court in 1647; at the Red Bull and Cockpit in 1648; at the Cockpit (William Beeston) sporadically through the 1650s. Jolly toured most of German-speaking Europe in the 1640s and 1650s, probably played before the exiled King in Paris and for the English colony at The Hague in 1648. Most interestingly, Hotson investigated a lawsuit brought by a King's Men company member against Theophilus Bird (who subsequently ends up in Killigrew's company), indicating that Lowen, Robinson, Benfield, Pollard, Clark, Hamerton and Bird (several of whom acted well into the restoration) retained a common shareholder's interest in 'apparel, hangings books and other goods' associated with theatrical production (Hotson, 24–34). Their 'stock' was still worth plenty (and was about to rise precipitously). As Milhous and Hume have shown, similar litigation as late as 1660 only adds evidence to the impression of continuity.  

Three troupes – Mohun's (descended from the Caroline era King's Men), Rhodes's, and 'Beeston's Boys' (led by Jolly) – were active immediately before the granting of patents. Killigrew captured the lion's share of senior actors (Mohun, Burt, Hart, Robert and Edward Shatterell, Wintershall, Clun and Cartwright), plus Kynaston and Betterton (the latter soon lured away by Davenant). Many of these veteran performers 'clearly
conceived themselves as part of an ongoing and unbroken “Society of Actors” active in 1648, as Milhous and Hume have recently put it (509). To these facts the researches of the Biographical Dictionary allow us to adduce valuable evidence on the persistence of theatrical families (ever a conservative element). Wintershall was the son of Richard Gunnell, himself a Caroline actor and one of the builders of Salisbury Court (BD, xvi, 191–4). Cartwright was likewise the son of an actor; he is to be found touring in the 1630s and during the Commonwealth, prior to his distinguished membership in Killigrew’s company (BD, iii, 89–92). Bird was Christopher Beeston’s son-in-law and Michael Mohun’s father-in-law, thus forging a theatrical lineage encompassing almost the entire seventeenth century (BD, ii, 133–5).

Langhans has compared pre-restoration and restoration promptbooks and finds that the latter closely conform with the former, with the single, prominent, restoration addition of notes on scenery. Langhans also observes the almost complete absence of notation as to what an actor did after entering the stage. Such an absence is compatible with a master/apprentice acting tradition in which the former dictated the traditions to the latter, whose personal responsibility it was to pass them on (xxii–iv).

As is well-known, James Wright (Historia Histrionica, 1699) and Downes (1708) emphasize the homage restoration actors bore to their predecessors: Davenant (after Lowen) instructing Betterton in the traditions of playing Henry viii; Mohun, Burt and Hart (themselves Caroline-restoration actors) closely following the manner of action of the previous generation (‘Lowen, Taylor[,] Pollard and some others’) (Wright cited in Thomas, 133). It may be that even the London ‘revolutions’ wrought by Macklin’s Shylock and Garrick’s Richard iii should rightfully be seen as the exceptions proving the rule of a ‘continuous tradition’ of tragic acting going back to Elizabethan times.

In my earlier example of Betterton seeking aid in remembering how to call forth `Hart’s key’ I believe the gestus was designed both to embody and symbolize the presence of the older actor and to lend authority to Betterton. I do not wish it to be construed, however, that such an example and the other evidence of continuity I have introduced here is meant to establish the ever-sameness of some eternal acting tradition. Rather, I suggest the evidence demonstrates perdurance, the sameness and difference at the same time of tradition allowing for change.

The implications of Murray’s suggestion (1, xi) that Tudor-Stuart theatre needed to be thought of as a national rather than urban phenomenon have yet to be sufficiently explored. The accumulation of REED data will make such exploration both more possible and more urgent. What are the implications for the vexed question of ‘Elizabethan’ (the term dictated to us by B. L. Joseph’s pioneering study in 1951) acting style?

If there was a ‘typical’ actor who spent most of his time performing in London there was an equally typical one touring the provinces. During James I’s reign, the King’s Men played at least 39 provincial engagements of varying length; the company variously known as Lenox’s, Albany’s, York’s and Prince Charles’s Men played more than twice as many in the same period, according to Murray’s (out-of-date) figures (2, 183–4 and 239–42).
Whether or not the audience of London companies was 'privileged' or heterogeneous, in the provinces audiences collectively ranged from honored guests at country manors to working men threatened with distraction from their tasks to impressionable students. Consequently, the myth of playing to the groundlings -- or the elitist counter-myth -- finds no necessary support in the provincial experience.

Yes, urban playwrights tossed jibes at provincial troupers -- as ever they have -- to distinguish themselves from the hoi polloi. To Somerset's catalogue (47-8), we might add Nabbes's Covent Garden, in which strollers are satirically depicted borrowing a blanket to create a costume (cited by Thaler, 244) or the country beggars' play in Brome's A Jovial Crew. We need not discount these and suchlike anecdotes, but should contextualize them in an elaborate provincial system as various as that of the Restoration. Whether or not Murray's company taxonomy or Somerset's or Thaler's estimate of company size are exactly right, there were in all likelihood classes of companies. Dekker's 'country' troupe of nine (Newes from Hell, 1606, cited by Thaler, 123) is to be contrasted with Henry Herbert's authorization for the King's Men to tour with as many as twenty-two. As after the restoration, a small or reduced troupe might necessitate extraordinary doubling (with possible humorous consequences; there are eighteenth-century reports of a provincial actor playing both parts in a two-character scene), as well as the natural selection of quick-studying actors. rosenfeld (12) records the post-Restoration practice of querying a potential company-member on how many 'lengths' (42 lines) he could memorize in a night.

Was the acting style enforced by repertory playing and the exigencies of regular touring necessarily formulaic, rigidly patterned, lacking individuality? Lise Lone Marker long ago convinced me otherwise, while at the same time positing a codified, decorum-based system which can be taken as evidence for a lingua franca of gesture and expression by which all actors could readily communicate in all situations (90-4). (In Morality Play, his recent novel about an English acting troupe in the fourteenth century, Barry Unsworth has compellingly imagined such a codified system not at all lacking in emotional power or individualized craft.) This, precisely, is what was transmitted when a master actor 'instructed' his apprentice. It was a short step from the theory of decorum to the playwright's recognition 'that characters' traits must be 'correspondent to their kind' (Lone Marker citing Richard Edwards' prologue to Damon and Pythias) and thence to the practice of casting according to 'lines of business -- thereby converting dramatic conventions and dramatists' predilections into theatrical traditions. Whether or not the estimable T. W. Baldwin had it exactly right about The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company, any working playwright knows that writing for specific actors facilitates the process, with the effect that dramatic and theatrical convenience mutually reinforce one another conservatively.

But conservatism and being hide-bound are not the same thing. Extensive provincial touring, with its great variety of venues, only supports the image of an adaptable, resourceful Elizabethan actor. Provincial touring suggests that the regular shuttling of the London-based King's Men between outdoor and indoor playing places was the national rule, not the exception. Even more relevant to speculations about acting style, if the vast majority of provincial playing places was indoors (Somerset, 59), still another link is forged with
post-restoration acting conditions, forcing us to revise the canonical disjunction from large, outdoor 'Elizabethan' theatres to intimate, indoor restoration houses. The ubiquity of indoor provincial halls and houses makes it clearer why the actors 'surviving' the Commonwealth were the residents of the Cockpit and Salisbury Court, rather than the tear-throat denizens of the Red Bull. And, too, Somerset's census of ordinary and seemly provincial sites — town halls, guild halls, parish houses, court halls, etc. — may invite us to qualify in substantive ways Steven Mullaney's provocative topography of the marginalized Elizabethan player.

Qualify, not reject. The vastness of provincial theatrical activity suggests that the players added a significant contingent to the 'hedge-birds' of every stripe, from disoriented gentry, to shiftless cavaliers to unemployed artisans ('Mechanicks walk[ing] worklesse up and down') — an innumerable army of 'em ... lately disbanded without pay,' as Brome put it in 1641. Brome's subtle and complex allegory, A Jovial Crew, arranges vagabond and strolling player to reflect off each other multivalently (and in a manner worthy of deeper analysis than it has, to my knowledge, received). Here I wish only to mention that among the country beggar colony are a playwright and enough 'beggar-players' to stage an (interrupted, as it happens) allegory-within-an-allegory described by the Poet who would write it: 'I would have the country, the city and the court, be at great variance for superiority. Then would I have Divinity and Law stretch their wide throats to appease and reconcile them; then would I have the soldier cudgel them all together ...' (108). Brome's play, the last performed before the closing of the London theatres, was all too vivid and prescient an emblem of the threat to public order and hierarchy represented by an itinerant populace. I am reminded that the actor on-the-road combines two of Camus' examples of 'l'homme absurde,' defiantly, endlessly, subversively refashioning himself. It was probably no accident Shakespeare named the strolling players 'the abstract and brief chronicles of the time.'

Notes

2 Mantell was the subject of Attilio Favorini, 'The Last Tragedian: Robert B. Mantell and the American Theatre,' Diss., Yale University, 1969.
4 'Abraham Ivory' is less well-known as a stage name than 'George Spelvin,' which was familiar enough in the 1970s to be punned upon by the porn star identifying herself as 'Georgina Spelvin.' Traditions survive in curious ways.


10 See Rosenfeld, *passim*.


12 Mantell played Romeo until the age of 66; when he could no longer physically play it, *Romeo and Juliet* was dropped from his company's repertory. Betterton played Valentine in *Love for Love* until he was 74; etc.


15 This is Downes's key word in *Roscius Anglicanus* (1708), ed. Judith Milhous (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1987), 55.


19 Randall (1) urges similarly, though his work was not available to me as I formulated my thesis.


21 Lise Lone Marker, among others, supports the idea of such a continuous tradition in 'Nature and Decorum in the Theory of Elizabethan Acting,' in *The Elizabethan Theatre*, ed. David Galloway (Toronto: Archon Books, 1970), 90. On the role of the provinces in the post-Restoration transmission of the tradition, see my 1972 article. Also note that the Macklin and Garrick revolutions were conducted against the backdrop of Quin's high mannerism, itself a departure from the more natural Betterton. Reasonably, Boaden placed Macklin in the 'old school' of Betterton and Booth because 'that school taught what was truth and nature' (cited *BD*, X, 23).

22 Somerset, 51, cites companies of four to twenty; Alwin Thaler, 'The Travelling Players in Shakespeare's England,' *MP*, 17 (January 1920): 134 suggests an average of 10–12 for smaller troupes, 16–20 for more 'respectable' companies.

Women and Carnival Masking

Medieval Carnival is one version of an enduring European tradition of winter popular festivity, stretching from at least the Roman Kalends to the present day. For an extensive period around the Middle Ages the wearing of masks seems to have been a significant aspect of this festive play. It is in the later fourth century AD that we first hear about masking in the winter games; by the fifteenth century it had become so popular a part of the celebrations that masking often dominated Carnival activity, with not only street masquerading, but also dancing, dicing, gift-giving and good luck visits, all in masks. This medieval Carnival masking was largely, but by no means exclusively, a men's game. This paper aims to explore the roles played by women in the maskings of Carnival, and to attempt to determine how far attitudes to women's and men's masking differed.

Carnival activity seems to have varied across Europe, both in particular customs and in prominence, from the flamboyantly developed celebrations of Italy, Tasso's 'thousand forms and thousand appearances,' to the virtual non-existence of Carnival as such in Britain. In Southern Europe, where the festival was more celebrated and masking and masks themselves more elaborate, sophisticated and spectacular, contemporary evidence certainly confirms that both men and women participated. Sixteenth and early seventeenth century pictures show women among street masqueraders, and eyewitness accounts from travellers in Italy, Spain and Southern France refer to both men and women maskers. As the prologue to an Italian Carnival comedy observed, 'Most men, and perhaps women too, either are going or want to go around in masks.'

However, as this perhaps hints, women seemed rather more likely to take a secondary role. Descriptions of Carnival festivity tend to imply that it was the young men who dominated masking; a recurrent image of bands of young masked men roaming the streets,