'Item paid ... to him that Rid to throwe graynes': Presenting the Innkeepers' Women in Chester's 1614 Midsummer Show

Lawrence M. Clopper's *Reed: Chester* contains details of the Innkeepers' company accounts from the late sixteenth century which record periodic expenses for the presentation of a 'woman' who accompanied the Innkeepers in the Midsummer Show procession. As David Mills relates, the accounts depict 'a woman with an iron-bound cane who rode with two devils in costume and used the cane to break 'goddertes' as she rode.' This paper considers additional material from early seventeenth century Innkeepers' accounts that was not available to Clopper when he prepared the Chester volume for *Reed*. Taken with details gleaned from the earlier records, this new evidence gives us a clearer picture of the presentation of the woman in the Midsummer Show.

The disbursements column of the 1613–14 Innkeepers' accounts lists a payment to an attendant for the woman whose function was to throw 'graynes':

> Item paid to him that Rid in womans Apparrell and to him that Rid to throwe graynes .................. ij s.

There are two matters of concern here: the nature of the 'graynes' and their significance for the portrayal of the Midsummer Show woman. I argue that the 'graynes' can be regarded as a highly appropriate addition to the representation of this figure.

The woman is documented as appearing in the Midsummer Show from 1583–1614. Her appearances during this time were somewhat sporadic. Expenses for setting her forth are recorded in the accounts of the years 1583–4, 1584–5, 1589–90, 1591–2 to 1596–7, 1599–1600, and finally in 1613–14. No expenses for the woman occur in accounts for the years 1585–6 to 1588–9, 1600–1 to 1602–3, 1609–10 to 1612–13, or between 1621 and 1642. In most of the records where this figure appears she is referred to as 'the woman that dyd Ryde' and denoted by the female pronoun 'heare.' The 1613–14 account, however, with its emphasis on 'him that Rid in womans Apparrell,' indicates that, for this performance at least, the figure was a man dressed as a woman.

Whether woman or man dressed as woman, she was a controversial figure who was as popular with some sections of the community as she was reviled by others, and attempts by conservative elements to suppress her participation in the Show, and that of other figures such as a devil in feathers, giants, a dragon and naked boys, met with resistance. The reasons behind the extremes of sentiment the woman generated may lie in the nature of her representation. The breaking of the 'goddertes,' or cups, together with the devilish attendants, and the distinctive costuming of both the woman and her entourage, suggest a colourful, noisy, spectacular, and transgressive style of display. The woman herself wore a 'cussocke,' a long gown, and was equipped with various props such as 'potes' and 'canes,' and the devils wore painted costumes with headpieces.
The available data indicating the manner in which the Midsummer Show woman and her attendants appeared in the procession urges the idea that the throwing of the 'graynes' alluded to in the 1614 record was designed to heighten the spectacle. One possibility is that the 'graynes' were gunpowder. The _oed_ definitions of 'grain' include

7 b) _spec_. Of gunpowder: A particle of definite size, varying according to requirements.3

This possibility is supported by the fact that gunpowder is listed amongst the Innkeepers' Midsummer Show expenses, and on occasions where expenses for the woman also occur. This definition has its appeal as the idea of throwing grains of gunpowder, with the associated noise and smoke, suits both the theatrical nature of the event and a display in which devils figure prominently. The traditional association between devils and Hell's fire was reflected in plays and processions where they were often presented throwing fireworks.4 The earliest use of the term 'grain' in relation to fireworks cited in the _oed_, however, is late seventeenth century, and the _med_ listing for 'grain' does not include this definition. Another more attractive interpretation of this term, which recommends itself on the basis of its thematic aptness, is that the 'graynes' are related to the practice of brewing.

Some of the figures presented in the Midsummer Show, as is well established, bore a strong resemblance to characters from the Chester Whitsun plays. The Innkeepers' woman in the Show was, to all intents and purposes, the dishonest Ale-wife from their play of the _Harrowing of Hell_.5 The Ale-wife in the play is damned for breaching statutes related to the brewing and selling of ale, which were strictly regulated activities throughout the late medieval and early modern period in England.6 The Ale-wife confesses to selling her ale short of measure and adulterating it with various additives to make it taste stronger; she also appears to have encouraged dicing and gaming on her premises, thereby swindling her customers by all available means.7

The affinity between the Ale-wife in the play and the woman in the Midsummer Show affords scope for interpreting the representation of both figures. In regard to the Midsummer Show woman and the 1614 account of the throwing of the 'graynes,' her link with the Ale-wife in the _Harrowing of Hell_ suggests that the 'graynes' may be emblematic of the woman's status as a disreputable practitioner of the ale trade, as are the 'goddertes,' which appear to represent the cups which the Ale-wife in the play is damned for selling short of measure.8

Joseph Wright's _English Dialect Dictionary_ includes an entry under 'grain' which offers a fitting solution to the question of the substance thrown in procession with the Midsummer Show woman, while augmenting our understanding of how she was physically represented, and raising some issues in regard to interpreting her dramatic effect:

Grain, sb.2. pl. The refuse of malt after brewing, much used for feeding swine and cattle.9

Brewers' grains, obviously a recognised commodity in this period since they were subject
to price regulation, appear to have been commonly available wherever ale was produced, and resourceful tipplers could turn a double profit either by selling this waste product or using it to fatten their own livestock. 16

The homogeneity of the Midsummer Show woman and the Ale-wife from the Harrowing of Hell play supports the idea that the ‘graynes’ referred to in the Innkeepers’ accounts were a by-product of the brewing process. Moreover, it accords with other aspects of the Midsummer Show woman which signify her relation to the ale trade and reflect the identity of the Innkeepers’ company, for whom she was in some sense a representative figure: besides the ‘goddertes,’ some records indicate that the woman wore a can around her neck, presumably symbolising a vessel used to hold ale, and the processional activity in which she and the devils were involved was popularly referred to as the ‘cuppes and canes.’17

Establishing the use of malt refuse as a thematically apt prop in the representation of the Midsummer Show woman solves one question, but poses another: what was the effect of this aspect of her portrayal? While the records do not oblige us with information as to how the grains were thrown: whether at the woman or at the spectators, such details as are available permit some speculation as to the import of the throwing of the grains. The association of the woman with the dregs of her product, and with that which was fit only to feed swine and cattle, may suggest a parity between the woman and the ‘graynes’: the grains symbolically representing this dishonest tradeswoman as the dregs or refuse of her society, a socially marginalised figure of ridicule.

Alternatively, the throwing of the grains may have been designed to enhance the transgressive aspect of the woman’s image. Like the smashing of the ‘goddertes,’ the throwing of the grains suggests a subversive, carnivalesque exercise, wherein the figure flaunts her distinctive persona and her ability to flout authority.18 Whether the joke was on the Midsummer Show woman herself, or on the conservative upholders of the civic ordinances her counterpart in the play was in conflict with, her entertainment value was clearly high. Documents of the time attest to this, detailing the ‘greate yll will’ generated Amonge the commons’ in the late sixteenth century when there were attempts to banish her, and other popular characters, from the Show.19

Notes

1 Records of Early English Drama: Chester, (Toronto, 1979); see index for references to ‘cups and canes.’
3 A transcript of the Innkeepers’ accounts for the year 1613–14 will appear in the Cheshire volume of REED. I am grateful to the editors, Elizabeth Baldwin and David Mills, for drawing it to my attention and to Marilyn Lewis, Archivist at the Chester City Record Office (hereafter cRO), for permission to examine the document and quote from it. See cRO G13/42.
4 James Stokes discusses the extent of women’s participation in dramatic activities in late

5 REED: Chester, p 198.
6 H. Kurath and S. Kuhn (eds), The Middle English Dictionary (Ann Arbor, 1954–), see 'godet' (n) a) A drinking cup or goblet.
7 REED: Chester, p 136; and cro G13/42 for the 1614 record where the devils' apparel is described as 'paynted.'
9 REED: Chester, pp 165–70. I am indebted to Professor Mills who first suggested to me the possibility of the 'graynes' being gunpowder.
10 See Philip Butterworth, 'Hellfire: Flame as Special Effect,' in Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (eds), The Iconography of Hell (Kalamazoo, 1992), 81–90.
14 Ibid., pp 337–9, II.289–90 and II.334–5.
15 English Dialect Dictionary, vol. II (Oxford, 1961), 703; also see oed, p 735, 'grain' 4 b) refuse malt left after brewing or distilling.
17 REED: Chester, pp 172–3; p lii. The Ale-wife in the Harrowing of Hell is also identified with her 'cuppes and kannes' which she rings with regret for the false dealing that resulted in her damnation, see Lumiansky and Mills (eds), The Chester Mystery Cycle: Vol. 1, Text, play xvii, p 337, II.297–300.
18 See Michael Bristol, Carnival and Theater: Plebian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England (New York, 1985) on Carnival as a means of expressing resistance to a prescribed social order or authority, pp 26–39 and p 52, where Bristol comments that 'popular festive form reminds the ruling elite that they may actually rule relatively incompletely and ineffectively.'
19 REED: Chester, p 198.

Announcements

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Ben Jonson: Four Comedies, edited by Helen Ostovich, was published on 9 April, 1997, by Addison, Wesley, Longman in the Longman Annotated Texts series. This edition of Jonson's four middle comedies (Volpone, Epicoene, The Alchemist, and Bartholomew Fair) places these works in the popular history and culture of the times, 1605–14, and surveys