

**PERFORMANCE AS RESEARCH:**  
**Staging John Heywood's *Play of the Weather* at Hampton  
Court Palace**

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What follows is a critical account of a collaborative project undertaken during the spring of 2007, involving Oxford Brookes and Leicester Universities, Historic Royal Palaces, and AandBC (theatre company), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council through its Speculative Research Grants scheme. The aim was to use a production of key scenes from John Heywood's *Play of the Weather*, performed in the Great Hall of Hampton Court Palace, as a means of exploring the political, social, and spatial implications of the interlude in ways which transcended the limitations of conventional textual or source scholarship, and to investigate the potential of the palace itself as a space for performance. Given the tight budget and limited rehearsal time (one week in rehearsal rooms and three days *in situ* at Hampton Court) we chose to perform only the opening 'scenes' of the play, from Jupiter's description of the 'parliament in heaven' to the exit of the Gentleman (1–329) and the scenes between Merry Report, Jupiter, and the Gentlewoman (766–867).

Rather than being simply an attempt at 'authentic' performance, we were determined to apply the insights of experimental archaeology, contemporary theatre practice, and textual scholarship to test a number of historically grounded hypotheses concerning the play's potential impact and effects in performance in the space of Henry VIII's Great Hall. How far might the particular circumstances, physical configuration, and cultural implications of playing the interlude in the Great Hall influence the 'meaning' of key scenes and individual lines, or influence relationships within the text, between the actors and members of the audience, even among the audience members themselves? What was the best way of using the space available in the Great Hall as a stage? How differently would the play be received if the actors in key rôles were of different ages, or a different sex? How fundamentally might the presence of the King as the principal spectator have affected both the performances themselves and their reception by spectators? To address these questions, we set out our acting space on the long axis of the hall (the details of our staging choices are described in more detail at pages 90–91 below), with a throne for

Jupiter at the screens end of the hall and an icon representing our royal spectator, Henry VIII, at the dais end, using the long space in between as a theatre in the round, with the audience seated on benches along either side. We chose to play each of our chosen scenes twice in quick succession, varying the age and gender of the actors to see how this affected the production. Thus Jupiter was played first by a mature male actor and then by a more youthful one, who subsequently doubled as the Gentlewoman in one version of that scene, with the rôle being taken in the reprise by a woman.

The project was led from Oxford Brookes, with Thomas Betteridge as Principal Investigator, Greg Walker of Leicester (now Edinburgh) and Kent Rawlinson of Historic Royal Palaces as co-investigators, and used a team of professional actors directed by Gregory Thompson, Director of the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, as its actor-researchers. In due course an audience of academics, theatre professionals, and representatives of Historic Royal Palaces was invited to witness the performance and respond to a series of questions about what they had witnessed and experienced. In addition to addressing specific questions about the dynamics of Heywood's play, the project would also be a test case for more general questions about the capacity of performance to unlock questions of text and context arising from early dramatic material.

### **Text and Context**

The suggestion, first advanced by Richard Axton and Peter Happé, that John Heywood's 'new and ... very merry enterlude of al maner we[a]thers' was probably 'his most politically audacious' play, has become something of a staple of recent Heywood criticism.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have fruitfully drawn attention to the ways in which the play's language, and the relationships between the various characters, echo some of the most contentious events of the period immediately preceding the play's publication in 1533, from the opening of the Reformation Parliament in November 1529, through the Break with Rome and the Royal Supremacy, to the 'Great Matter' of Henry VIII's 'divorce' from Katherine of Aragon and subsequent secret marriage to his newly pregnant mistress, Anne Boleyn, in early 1533. If, as seems most likely, the play was performed at court, and in the presence of the King,<sup>2</sup> during the first half of 1533, then Heywood was surely playing with fire in subjecting such matters to light-hearted, 'Lucianic' mockery?

The plot itself is a relatively simple one, involving Jupiter, the king of the gods, setting up his court in an earthly Great Hall, and giving audience

to a variety of his mortal subjects, who approach him with requests for the kind of weather that would favour their own particular vocation. So, for example, the Gentleman sues for temperate weather suitable for hunting; the Ranger (forest warden) for wild storms to provide him with the windfalls that supplement his income; the Gentlewoman asks for a mild climate to protect her delicate white complexion; while the Laundress calls for continual hot sun to bleach and dry her clothes. Faced with such mutually contradictory requests, the god-king, aided by his irreverent mortal servant Merry Report (identified in the *dramatis personae* as ‘the Vice’) is reduced to leaving things as they stand; presenting the preservation of the status quo as a considered answer to the prayers of the petitioners, each of whom will get the kind of weather they want, albeit only for some of the time.

Described thus in the broadest terms, the interlude could seem a rather anodyne amalgamation of timeless satirical topoi and stereotypical Estates figures. And to an extent this is what it is; but the pointed topicality of the play lies not in the sweep of its narrative but in the fine details of its presentation, many of which do seem designed to draw attention to deeply contentious contemporary events. That people have incompatible desires and viewpoints is an unexceptionable enough premise around which to structure a comic drama: but to use it at a time when English society was experiencing the first fraught exchanges in the process which would lead to the confessional fragmentation of the English Reformation, and when people were coming to terms with the idea that the body politic was now a deeply, and perhaps permanently, divided entity, was a quite different matter. And, rather than mute the contemporary implications of his theme, Heywood drew explicit attention to them in the opening stanzas of the play; having Jupiter declare that he had been prompted to come to earth after witnessing the rancorous debates in a parliament of the gods,

... late assembled by comen assent  
 For the redres of certayne enormytees  
 Bred amonge them thorow extremytees,  
 Abusyd in eche to other of them all.<sup>3</sup> 25-7

Such a description clearly aligns the Olympian senate with the first sessions of the disputatious Reformation Parliament, which had been summoned, as Lord Chancellor Sir Thomas More, speaking for the King, had told the assembled peers and members of the Commons, for the reform of ‘very insufficient, & vnperfect’ old laws and ‘diuers new

enormities ... sprong amongst the people, for the which no law was yet made to reforme thesame'.<sup>4</sup> To present a court audience — still more the King himself — with a parodic account of the Reformation Parliament, in which disputes over spiritual and temporal authority and the powers of the crown are reduced to squabbles between gods and goddesses over the predominance of sunshine or rain, was to tread very carefully indeed around current sensitivities. This was all the more true given that Heywood's analogue for Henry, Jupiter, emerges as a rather smug and self-regarding sovereign, seemingly more intent upon extracting adulation from his subjects than in delivering impartial justice ('And now, accordyng to your obedyens, / Rejoyce ye in us wyth joy most joyfully, / And we our selfe shall joyn in our owne glory': 183–5), and more than happy to use a degree of deception to resolve a tricky situation.

Even closer to the Henrician quick, as Peter Happé has suggested, are the exchanges between Jupiter, Merry Report, and the Gentlewoman, revolving around the King's desire to replace a leaky old moon with a bright, young, new one, coupled with the Vice's suggestive remarks to Jupiter about the Gentlewoman's sexual attractiveness and the prospect that she would make a desirable wife, if only he would consider marrying her. The implied allusions here to the rejection of the aged Queen Katherine in favour of the younger, more desirable Lady Anne, the latter's pregnancy and secret marriage to the King, threaten to turn the issue of Henry's 'divorce', the 'great matter' of conscience over which we was prepared to overturn the governance of the church, into a ribald joke: a possibility signalled in the text itself by Jupiter's sharp response to his servant's comments on marriage, 'Sonne, that is not the thyng at this tyme ment' (786).

Textual criticism and historical scholarship have succeeded in uncovering these potent political subtexts to the play's broad mix of bawdy humour, learned wordplay, and humanist moral counsel. But what such traditional approaches have not been able to do is to explore in detail how such issues might have been played out in the immediate contexts of performance. As Simon Shepherd has recently reminded us, 'theatre is an art of bodies witnessed by bodies';<sup>5</sup> its meanings are created as much by the movements of physical bodies in real time and real spaces as they are by the words spoken — or rather, the meaning of those words depends to a great extent on the ways in which they are both created by the actors who deliver and respond to them and by the audience members who receive them, again responding as bodies in real space and time. And these

processes of delivery and receipt are influenced profoundly by the physical and cultural contexts of the spaces in which the performance takes place.

The Hampton Court project began with an acceptance that we could never fully reproduce the conditions in which the original Tudor audience(s) responded to the play in performance in Henry VIII's Great Hall. The precise nuances of protocol and deference, self-interest and collective identification, which bound the original courtly spectators to their king and to each other, and which were so integral to early-modern court culture, were so different to modern codes of behaviour and expectation that it would be fruitless to try to reproduce them exactly in our modern spectators. But we might at least foreground the issue of our audience's own distance from such codes as something to think about while they were witnessing the production. And it might, we thought, be possible to explore other nuances of the text's performability, those subject to the more tangible and enduring aspects of the original context: the physical dynamics of the hall itself: its size, configuration, lighting, and acoustics. And we might also at least sketch in the general cultural dynamic at play when a mock-king (albeit — or perhaps especially — a mock *god*-king) lectures a courtly audience, and a real king, on the powers and responsibilities of kingship. And if we could reproduce some hint of the potent mixture of competing emotions which a Henrician audience member might have felt: the shifting degrees of self-awareness, concern over one's conduct, and concern for the conduct of others aroused when attending a potentially contentious performance in the presence of Henry VIII — when everyone involved was simultaneously both an actor and a spectator (Oh God, should I have laughed? Did *he* laugh? Did he see me laugh? Did *they* see him see me laugh? Did I laugh *in the right way?*), then so be it.

### **Production and Performance: The Hypotheses**

While previous academic productions of early plays have made great use of surviving playing spaces in merchants' halls, college halls, and aristocratic houses, this project afforded us a unique opportunity to work in a surviving royal space. The Great Hall at Hampton Court was the only hall constructed for Henry VIII and was the last of its type built in England. This remarkable building, 106 feet long by 40 feet wide (internally), was an architectural set-piece which dominated Henry VIII's palace, and it remains substantially the same space that it was in the early 1530s when Heywood's *Weather* was performed at court (very plausibly in

this space): hence its value as the locus for our research. Whilst it is known that the hall hosted court receptions, festivals, and entertainments, the manner in which these were 'staged' remains the subject of research and debate.

At the hall's 'high' end is a dais strikingly lit by a tall oriel window. From this dais a doorway gave direct access to the Great Watching Chamber and, in turn, to the king's 'private' apartments. At its 'low' end is a screens passage, with a minstrels' gallery above, divided from the hall by an oak screen. This has two entrances, one associated with the courtiers' stair, leading up from the Inner Court, the other with the servants' stair and the Great Kitchens. A key research hypothesis that the workshop addressed concerned the dramatic organisation of the Great Hall in performance. In particular, the production team made the decision to create a very strong central axis between a painted image of Henry VIII on the dais, representing (however inadequately) the royal presence, and Jupiter, whose throne was placed in front of the screens at the other end of the hall. This created a very long traverse, but one in which the central area felt like contested ground, since to cross it was to place oneself between the figure of Henry and Jupiter, his theatrical alter-ego. The audience were seated on either side of this performance space in a single row, all the men on stage left and the women stage right. This formality created both constraints and possibilities in performance. It made the most of the limited number of spectators that Historic Royal Palaces were able to accommodate on the night, and reproduced something of the gender division that Merry Report seems to allude to when he is able to 'point to the women' (stage direction at line 249) when identifying 'a sow or twayne of this sorte' among the spectators for the Gentleman's benefit.<sup>6</sup> It also made the audience very aware of Henry's presence, however merely symbolic that presence was, midway between the rows at the dais end, and thus able to see and be seen by, both. Dividing the audience on the basis of gender had the effect of multiplying but also formalising the different audiences for the play. The actors were very aware that there was a female, a male, and a royal audience, each located in its own distinct space, and that the King's relationship to the other audiences was not symmetrical. For example, when David Fielder's Merry Report made bawdy jokes about the Gentlewoman he explicitly addressed the male side of the room and the figure of Henry, so that at this moment these two audiences became one.

There were two further hypotheses that the production team aimed to test. One was the significance of the age of the actor playing Jupiter. In one version the god-king was played by a mature man, Richard Heap, who had an imposing presence and deep voice. In the alternative version Jupiter was played by Martin Ware, a much younger, more slightly built actor. Having Jupiter played by these two different actors created a number of interesting theatrical possibilities. The older Jupiter clearly looked and in some ways sounded more like the Henry VIII of 1529–1533, although we were very careful to avoid any sense in which Richard’s performance was an impersonation of the ‘real’ Henry. Creating such a powerful relationship between the theatrical Henry and the actual King emphasised the dangerous, politically fraught nature of the opening speech. In particular, when Richard involved members of the audience in Jupiter’s account of the dispute between the four gods, Saturn, Phebus, Eolus, and Phebe, identifying each with an individual spectator and prompting them to stand up for the duration of his narrative, there was a real sense of the symbiotic relationship between audience and action that Heywood’s play clearly draws upon. By imposing his ‘authority’ upon the unsuspecting spectators and exposing them so obviously to the gaze of their fellows, he was able to create a small measure at least of the kind of anxious self-consciousness that Tudor spectators must have felt when attending a performance in the presence of their sovereign.

Having a younger man play Henry also set up interesting theatrical possibilities, since it meant that Jupiter looked and sounded like the younger Henry who came to the throne in 1509. Having less intrinsic authority and ‘presence’, Ware’s Jupiter seemed more obviously to be ‘working’ the lines in which he vaunted his own powers, striving to convince us of claims that were not self-evidently true. (Opinions differed among spectators over whether this made him seem more or less potentially dangerous as an autocratic ruler.) Ware’s youth also raised fascinating issues about the relationship between Jupiter and the Vice Merry Report. When Jupiter is a mature man, the relationship between them is more formal but also at times more equal, in terms of experience at least. A mature Jupiter can understand and participate in Merry Report’s bawdy and crude wit in a way that a younger one, especially a child actor, might not. At the same time it is possible to play the relationship between a young Jupiter and Merry Report as that of a teacher and his pupil. Given the possibility (and it is no more than this) that Heywood himself played Merry Report, and a page or school-boy played Jupiter (perhaps one

of the boys of St Paul's with whom Heywood is known to have worked later in the 1530s),<sup>7</sup> this version of the relationship between Jupiter and the Vice does have a lot to commend it.

When we began working with both Richard and Martin what quickly became apparent was how difficult and complex Jupiter's opening speech is. It is, to quote Greg, 'syntactically tortuous' and reproduces the tones and cadences of Henrician public utterances.<sup>8</sup> And what also became clear as the actors began to 'action' the speech (cutting it down into distinct and meaningful syntactical units and ascribing to each a specific rhetorical purpose by means of an appropriate transitive verb) was how subtly modulated it is. What might appear on paper to be a relatively homogenised exercise in bombastic self-aggrandisement emerged under this intense close scrutiny as a very skilfully constructed and modulated rhetorical exercise, which regularly shifted its intended affects between distinct registers, as Jupiter attempts at various moments to inform his hearers, justify his own conduct, reassure us, or awe us into submissive admiration. Richard's performance exploited the pervasive but not explicit sense of duplicity that hovers around Jupiter's opening speech. There was a real sense of foreboding listening to this impressive figure relating with slick plausibility how he had reluctantly, magnanimously, been persuaded by others to take on an absolute and perpetual power over the elements, in everyone else's best interests. For young Jupiter the speech had different, and in some ways equally dangerous implications, since one was far less sure that Martin's Jupiter really understood what he had to say. In this version the audience perhaps got a sense of Heywood's profound scepticism towards the rhetorical underpinnings of the Henrician Reformation and a sense of how far the sonorous language of statutes such as the Act in Restraint of Appeals ('This realm of England is an empire') might be simply the 'spin' placed on royal self-interest by the King's opportunist advisors.

The other hypothesis that was staged in the workshop concerned the status of gender in the *Play of the Weather*. In particular, as part of the workshop the scene between Jupiter, Merry Report, and the Gentlewoman was played once with a woman (Cara Kelly) in the rôle, and once with Martin Ware in the rôle. In some ways the differences between these two versions of the same scene were less marked than those between the different versions of the opening scene. This in itself, however, was an interesting result since it indicated how easy it was for Merry Report to have a bawdy relationship with both a woman and a young man playing a woman. In both cases there was plenty of material for David Fielder to



exploit, and the key differences emerged from how gender was performed in each case rather than from the real gender of the actor concerned. Indeed, what quickly became important was not so much the issue of gender itself, but the question of how much ‘knowingness’ concerning sexual issues a young boy actor might be assumed to possess, or might be allowed to reveal, without a breach of taste or decorum, then or now.

Cara Kelly’s *Gentlewoman* was played as a knowing participant in Merry Report’s jokes and innuendos. This allowed her to use the gender split of the audience for comic effect, so that she could at one moment play wounded innocence to the female side of the hall and at the next flirt with the male side of the house. In particular, Cara played many of her lines to the figure of Henry, creating a sense in which he was the object of her allurements. Martin Ware’s *Gentlewoman* was played as a naïve innocent unaware of the jokes that Merry Report was making at her expense. These differences can be illustrated by examining briefly the *Gentlewoman*’s response to Merry Report’s closing request for a kiss.

<i>Merry Report</i>	Now good maystres, I pray you let me kys ye.	
<i>Gentylwoman</i>	‘Kys me’, quoth a! What nay, syr, I wys ye!	
<i>Merry Report</i>	What, yes, hardely, kys me ons and no more.	
	I never desyred to kys you before.	866–7

The request for a kiss came as a complete shock to Martin’s *Gentlewoman* who had been quite unaware of the kind of dialogue she was actually involved in with Merry Report. Her response was one of flustered confusion, leaving untouched the lines of complicity already established between Merry Report and the knowing audience, who shared an understanding of the scene’s sexual subtext. In the alternative version of the scene Cara played this line as a continuation of her flirtation with Merry Report, acting shocked at his suggestion and give him a slap, while all the time including the female side of the audience in a knowing exchange of glances on the transparency of men.

Having agreed on these hypotheses at a production meeting on 12 March, the creative team agreed on costume designs and the play was cast. What became apparent, and this is something that will have to be addressed before a full production is staged, is that there initially appeared to be no obvious way of integrating research formally into the design process. While the notion of performance as research relied upon a fluid, flexible, and interrogative approach to the rehearsal process, the practical needs of the actors for clarity and direction with the performance looming

encouraged decisiveness and clear ‘vision’ about where a scene might be going from an early stage. This was not a problem in the long term, however, since with this project decisions were made on the basis of the agreed hypothesis and Thomas, the Principal Investigator, had in the past worked as a production manager in the professional theatre. It was, however, noticeable how rigid in some ways the managerial structure is in terms of the relationship between the director and other members of the creative team. It was certainly crucial that Thomas attended all the rehearsals for the workshop and Greg attended at least 50%. The issue was not that Gregory Thompson, Hilary Armstrong, and the actors would ignore or reject the research basis of the project. It was rather that the structure of the theatrical process meant that there was a danger that all the research input would happen at the beginning and would form a passive lump of generative knowledge upon which the performances would grow. By having Greg and Thomas in the rehearsal room, however, it was possible to keep the research element of the workshop to the fore while at the same time allowing genuinely and important creative experimentation to occur. For example, David Fielder found that in order to make Merry Report work theatrically he had to play him as in control of the theatrical space, as its manager. Merry Report’s relationship with the other suitors, particularly those of a higher class like the Gentleman, on the page at times appears deferential if not subservient. In rehearsal what became clear was the extent to which Merry Report was in control. Apart from Jupiter’s opening monologue, this was Merry Report’s play: a fact that confirmed the pioneering textual and practical research on the rôle of Vices in the later interlude drama of Peter Happé, Meg Twycross, John McKinnell, and others. He has most of the stage time, and by far the largest number of lines, but he also controls the space of the Great Hall, orchestrating the onstage action, moving about between the various actors, and talking at key points directly to the audience; facts which might add weight to the notion that Heywood himself played Merry Report when the play was first produced.

The first week’s rehearsal took place in a rehearsal room while in the second week we rehearsed from 12 noon – 8 p.m. in the Great Hall. Having this time to work in the performance space was essential for the success of the workshop and it was very generous of Historic Royal Palaces to allow the project this time, particularly given the significant operational cost. The production meeting on the 12 March also made the decision to aim for a strategic authenticity in terms of the design and performance.

This was a concept that developed out of discussions among the creative team, led by the designer Hilary Armstrong, who has had considerable experience of similar productions at The New Globe. The best way of illustrating the implications of the project's understanding of the term 'strategic authenticity' is briefly to discuss the costume designs. These were closely based on drawings and sketches by Hans Holbein. They were as far as possible authentic in look, weight, and feel, encouraging the actors to alter their posture and movements to suit them; but we did not use Tudor tailoring methods to produce them. This was because in terms of the requirements of the project, and in particular its intellectual and economic resources, the project team did not want to fetishize (and clearly could not afford!) the pursuit of an absolute sense of authenticity. Given that no production can be fully or totally authentic it seemed to the creative team that the key thing was to be self-conscious about our choices in relation to the question of authenticity.

The drama workshop itself took place on the 10 May in front of an invited audience of approximately sixty people. Clearly, as Ros King (University of Southampton) pointed out in her response to the workshop, there would have been far more people in the Great Hall when performances took place there during Henry's reign. There were, however, a number of entirely legitimate constraints imposed upon the workshop by Historic Royal Palaces, and one of these was the number of people who could attend the workshop. A key decision made by the creative team was, given the understandable embargo on rush-lighting or torches in the hall, to light the workshop with a very modern helium balloon, since this would give a form of ambient light to supplement what we feared may be the inadequate natural light available in the hall in the late evening.<sup>9</sup> We wanted to avoid delineating the performance space in any way other than that in which it was created in the performance. Modern stage light, because it is so directional, inevitably creates a sense of the space of performance as different from that of the audience and as in some ways privileged. The only object specifically lit in the workshop was the figure of Henry VIII at the dais end of the hall.

The workshop lasted for approximately one hour and afterwards there was a reception at which members of the audience and the creative team discussed the workshop. In the weeks following the workshop members of the audience and the cast wrote to Greg and Thomas with their thoughts and comments.

There were a number of significant findings that emerged in the performance in relation to the *Play of the Weather*. Not surprisingly, but in a way that it is difficult to fully understand without seeing it embodied on stage, the interaction of the space of the performance and that of the court emerged as crucial to a proper understanding of the play. More than this, staging the creation and transformation of the place of performance created new insights in terms of understandings of Henry's court. In these terms it is appropriate to view this drama workshop as a successful example of the possible application of experimental archaeology to the study of the Tudor Court.<sup>10</sup> James R. Mathieu has recently discussed three main forms of experimental archaeology, visual, comparative, and phenomenological. By staging the *Play of the Weather* in the Great Hall at Hampton Court the drama workshop sought to replicate in the embodied performance of the actors in the moment of performance the perceptive behaviour of past people. Of course, as we noted above, there are serious limits to the degree of replication that can be achieved. Mathieu points out that, 'experimental archaeology does not provide answers. Rather, it merely eliminates possibilities, shows possible answers, and sometimes indicates the degree of probability of certain answers'.<sup>11</sup> In the context of drama as a subject, however, it may be possible to advance Mathieu's claims further. However, to do so it would be necessary to engage in the kind of serious questioning of the status of different kinds of knowledge of the kind undertaken by scholars like Philip Zarrilli.<sup>12</sup>

What became very clear in both rehearsal and performance was, not only the relative lack of knowledge that we currently possess about the Tudor Court, but also the possibilities that a genuinely radical interdisciplinary approach to research would hold. For example, during the rehearsal period the company started to think about the relationship between movement and Tudor court culture. This was partly driven by texts like Sir Thomas Elyot's *Book of the Governor* with its detailed discussion of the moral and educational importance of dance. It was also, however, based upon Simon Shepherd's argument in his study, *Theatre, Body and Pleasure*, that 'Theatre body work is ideological'.<sup>13</sup> The process of making our portrayal of Jupiter 'real', and working on the dynamics of the relationship between Merry Report and the Gentleman, inevitably involved close consideration of the ideological dimensions to Tudor class or Estates comedy. In considering the Gentleman's possible reactions to each of Merry Report's quips, we were forced to address directly the ways in which bawdy humour might cut across, or directly challenge, the dignity

or *amour propre* of an early-modern aristocrat. Although the actor playing the Gentleman is (and was) precisely not a 'real' aristocrat, he does seek to represent aristocracy to an audience that would originally have been primarily aristocratic, indeed whose *raison d'être* as a royal household was the support and perpetuation of aristocratic values. Would a Tudor gentleman have laughed at the discomfiture of his dramatic surrogate, content that no real noblemen were hurt in the making of a joke, or would his awareness of the presumption of the impersonation have made him all the more sensitive to any perceived slight?

At the end of the scene between the Gentleman, Merry Report, and Jupiter there is a very complicated moment when it appears that the Gentleman's head has to end up between Merry Report's legs in order for the latter's lines to make sense.

*Merry Report* One feate can I now that I never coude before.

*Gentylman* What is that?

*Merry Report* By God, syns ye came hyther

I can set my hedde and my tayle to gyther. 308–310

In this exchange Merry Report is making fun of the Gentleman's earlier claim to be the 'head' of the commonwealth. He goes on to suggest that the Gentleman's head will save him money by saving him having to pay for a suppository to cure him of constipation. At one level this exchange is a typical piece of bawdy comedy with Merry Report making fun of the Gentleman's pretensions. In performance the whole subversive potential of this moment was enacted and in the process the extent to which the Tudor Court could become a place where real class tensions were articulated was laid bare. Merry Report takes the commonwealth discourse that the Gentleman tries to use to claim primacy over him and turns it into a weapon of carnivalesque scatological levelling.

As part of the rehearsal process two courtly songs and dances were added to the scenes being studied — one in each of the scenes between Merry Report and the Gentlewoman. This was largely a product of trying to make them work in performance terms. But it also had the important effect of stressing the possibilities of embodied knowledge and in particular of staging the difference between moments of extreme formality and informality. In this element of performance and elsewhere what became very apparent was that it was Merry Report above all who had the ability and license to cross theatrical and courtly boundaries. For example, after having been appointed to his position as Squire of the Body, he leaves the

stage only to return almost immediately claiming to have travelled throughout the realm.

And on my fayth, I thynke, in my conscyens  
 I have ben from Hevyn as farre as Heven is hens,  
 At Louyn, at London and in Lombardy  
 At Baldock, at Barfolde, and in Barbury  
 At Canturbery, at Coventre, at Colchester,  
 At Wansworth and Welbeck, at Westchester,  
 At Fulham, at Faleborne, and at Fenlow,  
 At Wallyngford, at Wakefield, and at Walthamstow,  
 At Tawnton, at Typtre, and at Totnam,  
 At Glouceter, at Gylford, and at Gotham,  
 At Hartforde, at Harwyche, at Harrow on the hyll,  
 At Sudbery, Suthampton, at Shoters hyll,  
 At Walsyngham, at Wytam, and at Werwycke,  
 At Boston, at Brystow, and at Berwycke,  
 At Grevelyn, at Gravesend, and at Glastynbery  
 Ynge Gyngiang Jayberd, the paryshe of Butsbery. 196–211

While the final elliptical reference appears to be specifically to lands held by the Heywood family, on the page there is a tendency simply to read this speech as a list: an exercise in merely verbal dexterity commonly associated with Vice figures in the interludes. In performance it becomes far more important, since one is forced to notice its length and the precise details present in each line. As we worked in rehearsal on the speech with David Fielder he found that not only were these lines profoundly demanding in terms of his skills as an actor, their successful performance had to become of tour de force of physical theatre. In performance this speech generates a simultaneous sense of expansion and reduction. Merry Report tells his courtly audience that he has been everywhere but at the same time all the places that he has been to are reduced into matter to entertain the court. There is a courtly logic at work in this speech, which cannot be fully grasped by a reading of the text alone. Emphasising the sheer breadth and variety of the kingdom inevitably suggests by implication the narrowly 'local' nature of the court itself, while the representation of the bodily labour of the messenger in making this mock-epic journey draws attention to the leisured opulence of the courtiers who listen to his account. Merry Report's performance of his journey consumes the realm as a list of names

but the sheer practical effort to perform this speech reflects the fact that courtly play was for some, if not all, also courtly work.

### **Reception**

All the audience members were invited to comment on the performance and we received a total of fifteen written responses. All were extremely positive about the production and the research value of staging drama in its original setting. The academic responses came both from experts in Tudor theatre with backgrounds in English literature and drama, and from Tudor historians. Interestingly the latter were more open to the idea that women could perform in court drama. Professor Steven Gunn (Merton College, Oxford) pointed out that female performance in this period does have historical precedent in the masques and dances performed in early-modern noble households — albeit there is no evidence for their involvement in full-scale scripted plays performed by professional companies. The question of the performance space was commented on by a number of respondents. Professor George Bernard (Southampton) questioned the political focus of the workshop, wondering whether the play would have been understood politically at all, and more practically, suggesting that the action might have been performed closer to the dais. Dr Tiffany Stern (University College, Oxford) was interested in the way in which our staging created ‘something analogous to a “thrust” stage in the centre of the room’. This had a number of implications and in particular the splitting of the audience on gender lines heightened the dramatic potential of the staging. Stern commented on the way that the seating effectively created two audiences and two objects of attention, as each group watched both the play and the reactions of the audience they were facing. This was also an aspect of the performance that was stressed by Professor John J. McGavin (Southampton); in his response he commented on how the staging made him aware of the ways in as a spectator one had to constrain one’s gaze. While we chose not to try to stage the dominating influence of a royal spectator, except through the symbolic presence of our Henrician icon, it seemed that our attempt to create a more actively participatory and self-conscious spectatorial experience for our audience through the gender division had had its effect.

All of the responses commented on the presence/absence of Henry VIII himself. There was a general consensus, particularly from two of the actors who took part in the workshop, Peter Kenny and David Fielder, that Henry himself should be ‘live’ and played by an actor. This was also a

point made by Dr Farah Karim-Cooper (The Globe) who suggested that having an actor playing Henry would add a whole new level to the production. This is undoubtedly the case, since as Peter Happé commented, what is clear is that in the *Play of the Weather* John Heywood treads a 'delicate line between obeisance and mockery'. In any future production this issue will need to be addressed directly, although having an actor perform the rôle of a royal spectator would only add a new level of impersonation without providing a source of real authority that the audience would 'naturally' defer to and feel anxious about. A number of respondents commented on acting style. Dr Catherine Richardson (The Shakespeare Institute) suggested that given the size of the hall a largely or more demonstrative acting style might work better. This was also a point raised by Peter Kenny and Professor Ros King (Southampton) both of whom argued for a more rhetorical and formal style of acting.

All the responses that we received to the workshop raised important issues, none more so than Carl Heap's comment that the actors could have spent more time relishing the simple pleasure of talking about the weather. What is apparent from the responses is the potential of drama workshop for generating research insights but also the relatively poverty of current knowledge of the performative dimensions of Tudor court drama. It is, however, not clear to what extent this is a product of a paucity of sources or the effects of disciplinary assumptions (and the deadening pull of Shakespeare on theatre and literary studies) on the analysis of existing records. Clearly it would be possible to use Thomas Wyatt's poetry or the descriptions of courtly entertainments that fill *Hall's Chronicle* to generate an embodied knowledge of the Tudor court which in turn could be deployed within the context of an experimental production of a drama like the *Play of the Weather*. What is required is detailed and focused research on existing sources coupled with the development through workshops and rehearsals of a morphology of the Tudor court that can form the basis of future productions in the Great Hall at Hampton Court.

As with the work at the New Globe, the Hampton Court workshop demonstrated both the immense value to be had from attempting to produce 'authentic' early theatre and the pitfalls that lie in the way of so doing. The greatest value, from our point of view, lay in both the kinds of intensively detailed scrutiny of the text as a script that needs to be embodied in performance, that took place in rehearsals, and in the practical performative issues that arose — and insisted on being solved — when the actors moved into the Great Hall itself. In rehearsals, the need



for the actors to be clear, not only about the general implications of a speech or phrase, but about its precise meaning and implications, so that they might see both what they were saying and why they were saying it, created a powerful imperative towards a new kind of 'close reading' on the part of the academics. Even when one edits the text it is possible to explicate a speech intelligibly without really addressing its emotive and affective qualities — both for the actor speaking it and for the onstage and offstage audiences that will receive and respond to it. Such a partial understanding rapidly proved insufficient for the needs of our actors, and prompted us to reconsider whole speeches afresh and from new perspectives. Given the almost complete lack of production history for the *Play of the Weather*, or indeed most other early drama, in the professional theatre, the text has not previously enjoyed such illuminating close-scrutiny from both professional performers and academics: and for this opportunity alone the production seemed to us a successful experiment.

The second, perhaps more predictable benefit of the project was the opportunity it provided to see the play enacted in the kind of space for which it was originally written: an exercise that prompted us to rethink not only the content of a number of speeches, but also their spatial, aural, and visual contexts (the size of the hall did not dwarf the actors, for example, which we had initially feared it might). Watching David Fielder as Merry Report moving about the hall, interacting with both onstage actors and the distinct audiences, demonstrated very effectively how complex was the plays engagement with Tudor court culture, and with Tudor culture *per se*. In particular it demonstrated how far power and authority are complex and fragmented concepts in the context of a courtly performance, and how far they are negotiable — and continually *renegotiable* — in the course of a production. While the most obvious cultural power resides in the single royal spectator who is both the patron and ultimate judge of the performance (of the play itself and of the audience watching the play, which must perform as a 'good' audience, responding in ways that the King would have approved of, being alert to the humour, but not so alert that they laughed before he did and made him appear slow-witted), it was possible to discern a further complex and fluctuating series of implicit power relationships with and around that central authority, establishing and dissolving during the action in the performances of Jupiter, the Gentleman, Gentlewoman, and Merry Report. Jupiter himself might (depending upon how and by whom he was played) seek to reproduce, reflect, or mimic the kinds of legitimate authority embodied in Henry VIII

with various degrees of success. The Gentleman might flatter and connive in royal authority by deferring to the princely observer, while simultaneously using that implicit claim to a relationship with the King to bolster his status within the play as another, albeit lesser, 'head' in the commonwealth. Likewise the Gentlewoman might both flatter royal authority by playing 'toward' the King, yet also seek to exercise a different kind of, highly sexualised, authority of her own by flirting with the King, or doing so with other members of the audience for her own ends. And all of these attempts to exercise or imply the possession of power and/or authority are subject to the complex, paradoxical authority of Merry Report, whose obvious lack of social authority ('A gentylman? Thy selfe bryngeth wytnes naye, / Bothe in thy lyght behaviour and araye!': 109–110) does not prevent his exercising that dangerous, mercurial, joco-serious authority that is the carnivalesque prerogative of the stage clown or comedian. In laying open the extent of the Vice's dominance of the stage, and illuminating the potentially complex relationships between the characters, the workshop helped both to illuminate the inner workings of Heywood's intricate, masterful comic creation, and to demonstrate how much more work is needed before we can really say that we understand the cultural dynamics of early court drama.

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#### NOTES

1. *The Plays of John Heywood* edited Richard Axton and Peter Happé (Cambridge: Brewer, 1991) 52. See also Greg Walker *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge UP, 1991) 13–68; Walker *Writing Under Tyranny: English Literature and the Henrician Reformation* (Oxford UP, 2005) 100–119. For Heywood's post-Henrician writing see Thomas Betteridge *Literature and Politics in the English Reformation* (Manchester UP, 2004) chapter 3.
2. External evidence of the play's first performance(s) does not survive. From the text itself, however, one can deduce a number of things about it. It was performed by a company of ten actors, perhaps with additional musicians (although some of the actors could have doubled in this capacity at need). One of the actors (most probably the one playing Merry Report) may well have been Heywood himself, while another was a small child, as the list of dramatis personae calls for 'The Boy, the le[a]st that can play', which suggests a number of boy actors from among whom a choice could be made. The size of the

company suggests the resources of a princely or noble household performance, and the presence of a number of boys from among whom one might choose 'the least' supports the idea that the company itself came at least in part from a grammar school or choir — perhaps St Paul's or the Chapel Royal, with which Heywood had an association. Finally, Heywood's positions as a court musician and a sewer of the royal household, further supports the hypothesis that a court performance was intended for the play, of the sort that was envisaged for his earlier interlude, *Witty and Witless*, which contains three stanzas to be spoken only in the royal presence ('Thes thre stave next folowyng in the kings absens are voyde': sd following line 675: Axton and Happé *Plays* 72).

3. References to the play are to the version in *Medieval Drama: An Anthology* edited Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
4. Edward Hall *Chronicle* (London: J. Johnson and others, 1809) 764–5.
5. Simon Shepherd *Theatre, Body, Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 2006) 73.
6. Ideally we would have liked to reproduce something of the variegated audience conditions that the play seems to recognise at various points, with some standing spectators, originally probably of lower social status, crowding around the screens end for Merry Report to push through when he refers to 'stand[ing] thrusting amonge you there' at line 177, and higher status spectators seated in rows towards the dais end — see Walker *The Politics of Performance in Early Tudor Drama* (Cambridge UP, 1998) 53–9 — but the constraints of modern safety and insurance concerns prevailed.
7. W.R. Streitberger *Court Revels, 1485–1559* (University of Toronto Press, 1994) 149–52.
8. Walker *Writing Under Tyranny* 116.
9. In the end, a brief failure of the balloon meant that some of the Gentleman's scenes were played in natural light, which actually proved adequate enough for everyone to follow events.
10. Natalie Mears recently argued the case for a more dramatic approach to the study of the Tudor Court in her article 'Courts, Courtiers, and Culture in Tudor England' *Historical Journal* 46 (2003) 703–722.
11. James R. Mathieu 'Introduction — Experimental Archaeology; Replicating Past Objects, Behaviours, and Processes' in *Experimental Archaeology: Replicating past objects, behaviors and processes* edited James R. Mathieu (British Archaeological Reports Oxford: Archaeopress, 2002) 1–11.
12. 'Negotiating Performance Epistemologies; knowledge "about", "in" and "for"' *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 21 (2001) 31–46.
13. Shepherd *Theatre, Body, Pleasure* 32.