


What Beard Were I Best to Play It In: Costume and Property Exchange Among Local English Communities

Christine Williams
Lee University

Introduction

“hat beard were I best to play it in?,” queries Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1.2.86).¹ Later, he insists that the Lion must be played such that “half his face must be seen through the lion’s neck” so as not to scare the ladies (3.1.34-35). Then, returning from his sojourn as an ass, Bottom instructs his fellow actors to “get your apparel together, good strings to your beards, new ribbons to your pumps” (4.2.32-33). Where would local players like Snug, Flute and Quince find these costuming items? Do the King and his lords in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* just happen to keep Russian garb handy for use in disguisings (5.2)? Towards the end of the same play, the Nine Worthies pageant, played by local citizens, requires quite a few specialized costumes and props (5.2). In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where would Mistress Quickly and the others swiftly find their items for convincingly portraying fairies and hobgoblins in order to trick Falstaff (5.4; 5.5)?

Available records reflect an interesting trend in early modern theatre, showing that many theatre practitioners had resources just down the street or in the next town to help supplement their own productions; additionally, some towns and churches created

substantial rental stocks of theatrical items. Along with the more immediate communities created by local entertainments at church and cycle plays, ales, Robin Hoods and other events, the rental and borrowing of props and costumes was a communal, neighborly act that highlights the support and interaction prevalent in English society in the early modern period. These exchanges are evidence of shared traditions despite borders, politics, and doctrinal disputes and the items themselves are valuable markers of cultural history and tradition.

Theatrical rentals point to a performative network in England which was well established and elaborate. Communities took advantage of the costume stocks of neighboring towns, decreasing their own expenses while augmenting the incomes of the owners. The glimpse we have of this network indicates a much larger and wider-spread performative culture across early modern England than is at first assumed. In some cases, we have no other evidence of a performative event other than the notation of a rental, whether noted by the owner or the renter. The provincial theatre that laid the foundation for the professional theatre of Shakespeare's London was quite well developed. This article will focus on the interchange of costumes and properties across communities in the early modern period of England and reflect on the ways in which this interaction is a form of cultural communication. And the documentation, while never as full as historians would wish, is quite plentiful. Evidence for this study is found in record books from cities, churches and other organizations, many of which have been collected in the *Records of Early English Drama* collection.

Looking at the broader picture of these communities and their theatrical activities demonstrates a much more intricate network of theatre interaction than has been heretofore assumed. These costumes and props are not simply objects but represent much more. While their study is focused on the professional theatre of Shakespeare, Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda in *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* discuss the various objects of theatrical production and reference the ideas of Arjun Appadurai, stating:

Objects, in Appadurai's words, possess "life histories" or "careers" of exchange that invest them with social significance and cultural value... The significance a particular object assumes

thus derives from the differential relation of its present context to its known or assumed past, and potential future, contexts. In order to read the meanings of any object, then, it becomes necessary to trace its ‘cultural biography’ as it ‘moves through different hands, contexts, and uses.’²

In 1554 when the mayor of Southampton sent two men to Wilton in the neighboring county of Wiltshire to “fett [fetch] disgysinge apparrell” for their May games, these items were not just pieces of fabric but were objects with a history and significance that weave together people and communities of early modern England.³ When they were first made, they may have been for one particular use by one particular community member, but their “cultural biography” is much richer. Craig Muldrew writes about this sort of interchange in *The Economy of Obligation*, stating, “the early modern market was not only a structure through which people exchanged material goods, but was also a way in which social trust was communicated, and there is overwhelming evidence to show that contemporaries considered such communication to be one of the most defining features of their society.”⁴ The exchange of these theatrical items back and forth amongst communities and churches served as a means of cultural communication exhibiting the social trust Muldrew references. Trusting these valuable items to another community displayed a confidence in the other populace and the significance of cross communal interaction. Tracing the recorded movement of these objects from one town or person to another, we witness the “career” of that item as it moves through its history and that of those who rented the object.

In what was at the time an overwhelmingly rural country, towns were the primary source for disseminating culture. There were clear differences in the political and religious ideologies amongst the various regions of England over the course of this period, but theatre was widespread and found across the entire country. Furthermore, even when theatrical entertainments were viewed as politically, socially or religiously dangerous they were still enacted, sometimes in spite of orders against them. Towns helping each other keep these cultural traditions alive by renting items back and forth demonstrates the social trust, as Muldrew phrases it, they had with one another.

The exchanges of costumes and properties reflect a similarity of purpose, pride in community creation, and social interaction that reminds both communities, on either side of the exchange, of a shared perspective. These exchanges emphasize the similarity between these communities, reinforcing shared interests and supporting a sense of belonging and identity. Likewise, these items become suppressible property in times of strife. This is evidenced by the selling and destroying of some costume stocks and properties along with the large-scale destruction of various items deemed “popish” seen during the various waves of Reformation in England. In some cases of political or social stress, these items, along with the theatre performances for which they were used, were suppressed or altered, reducing the community interchange and destroying the cultural value of these items. Through the study of these property and costume rentals and exchanges we witness evidence of social interaction and communal connection.

Recently, scholars have been working to reexamine cycle plays, particularly looking at evidence of complicated layers of performance and meaning.⁵ As scholars have worked to rehabilitate the image of medieval plays, particularly in the literary area, not as much attention has been paid to the technical elements such as costumes and properties. While their study is focused on the professional theatre of Shakespeare, Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda argue, “subsequent criticism of early modern English drama has if anything intensified this disregard, although perhaps more by omission than commission: props have barely rated more than a passing mention in the vast majority of studies of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.”⁶ They make a compelling argument that one of the major reasons that the physical aspects of productions have historically been ignored is that there is a myth that the stage in early modern theatre was bare.

Harris and Korda remark that the physical objects of production in the early modern period were “often intended not merely to catch, but to overwhelm the eye by means of their real or apparent costliness, motion and capacity to surprise.”⁷ Ultimately in their work they maintain that “...early modern materials are not simply static things, but points of intersection for myriad relations of property and power.”⁸ An exchange of a costume or property includes within the interchange the intersection of communal

relations. A great deal of time, effort and money was spent on the creation and maintenance of properties and costumes in this period. For example, in 1583 in Coventry, the Chamberlain's and Warden's account book records payments made for "repairing of the 2 swordes & for a great Chape of Silver & gilt for them," and "for tryming & repoyring the velvett hatt with gold Lace, gold ffringe & buttons."⁹ Records in Coventry from the Drapers' account also describe paying someone to keep and paint the "hell mouth and setting ye worlde on fyre."¹⁰ The value of costumes and properties can also be determined by the fact that many wills from the period include theatrical objects as an item to be passed down to heirs and others. Harry Smythe's 1575 will notates an "item for the players geare valewd at xl s."¹¹ In Taunton, Somerset, the will of Agnes Burton dated 1503 states,

Item I bequeth to the church of seynt Mary Magdaleyn in Taunton my sute of blacke vestimentes with cope and corporas to the honor of almighty gode Item I geve vnto the said Sepulcre service there my rede damaske mantell & my mantell lyned with silke that I was professid yn to thentent of Mary Magdalen play and a Rochet & a box of siluer & gilt.¹²

These are just a few examples of several wills that give evidence to this practice further exemplifying the value these costumes and items held. Players' gear also warrants many mentions in church inventories, as evidenced in the 1576 inventory of Worcester Cathedral listing: "A gowne of freres, gyrdles, A Kings cloke of Tyshew, a lytill cloke of tysshew, a Ierkyn of greene, a womans gowne, a Ierkyn and a payer of breches, a gowne of silk, 2 cappes and the devils apparell."¹³ These items function as prized heirlooms to be recorded and given to the next generation indicating their "careers," as Harris and Korda refer to it, which carries social significance. The items reflect in their cultural biographies a history of performance in these communities, the points of interaction, and perhaps even the cultural biography of the people who are bequeathing them.

Rosalind Conklin Hays argues effectively for the importance of theatrical productions as a performance of civic identity, offering a terrific example in the town of Sherborne, Dorset which had a robust civic calendar that, as Hays argues, conveyed both the civic and religious aspects of the community.¹⁴ Additionally,

Hays maintains, in “Crossing County Boundaries: Sixteenth Century Performance and Celebration in Yeovil, co. Somerset, and Sherborne, co. Dorset,” that studies should focus less on specific boundaries drawn upon maps and more on regions with regard to artistic exchange and meanings based on evidence of rental exchanges of costumes and properties.¹⁵ As will be shown, these items of theatrical production traveled near and far from their home base further emphasizing the way in which a costume or property could be a point of communal interaction and exhibit social trust.

The study of these physical aspects of the early modern theatre landscape in England provides fascinating information into the workings of this pre-professional theatre. Vanessa Harding reasons, in “Space, Property, and Propriety in Urban England,” that

as a methodological approach to urban history, the study of property needs no apology. Not only is the documentation profuse; it also starts at an earlier date than most other written series. Hence, it can be an extraordinarily fruitful source for tracing long-term changes in the urban economy, the urban environment, urban form, and the regulation of urban life.¹⁶

While Harding is speaking of actual property in the form of land and buildings, and public spaces, her point is easily applied to the physical properties used in plays including costumes and props. Research into theatrical performance at this time is oftentimes left to the mercy of an early modern record keeper. As Harding suggests, many of our earlier records for theatre center on expenses for physical objects giving us information that may not be as dazzling as a play script or record of performance but includes important information nonetheless. Inventory lists and details from provincial records give evidence of the great care, money, and time that went into creating costumes and props for early modern performance events. Purple satin robes for Jesus, devil heads, tormentor’s costumes, gowns with fur trimming, dragons, crowns and numerous wigs and beards indicate that substantial numbers of costumes and properties were created specifically for plays, processions, pageants, St. George days, Robin Hood celebrations, morris dancers and other performative events. Likewise, there are several payments for mending, staining, washing, storing, and even creating new costumes. The costume stocks of several communities

were quite extensive and could serve as costume-rental shops for nearby towns, displaying social trust and points of intersection; this phenomenon offers an excellent beginning point for the exploration of exchanges of costumes and properties during this period.

Costume stocks

One can imagine the small early modern storage spaces crammed with costume items from various past theatrical events. There is detailed evidence in the records of large costume stocks in five towns: Wymondham (Norfolk), Sherborne (Dorset), Yeovil (Somerset), Tewkesbury (Gloucestershire) and Ashburton (Devon). Of course, the records vary in details. For Wymondham there are surviving inventory lists but no evidence of exchange, whereas the others show substantial rental traffic with neighboring towns.

While they were among the most remote areas of England during this time, the Southwestern counties of Dorset and Devon had a prolific theatre life. Sherborne, in Dorset, was a market-town with a large abbey presence. Lying on the London-Exeter Road it was one of the few areas of Dorset that saw much in the way of travelers coming from larger cities. The first reference to costume rental in Sherborne occurs in 1549 when St. Mary the Virgin's churchwardens' accounts show they received five shillings from renting their costumes.¹⁷ In 1550 an ale was held for "maynteynge of the pleyenge garments" which raised a moderate income for the church.¹⁸ The churchwardens' accounts of the parish show that they spent time and money maintaining their players' apparel over the years signifying the import of these costumes as valued cultural items.¹⁹

St. Mary the Virgin in Sherborne continued to rent costumes out to other towns in the early years of Edward VI's reign. In "Lot's Wife' or the 'The Burning of Sodom': The Tudor Corpus Christi Play at Sherborne, Dorset," Rosalind Conklin Hays conjectures that Sherborne may have shied away from dramatic activity in the late 1540s, responding to religious winds of the time. This would have potentially left them with many costumes simply sitting, gathering dust and might have led to the idea to rent to their neighbors. As she states, "helping others risk wrathful intolerance for misguided theatrical performance was not the same thing as doing it oneself."²⁰

The rentals were somewhat profitable and provided for costume maintenance which was convenient considering Sherborne seems to have returned to producing theatre in 1566.²¹ If Conklin Hays' assertions are accurate, a seemingly active theatrical town was left with no artistic outlet during this period. The rental of their items to other towns would have allowed the town to continue to participate in performance traditions even when they may not have been able to engage in their own. Sherborne clearly valued the importance of their theatrical past and invested in the costumes they had made and displayed over the years. Even in the midst of religious tension, to which theatre performance was certainly not immune, Sherborne was able to use their costume stock as a means of interacting with their neighboring communities and participating in theatrical presentations, displaying their civic pride.

Beginning in 1555, the records for Sherborne list the renters of their costumes and they range across a sizable area, including more than seven different towns.²² Over forty-eight shillings, no small sum, was raised by renting the players' garments of St. Mary the Virgin's in Sherborne. In 1572, the records indicate purchases towards a storage location for the players' garments and to make a key for the door to the costume stock.²³ These records suggest a lively performative community in and around Sherborne. Not only were costumes rented to towns within a few miles, costumes were rented to Castle Cary and Wincanton, each over ten miles away, and to Martock about fourteen miles away, all in the neighboring county of Somerset. Over the course of their history, these costume items were imprinted with traditions from Sherborne and each rental town added to the career, as Appadurai refers to it, of the object. Their cultural biography conveys a collaboration between towns, counties and traditions and points of intersection between these communities. Dorset was rural and overall inconsequential in terms of political stress and was a somewhat insular community.²⁴ Performance traditions were an important way in which the societies in this county interacted and exchanged social communications with communities and people with whom they intersected.

The town of Yeovil in Somerset has records indicating a lengthy history of renting out players' garments. John the Baptist's

churchwardens' accounts show rentals beginning in 1457 and continuing through 1573. These records are in line with the robust theatrical activity in the county as a whole. Over the years there are records of rental income from loaning out their playing apparel to places such as Sturminster Newton, Bradford Abbas, East Coker, Sherborne and Lye. The rentals ranged in income from just a few pennies to more substantial amounts, such as seven shillings for the rental in Sherborne, or six shillings for the rental to the "men of East Coker."²⁵ In this case we have evidence of two towns that rented to each other at various times with Sherborne having rented to Yeovil in 1561 and vice versa in 1566.²⁶ Somerset County had public markets in many towns and the medium-sized town of Yeovil's costume stock and rental history indicate its importance as a producer of cultural tradition. These items were elements of civic pride, yet in the case of Yeovil, there may have been an added desire to impress and show their importance in the larger picture of performance tradition in this area.

Another substantial market town, Tewksbury, in the county of Gloucestershire, shows steady rentals of their players' apparel and other items from 1567 into the early 1600s until parish dramas were effectively banned in the area by 1607. These rentals are noted in St. Mary the Virgin's churchwardens' accounts and rentals by "Hyllchurche" and Mathon (Herefordshire) are both named in the records.²⁷ The church also spent a substantial amount of money to make garments, as evidenced in 1577 when the records indicate over fourteen shillings was spent on costuming.²⁸ In 1584 the inventory of St. Mary the Virgin indicates they still had several items in their stock including specialized items like hair and beards for apostles and a mask for a devil, suggesting a variety of playing opportunities.²⁹ The documented rentals indicate busy performance seasons at Christmas and Midsummer for the towns renting from Tewkesbury. As seen with some of the distance of rentals from Sherborne, the town of Mathon was a substantial distance away from Tewkesbury. The cultural biography offered by this collection, like those of Sherborne and Yeovil, displays an interchange of larger towns with smaller neighboring towns to continue important performance traditions. In a county lacking in much archival information regarding performance traditions, these notations offer us a peek into the world of entertainment

in this area indicating support through exchange of items and contributions from larger towns to smaller ones.

Perhaps the most robust records of a costume stock of players' apparel come from Ashburton. Entertainments raised a good deal of income for the parish of Ashburton, which owned an extensive stock of costumes frequently rented out and well-managed and mended. Over twenty-eight pounds worth of expenditures on costume items are documented in the records.³⁰ Wigs, tunics, gloves, sheepskins, devil's heads and many other items are listed as part of their stock. Players' clothes were hired several times and Ashburton even paid a person to maintain the garments most years.³¹ The "hiring" of players' costumes was frequent enough in the practice of Ashburton's costume stock that the records include an entry in 1545 stating "nil received for the hiring out of clothing to players this year" indicating clear changes in performance traditions in the area.³²

One of the few visible signs of the effect of the Tudor reformations in this area seems to be reflected in the records pertaining to costumes. The sale of costumes during the Edwardian reforms is a common feature in the records of provincial drama. Most communities that somehow survived those reforms with their stock intact eventually did sell their costumes. For example, Bungay in 1577, which sold their stock for two pounds.³³ Amateur provincial theatre greatly declined during Queen Elizabeth's reign and most failed to revive at all after Edward VI's reformations. Starting in 1546 there is a sudden sale of many of Ashburton's costume pieces.³⁴ More costumes were sold again in 1551, and a keeper of the players' clothes is not paid again until 1554.³⁵

This year, 1554, may mark Ashburton's revival of its local plays and replenishment of its costume stock as was happening in other communities during Queen Mary's reign. From that point on there are payments for keeping the costumes and expenses for producing new ones for virtually every year until 1560.³⁶ In 1556 there are two curious entries in the Ashburton records concerning "paynting the players clothes at Tottnez" and "ffettyng the same clothez from Tottnez."³⁷ These ambiguous entries offer alternative explanations: that Ashburton was helping Totnes present a play by working on its costumes, or perhaps that Ashburton was attempting to replenish its own costume stock by obtaining some from Totnes. The term

“painting” is used quite often when referring to refurbishing or replenishing a stage item. Ashburton was noticeably a community that took pride in their collection of costumes, willing to spend a good deal of resources in order to take care of it over many years. The items in their stock have a varied cultural biography as their context pre- and post-Reformation converged. When rented, these items represented not only the current context of the play they were rented for, but also their past context and ties to older traditions. The point of intersection between Ashburton and Totnes, for example, included the exchange of costumes that may have held layers of meaning from before the waves of reform in England. Their present context may be for a new play that had not been performed before, but their past context held a reference to past traditions and possible future contexts.

The four towns with rental exchanges from their costume stocks have one thing in common: they are not the largest towns in their county. These towns are important for their counties, all of them substantial market-towns with a performance history in their own right, yet it is important to recognize that the surviving documents show that these larger stocks held and rented out seem to be more common in medium sized communities. The exchanges of these items to neighboring towns indicates a communal interaction and point of intersection that carries with it the pride of the owner and enjoyment of the renter. What better way to show neighborly action than by helping to create entertainment, perhaps religious expression, and joy for your fellow citizens? However, the practice of sharing these items across communities is not just evidenced in towns with substantial rental stocks; it is also apparent in the records from a variety of locations across England.

Evidence of costume exchange

In addition to costume stocks, documentation shows a great deal of rental interaction amongst communities with theatrical items. Kent, a particularly active theatrical area, provides an excellent starting point for discussing this interaction. This history-rich area boasts both an extensive religious history and an impressive entertainment record including a wide variety of performative activity filling most of the yearly calendar. Records in New Romney, in Kent, show that as early as 1490 payments were

made for “hiring” apparel.³⁸ In 1503 the town rented costumes from Romney and in 1560 they paid three pounds to the “towne of Lydd pty paymt for or appell.”³⁹ Another record shows the payment of ten shillings in 1560 to hire beards, fourteen shillings and four pence to a Mr. Neve for the “hire of or bearde & heres,” and also forty pence “in full paymt for a beard lost.”⁴⁰ There are several payments to Lydd in 1560 which do not specifically name rental items so it is difficult to determine exactly how much and what New Romney borrowed from Lydd other than the more specific references cited earlier.

While we do not have any records of extensive costume stocks in this area like those studied earlier, these entries do indicate that several towns had items available for rental. Kent, at this time, was widely populated with many small market-towns. One of the important notes from this area is the rental of items from a person, Mr. Neve. Not only were these items held by specific towns or parishes, but here is a record of costume items for rental from an individual. Was Mr. Neve someone who specialized in costuming for the plays in his area? Was he a tailor with access to fabrics and notions? Or was he an actor who had taken to collecting a stock? We do not know the answers to these questions, but the fact that a town had a resource who held these items and allowed the borrowing of them gives us an indication of the value of these objects. While the cultural exchange of costumes and props from one town to another can be read as a support of civic exchange and reinforcement of similar values and traditions, renting from an individual brings a new aspect to the cultural biography of these items. Mr. Neve took care of these items to keep them for rental, and was compensated for the loss of one beard indicating he certainly had a list of the items borrowed and expected them returned in good condition. A citizen providing their items for use in these civic or religious entertainments is engaging in the cultural traditions of the town. The point of intersection with this act of exchange is more personal and lets an individual have a more direct hand in the performance life of their larger community.

North of the county of Kent, the Suffolk town of Bungay records several references to renting costumes from Great Yarmouth, Wymondham and Norwich. Starting in 1558, Bungay rented costumes from Yarmouth; and in 1568 the town paid

someone to return rented apparel.⁴¹ The Great Yarmouth records offer us no information regarding the costumes that it owned and rented, however Wymondham records do offer us a glimpse of that town's stock of costumes.⁴² St. Petrock in Devon rented togas in 1528 from an unknown town and paid to have them transported.⁴³ Additionally in Devon, St. John's Bow churchwardens' accounts show rental income from hiring out tunics in 1519.⁴⁴ St. Columb Major in Cornwall rented their Robin Hood costumes to an unknown location, for eighteen pence in 1587.⁴⁵ The Grocer's guild in Norwich rented hair for an angel and an angel's coat in 1556 and 1558.⁴⁶ Finally, in Hampshire, the records of Winchester in 1573 show payments for a man hired to ride to the city of Salisbury for a "scarlet cloak received on loan at the same place for the visit of the Lady Queen."⁴⁷ All of these records demonstrate the prevalence of this engagement across the country in a variety of settings and for a variety of types of entertainment.

Larger cities also show records of this interaction. Records from Ecclesiastical London indicate several instances of costume and property rental outlining not only expenses but also income. Most of the entries in London revolve around performances on Palm Sunday ranging from 1485 to 1539 and between several parish churches.⁴⁸ In Chester, one of the major cycle play cities, several guilds have entries for rentals of costumes including the Bowyers', Fletchers', Coopers, and Stringers' accounts, the Cordwainer's and Shoemaker's records, the Innkeeper's accounts, the Painters and Glazers guild, and the Smiths, Cutlers and Plumbers.⁴⁹ Interestingly, these entries are all in the latter half of the 16th century and include references to "Pilate's clothes" among other things.⁵⁰ Despite political and religious pressure, Chester was still producing religious plays and Pilate's costume was still available for use. The cultural biography of this lone costume is fascinating to consider. We cannot say how old it was, or how long it had been in use; if this costume was from an earlier iteration of the Chester cycle prior to the religious upheaval of the Reformation in sixteenth century England, consider the layers of history and context of this one costume. It would hold within it the history of this vibrant tradition of Chester and with each new use a new layer of that story would be added to the cultural biography of the item.

The Chester Innkeepers' account shows rentals in 1583, 1584, and 1589 of "devil's clothes" or demon's clothes;⁵¹ again in 1594 there is a rental for the "hyer of ij dyemenes cotes and for there houdes."⁵² Other notations in Chester indicate more rentals including several in 1573, when the records note that the items were rented from Hooton and Poole, nine and eighteen miles, respectively, away from Chester.⁵³ With such a long and rich history of performance in Chester, it is interesting to consider that smaller, nearby towns would have what they need rather than someone or some organization in the city itself. This is further evidence of the communal importance of these exchanges. They are not simply larger, more wealthy areas helping the smaller, poorer areas. There was an equality of aid in these exchanges where the value is in the item itself and what it can add to a production. The points of intersection in this exchange indicate a reversal of what was most likely the more common experience of the smaller town gaining something from the larger one. In 1574, an entry indicates the purchase of soap to wash the players' clothes which they "borrowed." This entry conveys, similar to the response to the lost beard of Mr. Neve, a care and consideration taken with the rented items. These were treasured and respected pieces of cultural history for these towns and their neighbors and they were treated as such. There was a clear expectation about how these items were to be treated and this further indicates the importance of these exchanges as a cross-community collaboration.

Coventry, another important cycle play town, features many references to hiring harnesses, armor, drums and crests for processions.⁵⁴ The Smiths' accounts indicate a payment in 1488 to Mistress "Grymesby" for lending "her geir ffor pylatts wyfe," and then in 1502 for renting a scarlet gown from an unknown source.⁵⁵ The Weaver's guild rented beards between 1570 and 1572, and the Draper's rented a devil's coat in 1570.⁵⁶ Finally, the Mercer's guild paid thirty-three shillings to rent and transport players' apparel in 1584. Unfortunately, where these items were from is not in the records.⁵⁷ Like Mr. Neve in Kent, Mistress Grimsby in Coventry seems to have allowed rentals from a personal stock, specific enough to costume Pilate's wife. The exchange of these personal items emphasizes the aspect of social trust for early modern market exchanges. Mistress Grimsby and Mr. Neve demonstrate trust that

their fellow citizens will care for their items, use them responsibly or replace them and use them in the sacred and secular traditions of their culture.

University towns of Oxford and Cambridge also have evidence of rentals in their records. For example, in 1545, Queen's College Magnum in Cambridge rented armor for a comedy.⁵⁸ And in Oxford, St. Peter in the East and St. Mary Magdalen both earned income from the rental of players' garments through the Tudor period.⁵⁹ As far back as 1386, the Dean and Chapter Common Fund Accounts of Cambridge indicate a rental in Lincoln for the "hiring of trimmed (or lined) garments for the kings..." for a play on Epiphany day; evidence of, as Appadurai says, these items that "move through different hands, contexts, and uses."⁶⁰ These garments must have been splendid to be worthy of the performed kings, let alone to travel the substantial distance from Cambridge to Lincoln, and back again, in order to procure them. This entry is an early example of evidence of the rental of theatre items indicating the historical tradition of this type of exchange.

Costume rentals are not limited to towns; the records indicate that costumes were even rented from the stock of local lords, taking advantage of their players' costume stocks. In 1566 the Bungay Holy Trinity churchwardens' accounts show expenses spent on a play, including apparel that was rented from the Earl of Surrey (Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk).⁶¹ Records from 1554 in Southampton show charges to pay for two men to go to Wilton to fetch "disgysinge apparrell" which may have come from the Earl of Pembroke's Wilton House.⁶² While the original cultural biography of these items might have different stories to tell, perhaps masques or other entertainments in a manor house, these items nonetheless serve the purpose of engaging social trust. That trust indicates a parallel purpose to engage in entertaining activity that builds community. The Earls of Surrey and Pembroke entrusted their items to the use of the local parish church or community members, despite differences in wealth and status. Similar to what was noted as Chester rented from smaller towns, the points of intersection in this exchange indicate, as Harris and Korda put it, "myriad relations of property and power."⁶³ All of these various items indicate a strong and robust theatrical tradition as well as interconnections between communities as they borrowed from one another to create their performances.

Evidence of property exchange

Costumes were not the only rental items in the early modern theatrical world. King's Lynn rented out its processional dragon in 1501, collecting one pound, one shilling for the rental.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the records of King's Lynn do not tell us to whom the dragon was rented, but many Norfolk towns used dragons in their processions. Additionally, many communities put on St. George plays which could require the use of a dragon. The payment collected is quite substantial and indicates the importance of this item. A processional dragon would have cost a considerable sum to make and would be a treasured item for a town whether used in a procession or St. George play, or both. The social trust expressed by renting out this piece of cultural heritage and tradition is impressive.

In Norwich, an angel's crown was rented out several times in the mid-1550s.⁶⁵ In Sherborne, Dorset, not only were the players' clothes rented out but also the bells, presumably the bells used in morris dancing, which were rented in 1557 to the town of Martock.⁶⁶ In London, St. Stephen Walbrook also rented David's crown in 1530.⁶⁷ St. Andrew Hubbard church rented an angel for Palm Sunday in 1526, as well as, "clothes at the tower."⁶⁸ Angel wings were also rented along with angel hair and a crest for an angel in 1535 by All Hallows Staining in London.⁶⁹

St. Michael's churchwardens' accounts in Bath, Somerset County, indicate a steady rental situation with their "king's crown" over the course of several years. From 1465 to 1491, their records show income from renting their crown out eleven times for summer king festivities. In 1484 the records state, "they seek allowance of 2s 5d for the renewal of that crown of the church so that it could be painted in various colours and on gold for the same crown, together with the labour of the painter."⁷⁰ Clearly, this was a valued item worthy of time and expense to the church. It is important to note that the crowns from these various towns were rented year after year in some cases. Over time the towns themselves could have purchased or made their own crowns for use, or angel wings, or other props, but they choose to continue to rent the items from their neighbors. Just as these items have meaning and importance to the community in which they were created, the rental item itself

becomes a tradition for the neighboring town and a visual example of connectedness and points of intersection.

“Pilate’s club” was rented by the Capper’s guild in Coventry in 1573.⁷¹ In Chester, the Cathedral Treasurers’ accounts show a rental expense in 1571 to “hyre a clothe for ye mansion ouer ye gates.”⁷² In addition to many instances of renting harnesses, carriages, and other items, the Bowyers’, Fletchers’, Coopers’, and Stringers’ accounts note they rented a saddle cloth for the annual Midsummer Eve event for several years in the late 1570s.⁷³ Additionally, in 1567 the Painters’, Glaziers’, Embroiderers’ and Stationers’ accounts show an expense to borrow a “coueryng & A naked child,” as well as, “to borrow bottelles” for their Whitsun plays.⁷⁴ The same group, in 1585, paid to borrow chains of gold for the Midsummer procession.⁷⁵ The Innkeepers records show a rental of six pence for a feather in 1598 for their Midsummer procession.⁷⁶ Rentals were clearly not just for costume pieces but also the set dressing and properties needed for many of these events. Perhaps the craftsmanship of the property makers in these other towns or guilds were exemplary, or the items were quite dazzling, as Harris and Korda suggest “intended not merely to catch, but to overwhelm the eye by their real or apparent costliness, motion and capacity to surprise.”⁷⁷ In each of these cases a neighboring town or parish or even a neighbor had an item that would make their entertainment more alluring, and through the exchange of these rentals the imprint of the histories and traditions of these items and these towns becomes more complex and interwoven.

Conclusion

These records have shown that local theatre was complex and well organized in early modern England. Communities relied on each other to produce their work. The standards of early modern theatre history mention this phenomenon only briefly and off-handedly, giving little weight to the importance of it. Chambers, in his *The Medieval Stage*, refers to Chelmsford and the fact that this town rented out garments stating that, “this same practice of hiring garments can be traced at Oxford, Leicester, and elsewhere.” Additionally, he mentions a record in 1511 in Bassingbourne for a “garnement man for garnements and propyrts and playbooks.” Chambers suggests this was a position created to function as a

“theatrical outfitter” not unlike Ashburton’s costumer.⁷⁸ Wickham, in *The Medieval Theatre*, references Chelmsford’s and Worcester’s stock of costumes for hire.⁷⁹ However, these references are slight and in passing amidst much more detail on other aspects of early modern theatre.

Theatre historians recognize that theatre was popular and prevalent in England during this period but there is a complexity to theatre relationships at this time that has not been well explored. These communities created a system to work within to maximize their production abilities, and this information greatly enhances our understanding of this fruitful period of theatre history. This network of theatre items further weaves together the rich variety of communities and their playing traditions, displaying a much more intricate tapestry than we may have at first assumed. These items carried with them traditions, cultural biographies and social trust from use over many years, some surviving long past the plays they were originally intended for and all highlighting the points of intersection, exemplifying the trust between these communities and the value of tradition. They reinforced similarities despite differences and the stability of tradition despite change. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, first arguing he can wear a mask to cover his own beard, Bottom finally accepts playing only the role of Pyramus. Then, he ponders the best style of beard to wear for this role suggesting he play it in a variety of options: straw-color, orange-tawny, purple-in-grain or French-crown-color beard (1.2.83-86). The records of the period show that were Bottom to seek them out in a local area, he would have had a good chance of finding an option to rent.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, (New York: The Arden Shakespeare, 2021).
2. Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18.
3. Peter Greenfield and Jane Cowling, “Hampshire,” *REED Online*, 11 October 2021, <https://ereed.library.utoronto.ca/records/hamps-ridp227436912/>.
4. Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England*. (New York: Palgrave, 1998), 5.
5. For an insightful picture into the details of production of Medieval plays and the ties to the local communities, see Clifford Davidson’s *Corpus Christi Plays at York: A Context for Religious Drama* (New York: AMS, 2013).

6. Harris and Korda, *Staged Properties*, 1.
7. Harris and Korda, *Staged Properties*, 4.
8. Harris and Korda, *Staged Properties*, 16.
9. Records show xxvij s viij d and xv s j d spent, respectively. R. W. Ingram, *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 299.
10. Ingram, *REED: Coventry*, 257.
11. David N. Klausner, *Records of Early English Drama: Hertfordshire/Worcestershire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 444. Resident of Worcester.
12. James Stokes, *Records of Early English Drama: Somerset* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 227.
13. David N. Klausner, *REED Hertfordshire/Worcestershire*, 447.
14. Rosalind Conklin Hays, "'Lot's Wife' or 'The Burning of Sodom': The Tudor Corpus Christi Play at Sherborn, Dorset," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 33 (1994): 104.
15. Rosalind C. Hays, "Crossing County Boundaries: Sixteenth-Century Performance and Celebration in Yeovil, co. Somerset, and Sherborne, co. Dorset," *Early Theatre* 6, no. 2 (2003): 73-95.
16. Vanessa Harding, "Space, Property and Propriety in Urban England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 551.
17. Rosalind C. Hays, *Records of Early English Drama: Dorset* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999), 262.
18. The ale raised fifty-two shillings and eight pence. Hays, *REED: Dorset*, 262.
19. Hays, *REED: Dorset*, 262. Another example of this is shown in the payment to Katerine Walles "ffor brusshynge of the Corpus christi Garmentes." They did not just pay someone to oversee the stock, but also to take special care of the items.
20. Hays, "Lot's Wife," 112.
21. Hays, "Lot's Wife," 114. A reference to a Corpus Christi play in Sherborne occurs in 1571 when John Dier is paid for making and devising garments for the Corpus Christi players. These references make it clear that Sherborne had a large and substantial costume stock that was worth maintaining. Hays, *REED: Dorset*, 266.
22. Hays, *REED: Dorset*, 262-5.
23. Hays, *REED: Dorset*, 264, 268.
24. Hays, *REED: Dorset*, 7, 10.
25. Stokes, *REED: Somerset*, 861, 407-9.
26. Stokes, *REED: Somerset*, 408; Hays, "Lot's Wife," 114.
27. Audrey Douglas and Peter Greenfield, *Records of Early English Drama: Cumberland, Westmorland, Gloucestershire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 335-341; as noted by the editor "Hyllchurche" is unidentified due to the common use of "hill" in names around the area. Douglas and Greenfield, *REED: Cumberland, Westmorland, Gloucestershire*, 339.
28. Douglas and Greenfield, *REED: Cumberland, Westmorland, Gloucestershire*, 337.

29. "Players Apparrell: Item viiij gownes and clokes, Item vij Irkyns, Item iiij capps of green sylke, Item viiij heades of heare for the apostles and x beardes, Item a face or vysor for the devyll." Douglas and Greenfield, *REED: Cumberland, Westmorland, Gloucestershire*, 339.

30. Alison Hanham ed., *Churchwardens' Accounts of Ashburton, 1479-1580* (Torquay: Devonshire Press, 1970), 1-194.

31. Hanham, *Ashburton*, 17, 110, 114, 116, 118. It is possible that income records are not complete given the few records of income for a stock that was well kept and stored over many years. John M. Wasson, *Records of Early English Drama: Devon* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 22-29. John Wyndyatt Taylor is the keeper of the clothes from 1532 to 1537. William Bound is then registered as the keeper of the players' clothes from 1541-1560.

32. Wasson, *REED: Devon*, 337.

33. Wasson, *REED: Devon*, 145.

34. Hanham, *Ashburton*, 118, 120, 126.

35. Wasson, *REED: Devon*, 28.

36. Wasson, *REED: Devon*, 28-29

37. Hanham, *Ashburton*, 136.

38. Malone Society, *Records of Plays and Players in Kent: 1450-1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 128.

39. Malone Society, *Kent*, 128, 208; James M. Gibson, *Records of Early English Drama: Kent: Diocese of Canterbury* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 787.

40. Malone Society, *Kent*, 211; Gibson, *REED: Kent*, 786.

41. Malone Society, *Norfolk/Suffolk*, 143, 145.

42. Malone Society, *Records of Plays and Players in Norfolk and Suffolk: 1330-1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 131-2. Malone notes "One interesting document at Wymondham which, in contrast to a number of the guild books, has not vanished is a little book, dated 1552, consisting of two large sheets of paper folded into four leaves and containing an inventory of books, writings and other goods belonging to the town (INV). On the third leaf there is a list of 'apparell for the game players,' and Carthew speculates that the 'apparell' might have belonged to 'The Watch and Play Society'." Malone Society, *Norfolk/Suffolk*, 120.

43. Wasson, *REED: Devon*, 48.

44. Wasson, *REED: Devon*, 398.

45. Sally L. Joyce, and Evelyn S. Newlyn, *Records of Early English Drama: Cornwall* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 507-8.

46. David Galloway, *Records of Early English Drama: Norwich* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 37, 43-4.

47. Greenfield and Cowling, "Hampshire," 11 October 2021, <https://ereed.library.utoronto.ca/records/hamps-ridp247213968/>.

48. Mary C. Erler, *Records of Early English Drama: Ecclesiastical London* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 35, 39, 41, 57, 59, 61, 64-5, 67-8, 73, 86-7, 90-2, 94, 96.

49. Elizabeth Baldwin, Lawrence M. Clopper and David Mills, *Records of Early English Drama: Cheshire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 127-

128; again in 1571 their records show a payment to William Rogerson for “a cope & a tenekell”. Rogerson is named in the earlier records as the rental source for the 2 copes, so perhaps this is also a rental. Baldwin, Clopper, Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 138.

50. Baldwin, Clopper and Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 245, 299. Lawrence M. Clopper, *Records of Early English Drama: Chester* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 90; Baldwin, Clopper and Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 142-3.

51. Baldwin, Clopper and Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 201, 206, 230.

52. Baldwin, Clopper and Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 230, 253; they also rented a cassock for a woman in 1583, Baldwin, Clopper and Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 201; 1598 rented a cape for the boy in Midsummer processions, 1599 the mayor dismissed the devil riding in the procession and reduced a lot of the elements, 1600 procession restored to previous ways, Baldwin, Clopper and Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 270-3.

53. Baldwin, Clopper and Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 142-3, 150, 159, 167, 180, 187, 188, 304; records include 1572 and 1573 when “gere for the child” was rented; other examples include the Joiner’s Carver’s and Turner’s company renting velvet for a “chylld’s clocke” in 1579 and 1580. Clopper, *REED: Chester*, 92, 106, 166; in 1605, they paid 12 pence for renting a hat at Midsomer Eve

54. Ingram, *REED: Coventry*, 20-290.

55. Ingram, *REED: Coventry*, 69, 97.

56. Ingram, *REED: Coventry*, 252, 254-5, 258.

57. Ingram, *REED: Coventry*, 305.

58. Alan H. Nelson, *Records of Early English Drama: Cambridge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 1115.

59. John R. Elliot, Alan H. Nelson, Alexandra F. Johnston, and Diana Wyatt, *Records of Early English Drama: Oxford* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 39, 108, 929.

60. James Stokes, *REED: Lincolnshire*, 649. Harris and Korda, *Staged Properties*, 18.

61. Malone Society, *Norfolk/Suffolk*, 143.

62. Peter Greenfield and Jane Cowling, “Hampshire,” *REED Online*, 11 October 2021, <https://ereed.library.utoronto.ca/records/hamps-ridp227436912/>.

63. Harris and Korda, *Staged Properties*, 16.

64. Mark C. Pilkinton, *Records of Early English Drama: Bristol* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 18.

65. Rentals occurred in 1556, 1557 and 1558 by the Grocer’s Guild Galloway, *REED: Norwich*, 37, 43, 44.

66. Rosalind C. Hays, Sally Joyce, C. E. Mcgee, Evelyn Newlyn, *Records of Early English Drama: Dorset* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 264.

67. Erler, *REED: Ecclesiastical London*, 73.

68. Erler, *REED: Ecclesiastical London*, 66.

69. Erler, *REED: Ecclesiastical London*, 91.

70. Stokes, *REED: Somerset*, 762-765.

71. Ingram, *REED: Coventry*, 262.

72. Baldwin, Clopper, Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 137.

73. Baldwin, Clopper, Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 178.

74. Baldwin, Clopper, Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 122.
75. Baldwin, Clopper, Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 211.
76. Baldwin, Clopper, Mills, *REED: Cheshire*, 270.
77. Harris and Korda, *Staged Properties*, 1.
78. E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage: Book III* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1996), 122, 141.
79. Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 70.