

**‘NOW FEARING NEITHER FRIEND NOR FOE, TO
THE WORLDES VIEWE THESE VERSES GOE’:**

Mapping Libel Performance in Early-Modern Devon

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Libel — the creation and spreading of a message in order to defame somebody — was acknowledged as a ‘growing dangerous and enormous offence’ during the early-modern period.¹ Commonly, the provincial libels of the early-modern period consisted of a public confrontation or humiliation carried out in a communal space within the town or village accompanied by some attempt to disseminate abroad, either by written text or symbolic object, or by singing or reading aloud, the contents of a libel. Libel cases at this time had, on the whole, local disputes at their heart; these were cases firmly rooted in the tensions existing in local communities. During the late sixteenth century, however, these local disputes began to be tried on a national level at the court of Star Chamber. The person targeted could now complain of their grievances to a powerful and high-status court and it is these court records which survive to us today. Libel was very much an emergent and evolving crime in early-modern England and was clearly a phenomenon which concerned those in authority. But why was it considered to be such a dangerous offence and what can it tell us about the popular modes of expression for communal conflicts in provincial England at the time?

Libel and slander cases have received considerable attention from historians who have used them to shed light on levels of literacy at the lowest parts of society and to reveal the exposure to printed sources and political opinion that these communities experienced.² Whilst scholars have previously suggested that libels can be seen as communal performances, this article will show that the performance nature of early-modern provincial libel cases requires further critical attention, particularly in relation to the ways in which libel performances used space and place. The article will explore this by focusing on the libel cases of one county in detail: the county of Devon. Devon is of particular interest because the Star Chamber records for this county do not appear, as those for most other counties do, in the *Records of Early English Drama* (REED) volumes. Whilst working on the Star Chamber records for libel in Devon it became clear that one of the most striking ways in which the performance nature of libels can be demonstrated is by placing them onto a map of their

contemporary landscape. This mapping process reveals the awareness that early-modern libellers had of their environment and how they exploited it. In working on a small scale project which has aimed to map ten Devon libel cases onto their contemporary landscape using GIS mapping software, not only have the spatial elements of libel performance been revealed, but a pilot resource has been created which shows the potential that interdisciplinary and digital humanities projects such as this one hold for making records more accessible to a wider audience.³ This article will outline the aims of this mapping project and report some of its findings on the spatial aspects of libel performance in early-modern Devon.

1. The Offence of Libel

In his comprehensive survey of libel cases, Adam Fox explains that whilst libel had once been tried in local ecclesiastical courts, the offence was redefined as a criminal rather than a moral one during the late sixteenth century. Fox demonstrates that due to 'a series of precedential cases' and much new legislation during the Jacobean period the Star Chamber court became the natural place for libel cases to be tried.⁴ This redefinition of the offence and repositioning of the trials of libel was, no doubt, part of the reason why libels assumed the form that they did during the period. Previously, when libels had been tried in church courts, common law had only been concerned with the 'damage' done 'to the person defamed' and so held that publication to a third party was required, that truth was a defence, that the offence died with the person, and that there was no difference between written and spoken defamation.⁵ Libel trials were then moved to the Star Chamber due to the court's jurisdiction over threats to breaches of the common peace. In contrast, when libel cases were tried in the Star Chamber as criminal offences, damages could be awarded to complainants for the first time and the truth or falsity of a statement was no longer a defence because a true statement in a libel was considered just as likely, if not more likely, to cause a disturbance to public order. Libelling was dangerous then because, as one bill put it:

[It] directlie tend[ed] to the sowing and increasing of debate strife and hatred betwixt neighbour and neighbour to the breach of your highnes peace and to the vtter vndoeing of your said subiectes.⁶

The key to the success of these libels in creating 'strife and hatred' in early-modern communities was, as this article will argue, the manner in which they were publicly communicated. Before exploring this, though, it is

necessary to give an overview of the common features of provincial libel in early-modern South West England.

Each libel case was unique: they varied according to differences in the identities of the people involved, the make-up of the local community, the underlying cause of the dispute, and features of the local environment. However, some similarities in form and content can be seen to occur across many cases. Here, the example of two connected cases from a small village in South Devon will serve to draw out some of these common features. The case of *Roupe v. Fortescue* was first complained of to the court of Star Chamber around 1606 by Mr Richard Roupe, gentleman, of East Allington, Devon.⁷ Roupe complained that one Edmund Fortescue, esquire, and others had placed a libel made up of four playing cards with messages written on them on the door of his house in full view of the public highway. Roupe claimed that the playing cards termed him an 'olde cuckowe'; his son William a 'quarrellour'; another of his sons, Richard, a 'sawcie foole'; and a kinsman and servant named George Smith a 'lawhinge foole'.⁸ The derogatory terms were said to have been written on 'twoe ... knaues of diamondes ... one ... knave of Clubbes ... [and] one ... knave of hartes'.⁹ Presumably, the two Diamonds indicated the saucy and laughing fools, the Knave of Clubs represented the quarreller, and the Knave of Hearts labelled Roupe himself as a cuckold. The whole libel was then said to have been 'directed with a superscription in this manner (vizt) to the generacion of Asses giue theise'.¹⁰ In addition to this construction being fastened onto his door, Roupe complained that one of the defendants named William Richards had, at the command of his master and mistress, the Fortescues, made a mock royal proclamation in the church yard of East Allington, during or just after divine service, announcing that he would pay anyone who could give him news of Richard Roupe and his daughter Honour because they had been absent from church for over a fortnight. The underlying cause of this libel case appears to have been Roupe's recent marriage to a local woman through which he had gained a higher social status: this newly acquired status was physically manifest in his residence at a large house called Nutcomb and his new entitlement to an ancient pew in the church belonging to his wife's family. This social mobility was clearly disliked by the established local élite, the Fortescue family. The feud between the Roupes and the Fortescues continued beyond this initial libel case, as in 1615 William Roupe, son of the former complainant Richard Roupe, submitted another bill of complaint to the Star Chamber claiming to have been libelled again

by members of the Fortescue family.¹¹ This second complaint accused Fortescue and others of having set up a pair of ram's horns in the street which was used by his father Richard Roupe to travel from his house to the church. William Roupe also complained that two new church pews which he and his father had had built in the church had been broken repeatedly by Fortescue and his men displacing the Roupes during key services in the liturgical calendar, such as Christmas.

These two cases contain many elements that are repeatedly found in libel cases across Devon and the rest of South West England. Social mobility, whether achieved through marriage or trade, was a central concern in many libel cases and, like the instance of Roupe v. Fortescue, most libel cases revolved around pre-existing local politics. More significantly, though, the form that the playing-cards element of the libel which targeted Roupe took was typical of provincial libels; it used a visually symbolic object coupled with a written text placed in a prominent and significant location in the village. Other examples from the extant Devon records of this kind of dramatic visual object being used to communicate a libel message include a pair of horns tied together with shoemaker's leathers, a chest of sugar confiscated from pirates upon which mock royal proclamations were given, and, from outside Devon in Somerset, a horse with its mane and tail cut which had a mock court summons tied to it. As with the inclusion of mock proclamations in the case of Roupe v. Fortescue, most of these examples show that the use of visual or physical objects was normally coupled with a written text or a mock ceremonial process. Some libel cases did not use symbolic objects in order to libel their targets. Instead libellers composed verses, often lengthy and confrontational, which were read out from a written text accompanied by certain gestures in a public place within the town to the local community. These verses were sometimes sealed up in the form of a letter after they had been read out and were either left in the highway to be found and spread by passers-by or delivered by a servant to those they libelled as well as to their friends and neighbours. A libel could also comprise an action done to a person, who was thereby libelled in the presence of the community. In Devon, the case of Pulton v. Prowse serves as an example of this: the vicar of the church of Hittesleigh was falsely arrested by his libellers, dragged out of the church in the middle of giving service, and forced to walk with his hands bound and still wearing his robes to the jail some eight miles distant.¹² Here it was the action of walking the minister in shame which constituted the libel.

Many libel cases, as can be seen in the above examples, bore striking similarities to the traditions of popular culture such as skimmington rides, or to ceremonial genres such as proclamations, but they also contained elements akin to theatrical performances — a text being read out in front of an audience with gestures and in a place appropriate to the content. All of the elements involved, object, text, and mock ceremony, relied on an informed and involved spectator for effect; they required a member of the local community who would see these libels placed in public spaces around the town or village and know the people and places well enough to be able to understand and judge their contents. Whilst the performance nature of provincial libelling has been highlighted by existing scholarship, more attention might profitably be paid to the way in which these libels functioned as performances and their uses of physical space in performance terms. Historians, most notably Adam Fox, have used provincial libels to demonstrate the co-existence and significant crossover which existed between oral and literate cultures in the lives of the people at the lowest levels of society during the early modern period. Fox demonstrates that libelling was common across England and that its use of both visual and textual elements meant it had a more damaging effect in communities where literacy levels were still relatively low.¹³ Further, Andrew McRae has pointed out ‘the importance of situating libels within literary history’, demonstrating that libels did have a place in the contemporary literary scene.¹⁴ However, McRae’s work analyses well-known examples of libels at court, such as those surrounding Lady Penelope Rich; libels with high-status targets and contemporary political relevance, which he says were at this period considered ‘a recognized feature of literary and political culture’.¹⁵ McRae’s work on political libels with Alastair Bellany, and indeed Bellany’s own work, also focuses on elevated examples which comment on issues of national political scope, which are different to the popular provincial cases examined here.¹⁶ Early studies of popular culture, such as those by C.J. Sisson and Martin Ingram, began literary- or performance-orientated discussions of provincial libel; these studies placed libels amongst other events central to popular culture, like the May Game or charivari, and they also pointed out some of the similarities between provincial libels and drama on the London stage.¹⁷ However, subsequent scholarship does not seem to have taken up these discussions regarding the performance of libels to their full extent. Whilst recent scholars have signalled the significance of performance in provincial libelling, this has not been their central concern. Fox acknowledges that there is now a need

to ‘move the history of popular literature beyond the study of form and content and towards the analysis of performance and reception’; he says, when talking of ballads, that performance context ‘is something usually lost’ to those studying them.¹⁸ Bellany describes how important performance was to instances of sung libel, but concedes that historians have been ‘reluctant’ to analyse them in this light.¹⁹ This scholarship emphasises the significance of performance context to libels and their surrounding genres and yet no full scale analysis of early-modern provincial libel in terms of performance has been undertaken. With the inclusion of major libel cases in the more recently published volumes of *REED* this move towards defining a genre of performance-based provincial libel has become ever more achievable, and so is all the more pressing. As part of this study, the gaps in the records of provincial libel left firstly by developments in editorial practice at *REED* and secondly by *REED*’s inbuilt selectiveness can also be bridged.

2. The Performance of Libel

Descriptions given in the Star Chamber bills of complaint allow us to place libels in their performance contexts. In the records of a large and significant case from Wells in Somerset (1607–8), one of the defendants, William Williams, was said to have read out a libel verse entitled ‘My Loving Friends’. One of the deponents described Williams’ rendition:

Which speech he [Williams] deliuered with the action of his foote and hand, much like a player, which moved this deponent to thinke that the said verses had been parte of some play.²⁰

This description shows the versatility of libels: they could be songs, verses, or plays; but more strikingly it highlights their aptitude to be performed. The bill of complaint for another case, from Bridport, Dorset (1608), described how several of the defendants had read a libel on the same day in various shops around the town. One defendant, John Abbott,

Came into the Shop where Your said Subiecte Angell Churchill [*complainant*] and the said Lea [*defendant*] were ... and the said Abbott did then and there vnlawfully reade and publish the same Libell openly in the shop in the presence and hearing of diuers persons and smyled as hee was reading it, and did well like and allow therof.²¹

This was more than just reading a text: the libel verse was punctuated by Abbott’s own interpretation, done for the benefit of the gathered audience.

Significantly, Abbott tried to use the lack of a performance context in his own defence. Abbott claimed that the complainants Churchill and Bagge were trying to frame him by taking the libel verse to him and persuading him to read it to them. In his defence, Abbott claimed that he

Dyd take the said paper in his hand [from Churchill], and turned his face from the said Churchill and Bagge, and read about fyve, or sixe lynes of the same to himself inwardly or softely, and not otherwise.²²

The difference between this description and the previous one is the manner of reading: here the elements of performance were studiously avoided.

These and other descriptions taken from the Star Chamber records of libel cases reveal that there was a certain accepted way to read a text like this which included eye contact, a loud voice, to be read in full, with accompanying gestures and commentary, and without full reliance on the written text; as a performance on a stage. In the case of provincial libels, the stage was made up of a communally significant public place and the features of reading aloud, as described above, were done with a specific audience in mind: the community. Libels became performances when the community became spectators; their knowledge and experience of the places and people involved in each case was relied upon for the reading aloud of a text, or the display of a physical object, or an action done to a person, to convey a message and so cause offence to the target.²³

There is also evidence to suggest that those in authority at the time, the men who were punishing and regulating the offence of libel in the Star Chamber, felt that it was this performance context which made libels dangerous. The Attorney-General, Sir Edward Coke (1552–1634), was a prolific publisher of cases heard in Star Chamber and his numerous volumes give his opinion on matters of precedents.²⁴ On the subject of publication, Coke states in reference to a case from 1611 that:

If one reads a libel that is no publication of it, or if he hears it read it is no publication of it, for before he reads or hears it, he cannot know it to be a libel; or if he hears or reads it, and laughs at it, it is no publication of it; but if after he has read or heard it, he repeats it or any part of it in the hearing of others, or after that he knows it to be a libel, he reads it to others, that it is an unlawful publication of it; or if he writes a copy of it, and does not publish it to others, it is no publication of the libel ... But it is great evidence that he published it, when he, knowing it to be a libel, writes a copy of it.²⁵

In his 'Treatise of the Court of Star Chamber', William Hudson (c. 1577–1635), a barrister who practised in the court of Star Chamber for twenty-five years and whose writings provide one of the most important sources of information about the court and its jurisdictions,²⁶ wrote:

The publishers of libels are as severely punished as the makers; therefore it is usually said, that it were a punishment to a libeller if no man would publish it. Therefore, to hear it sung or read, and to laugh at it, and to make merriment with it, hath ever been held a publication in law.²⁷

In Coke's opinion one can read or hear read a libel and even laugh at it without that being publication if one did not know it to be libellous at first, but once the text has been read or heard, then to re-read it, or any part of it, to others, is publication; if the person knows that the text is a libel and then reads it to others, he is publishing it, in Coke's opinion. This very precise description specifies 'unlawful publication' when the person, knowing it to be libellous, repeats it. But it allows the reader and audience to laugh at the text in the first instance of reading or hearing. Here the act of publishing originates in the intent of the reader when, once he knows it to be libellous, he actively reads it to others; but it also relies upon a third party to be the audience. Even if a copy is written it is not publication if he does not 'publish' it to others, although Coke does admit that to have a written copy is strong evidence that the text has been made known to others. This acknowledgement suggests that the accepted function of a written copy may have been to act as a script for performance. Hudson on the other hand defines publication according to audience reception: if it is being sung or read and those hearing it laugh or make merriment with the content, then the libel has been published. In Hudson's view the act of performance and audience reaction determines publication, and it is publication that the Star Chamber is concerned with controlling. Both of these opinions involve an audience, with one emphasising the role and intent of the performer, and the other the reaction of the audience, and although they do differ in their opinions, this difference shows that contemporary theory on the punishment of libels at Star Chamber was most concerned with how libels were performed and received: in Hudson's own words, 'it hath ever been agreed, that it is not the matter but the manner which is punishable'.²⁸

Along with the form that libels took, it is evident from the descriptions given in the court records of libel cases, and the opinions of those in

authority on the subject of publication that libels were performed; it was this performance nature that meant libels were so successful in defaming members of provincial communities and why they posed such a threat to the common peace. Therefore they should be analysed as performances: for their uses of common themes and stock phrases, their theatricality, their use of physical properties, and, as will be the focus here, their uses of space and place. What emerges when this spatial analysis, in particular, is applied to the libels of Devon, is the nuanced understanding that libellers and their envisaged spectators clearly had of the subtleties of performance and its relationship to their everyday lives. During the work on this topic, it became clear that in order for the spatial dimension of libel performance to be fully understood and adequately represented, the libel cases needed to be placed in their original geographical context; this need brought about a collaborative mapping project for libel performance in the county of Devon.

3. Mapping Libel Performance in Devon

The 'Mapping Libel Performance in Early-Modern Devon' project took a small sample, ten cases in eight locations, from the Devon material and aimed to create a pilot resource presenting a map of early-modern Devon with key landscape features highlighted and libel locations marked using Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping software.²⁹ The work was funded by the Digital Humanities project at the University of Southampton and was achieved through collaboration with the Archaeology department; the resource also benefited enormously from the generosity of the REED *Patrons and Performances* organisation who shared their data with us. The resource includes an overview of the county so that the eight libel locations can be viewed in relation to the county road-network system and other features such as hundred boundaries. The resource also maps the locations involved in each libel case in more detail so that the specific use of local geography by individual cases can be seen. Each mapped libel case also has information about the conflict and those involved attached to its significant locations in order to communicate a narrative for each case. Having information for each case linked to each significant location allows comparisons between cases in terms of the status of those involved, the libel form and content, the causes, and distances travelled, for example. Thinking beyond the offence of libel, these instances of the communal performance of conflict, when presented as a visual and searchable database, could then be compared to more

traditional dramatic performances and their sites, in order to determine their relationship to contemporary literature and culture. This article will now discuss what the process of mapping libel cases has revealed about the performance nature of these early-modern communal conflicts.

County-Wide Level

Recent studies have shown that to think of the provinces of late Tudor and early-modern England as isolated and cut off from the sophistication of London is misguided. Ian Cooper demonstrates that Devon, in particular, was closely tied by established news networks to London in relaying crucial information from the ports to the capital.³⁰ Cooper also shows that those with wealth, status, and authority in the county frequently communicated important news and information amongst themselves and that surviving letters even 'indicate a much more widespread circulation of information ... throughout the lower echelons of Devon society'.³¹ Sally-Beth MacLean has also shown that in Devon, locally patronised performance troupes travelled round the county on well-established routes,³² and more generally, Barbara Palmer has shown that drama in early-modern England was more mobile than we might at first assume.³³ Adam Fox has shown that early-modern libels of a religious nature took advantage of the higher literacy levels, large audiences, and 'communications infrastructure[s]' provided by urban centres for disseminating their messages.³⁴ It can also be shown that provincial libels in general exploited their geographical locations on a county-wide level to achieve the widest possible dissemination of their contents, a feature which emphasises their performance nature. The public and mobile aspect of provincial libel is most clearly demonstrated by mapping instances of libel from the extant Devon material onto a county map. FIG. 1 shows a map of Devon with the locations of early-modern performance-based libel marked alongside the contemporary road network. The most striking feature of the map is its demonstration that the majority of performance-based libels in Devon were located on or near main roads and travel routes which passed into and out of Devon and connected the city of Exeter with the surrounding towns and neighbouring counties. These libels can be seen to take advantage of the known mobility of other performance genres and of established routes of travel: libel performances envisaged a travelling spectatorship or a word-of-mouth report that went beyond the initial local spectacle and which used the travel network. Instances of libel from towns and cities such as Exeter, Tiverton, Axminster, Plymouth, South Molton, and Crediton which,

when read in isolation as cases tried separately in the national court of Star Chamber, can seem to have very little geographical relationship, prove, when placed on a map of the county, to be frequently linked by the contemporary road network. This pattern shows that libellers deliberately exploited their geographical location when devising libels as performances: they consciously designed these libels for an envisaged spectator and bore in mind the future journeys that that spectator was likely to undertake carrying with them the message of a libel.

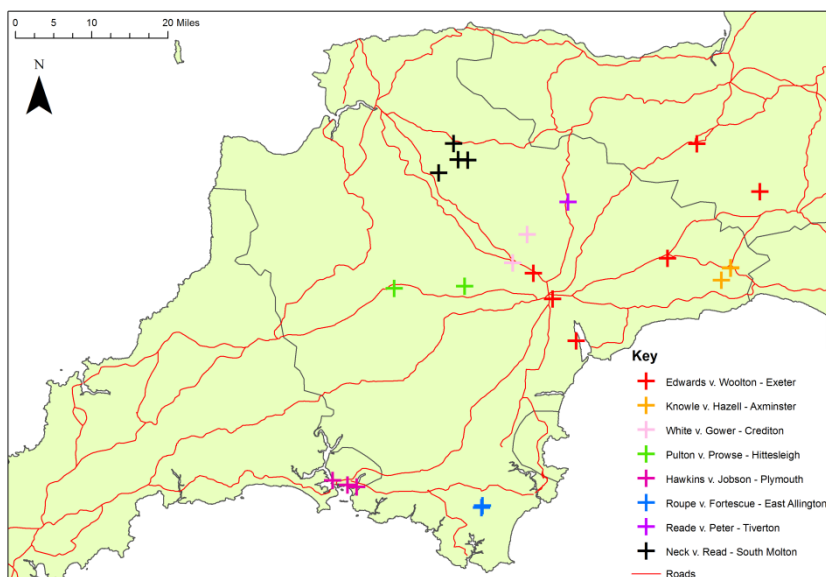


FIG. 1: A map of Devon with the performance venues for ten libel cases in eight general locations marked alongside the contemporary road network.

Road data courtesy of *REED: Patrons and Performances*

< <http://link.library.utoronto.ca/reed/index.cfm> >.

It is important to remember that the view we have of the trend of libel is dictated by the records that survive to us, and that events happening in large towns or cities with well-established trade connections would have been more likely to have been recorded in the first place, and survive in the second, than would events that occurred in smaller villages. This might be claimed as the reason for the pattern of libel that appears on the Devon map: that only those libels which occurred in major towns survive

in the records, so that if there were libels which used performance but did not bear any relation to the county's road network, those examples would be less likely to be reported and would therefore not survive today. However, this argument is refuted by the cases of East Allington and Hittesleigh, the locations of the libel cases of Roupe v. Fortescue and Pulton v. Prowse respectively. Both East Allington and Hittesleigh were small villages not directly situated on any main road or travel route, yet the libel cases associated with them survive: in fact East Allington was the location for two heavily performance-based libel cases spanning almost a decade. In the case of Pulton v. Prowse the local vicar was pulled out of the parish church of Hittesleigh and paraded, still wearing his robes, to the jail in Okehampton, eight miles away (see FIG. 2 below).

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FIG. 2: The performance venues associated with the case Pulton v. Prowse based in Hittesleigh marked on Benjamin Donn's 1765 map of the county: Benjamin Donn *A Map of the County of Devon 1765* edited W.L.D. Ravenhill (London: Percy Lund, Humphries, 1965) with the contemporary road network shown.

Road data courtesy of REED: *Patrons and Performances*
< <http://link.library.utoronto.ca/reed/index.cfm> > .

This case originated in a small village set back away from any main road, but in the shame-walk of its target it still used the closest major travel route, the road into Okehampton, to perform part of the action of the libel. Although it ended at the jail in the town of Okehampton, its centre of operations was the small village of Hittesleigh, which was then linked to a public road by the marching of the vicar along it to jail. Here we see a libel case originating in and performed around a small village, but using its geographical location in order to gain the widest possible dissemination.

In the case of Roupe v. Fortescue, East Allington was another small village which was not close to a contemporary road and in this case, in contrast to the case of Pulton v. Prowse, the libellers did not travel to the closest road to stage their libel (see FIG. 3 below).

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FIG. 3: The performance venues in East Allington used in the cases of Roupe v. Fortescue marked on Benjamin Donn's 1765 map of the county: Benjamin Donn *A Map of the County of Devon 1765* edited W.L.D. Ravenhill (London: Percy, Lund, Humphries, 1965), with the contemporary road network shown.
Road data courtesy of REED: *Patrons and Performances*
< <http://link.library.utoronto.ca/reed/index.cfm> > .

However, the case did use its local geography in significant ways which will be explored in greater depth later in the article. What these two cases signal is that it is not the case that only libels which were performed in towns and cities were recorded, and so only those cases survive to create the pattern of libel location found in Devon. They show, rather, that early-modern libellers deliberately exploited their geographical location by using towns, cities, and, most significantly, the road network to achieve the widest dissemination possible for their libel messages on a county-wide level.

The location of performance-based libels on or near major travel networks shows that early-modern libellers intended their messages to reach the largest audience possible, including those beyond their immediate community. But their use of specific, locally significant geographical locations also demonstrates that these libel-makers saw place as a performance tool to be exploited and that they envisaged their initial spectators as people who could see or hear a libel in a certain place and use their knowledge to interpret the link between their local geography and the libel message. This would suggest that, whilst widespread dissemination was important in that it threatened the target with a loss of reputation outside his local community as well as within it, the imagined initial spectator according to a libeller was one who knew the local area and the people within it. These initial spectators would presumably then spread the libel message further; as did the later authorities when they punished libellers.³⁵

Local Geography and Libel Journeys

Libels did not only use geographical location and travel networks on a county-wide level in order to perform their messages; they also used local places and the streets connecting them as a physical embodiment of the links that their libel contents strove to present as at the heart of each community conflict. They did this by using the connections made by highways between residences or communally significant places and they often highlighted these connections by incorporating journeys, commonly in the form of letter deliveries, into their libels. For example, the use of local geography in the case of Neck v. Read demonstrates the deliberate linking of significant local places in spatially representing a libel.³⁶ FIG. 4 shows the location of the case between Neck v. Read. In this libel case Edmund Read and his accomplices targeted Roger Neck in a libel written in the form of a letter because he had recently married

The daughter of a Marchaunte of Southmolton in the Countie of devon of good parentage and honest Conversacion amonge the inhabitantes there, your Subiectes said wyves father having beene Maiour of the said Towne of Southmolton And your said Subiect having good livinge to the valew of above ffourty poundes per anum where he hath and still doth live in good accompte and regarde amongst his Neighbours there.³⁷

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FIG. 4: Detail of South Molton and surrounding area from Benjamin Donn *A Map of the County of Devon* 1765 edited W.L.D. Ravenhill (London: Percy Lund, Humphries, 1965).

The bill of complaint notes that Neck was originally from Kings Nympton (shown in the bottom left hand corner of FIG. 4), just down the road from South Molton, but that through his marriage he had risen to a comfortable living in South Molton (located at the centre of the top edge of FIG. 4). The bill also tells us that Edmund Read was from Mary Annesleigh (on the right hand side of FIG. 4). The three locations of Kings Nympton, Mary Annesleigh, and South Molton, as shown on the map in

FIG. 4, make up the three corners of a triangle joined by public streets. South Molton sat at the top of this triangle and had the main road from Barnstaple in the west to Bampton in the east running straight through it. The libel text in this case was first performed by Read to an audience of local inhabitants; it was then sealed and placed in the 'Common Way' for others to 'take vpp and view the same' and bore the direction 'To his loving friend Mr Roger Neck att Alsweare Milles in the parish of Marleight give these with speed'.³⁸ Alsweare Mills (or 'Alzer', as it is called on the 1765 map), presumably the new residence of Mr Neck, sat in the middle of one of the sides of the triangle on the road between Mary Annesleigh and South Molton, on a river, and on the boundary between the hundreds of South Molton and Witherington, the latter of which included both Mary Annesleigh and Kings Nympton. The direction of this letter and its placement in the highway would have brought to the attention of any audience that knew the local area the fact that the local highways linked Kings Nympton, South Molton, and Mary Annesleigh, just as the three locations were linked in the accusation being made in the libel — that Neck had risen beyond his station through his recent marriage. The letter's destination on the boundary between areas of civic administration must also have tied in with the status of Neck's new father-in-law as mayor of South Molton, but it also highlights the fact that Neck was being defamed and pushed out of his community by his neighbours. Here the local geography was exploited to give a physical representation of the libel's message: that Neck and his recent connections were disliked by some of his neighbours.

Along with the local geography, this case used a letter and the process of its delivery as part of its physical dramatisation of the links created by libel, a practice which appears to have been common in early-modern libelling. Recent scholarship has focused increasing attention on early-modern letter-writing by questioning how private a letter could really be during this period, the cultural and social functions of letters, letters as material objects, their use on stage, and also how they functioned in libel cases.³⁹ Gary Schneider suggests that letters were used in libel cases for various reasons, including their 'documentary character' and 'relative permanence' — in contrast to the transience of oral communication — the fact that their 'paratextual and nontextual elements' could be 'managed' by their writers, and because they offered a nonviolent alternative to the 'more aggressive face-to-face conflict' of duelling, something which James I and his government were specifically trying to eradicate.⁴⁰ In my opinion,

this last suggestion seems to over-simplify the choice of the letter form by a libeller: there are more subtle readings of why libellers used letters than that they were merely trying to avoid the violence of a duel.⁴¹ However, Schneider's other suggestions for why libellers used letters are more intriguing, and the case of *Neck v. Read*, with its sealing and strategic dropping of a letter, is clearly an instance of the 'nontextual elements of letters' being 'purposefully managed' by a libeller in order to make a physical connection between the people and places involved in the mind of the spectators.⁴² The delivery of a letter was, by its very nature, the communication of private information through a public act with a socially conditioned response and so it provided a performance opportunity for the libeller to exploit. In *Read's* case the reliance on an anonymous passer-by finding the letter and taking it to its addressee adds another dimension to the use of a letter to libel as it signals a deliberate attempt to engage an imagined spectator in that process and reveals the expectation that such a person would chance to find it.

Another Devon case in which the delivery of a letter is employed to libellous effect is that of *Luccas v. Knowle*.⁴³ This case is related to an earlier instance of libel in Devon between Knowle and a man called Baptiste Hasell in which Hasell and others wrote and read out a verse libelling Knowle in the town of Axminster;⁴⁴ Luccas had been a defendant in the case of *Knowle v. Hasell*, but later filed his own complaint against Knowle claiming that Knowle had engineered the whole thing in order to frame Luccas. In 1609, Peter Luccas the elder complained to the court of Star Chamber that William Knowle had written two libels, one about Luccas and the other about himself. Luccas claimed that Knowle had folded the two libels in the form of letters and sealed the one about himself inside the one about Luccas and directed the whole package to Luccas. The bill of complaint then says that Thomas Langdon, one of Knowle's confederates, delivered the letter(s) to Luccas' house at a time when he was absent and persuaded Luccas the younger (Peter Luccas' son) to open and read the libels in his presence at the door. Luccas the elder, having returned home and discovered the libels, claimed that he took the libels directly to the local constable, but was apprehended in the street on his way by Knowle who demanded to see their contents. Luccas said that he refused and that both men went to the constable's house together where Knowle again demanded to see the libel, but upon receipt of it pretended to be unable to read the handwriting. Knowle then said that he knew that Luccas' son could read the handwriting and so he arranged for Luccas the

elder, his son, and the constable to meet him and various other people, whom he had gathered, at Langdon's house. When all were present at Langdon's house the boy read the libel to those assembled and it was this reading of the libel which Luccas, in his bill of complaint, highlighted as the moment when Knowle had succeeded in framing him and his son in the act of libel. The letter-form features heavily in this case, and similarities can be seen between it and the case of *Neck v. Read*, which also features a letter. In this case, Thomas Langdon claimed that his maid had found in the street the letter directed to Luccas, which was described as 'much toren & durtyed as yf yt haf Lyen in the durt'.⁴⁵ Langdon then took the letter to Luccas' house because it was directed to him. Here we have an account of what might have happened in the case of *Neck v. Read* after the letter was dropped in the street. In the case of *Luccas v. Knowle* the discovery and delivery of the letter not only resulted in Luccas the younger being acquainted with the contents, but it also meant that Knowle could engineer the second libel performance at Langdon's house. Significantly, Knowle did not have the letter read out when he was first handed it at the constable's house; instead he organised a performance at Langdon's house, because Langdon's presence signified the original delivery and receipt of the letter, connecting Luccas and his son with a libel against Knowle. This case demonstrates the subtle ways in which the processes of letter delivery, their moments of receipt, and the houses which their deliveries involved could be used to physically represent the act of libel; places of residence were connected by physical journeys through the streets, occasioned by the libellous letter.

The case of *White v. Gower* (1610)⁴⁶ also employed letter delivery in the performance of a libel; we are told that Gower sent messengers bearing a libellous challenge sealed in the form of a letter to George White's house three times. Each time the messenger and challenge were refused and returned directly to Gower. This process established a link between the small village of Cheriton Fitzpaine, where Gower lived, and the larger town of Crediton, home to White, which sat on one of the main travel routes between Exeter and Barnstaple, through the physical journey of the messenger, just as the libel established a challenge between the two men. Gower then used these streets later to publicly perform his identity as challenger: he got a pistol, rapier, dagger, and a privy coat, which he wore about his person around the town and waited for White in highways and passage ways in order to shoot him, whilst declaring to anybody passing by that he had nearly killed White at their last meeting and would do so

whenever he next saw him. Gower's use of the street as the location to display himself as a challenger thus recalled the initial challenge-letter and its delivery, which linked the two men and which would have been remembered by a spectator familiar with the conflict and its relationship to the local geography.

More generally, physical acts performed in specific locations were used symbolically to represent the messages of libel. In the case of *Pulton v. Prowse* the physical walking of the minister from his church through the streets to the jail in order to shame him physically represented the downward journey of his honour and reputation. In the cases of *Roupe v. Fortescue*, a pair of ram's horns placed in the street which connected Roupe's house with the church physically represented the shame that the libellers wanted him to feel in having gained his status in the church through his domestic situation. A similar type of public journey was used by the libellers in the case *Hawkins v. Jobson*.⁴⁷ Richard Hawkins was the Vice Admiral of Devon until he was challenged by the defendants of this case with a libel which took place in and around Plymouth and its port. The defendants Jobson, Burrage, and Grymes took, by force, a chest of sugar which Hawkins had previously confiscated from a pirate ship and locked in a house in Orston, and carried the chest back to Plymouth by boat. Hawkins pursued them in his boat and commanded them to give it back, at which point Burrage, to an audience of a hundred, stood on the chest, drew his sword and made several cries or 'Oyes' (which are described by the bill of complaint as imitating royal proclamations) announcing that Hawkins had no power and that he and his men should be taken by force. These 'Oyes' were done as the boat left Orston and were repeated when it arrived at Plymouth in front of a large audience, which included the mayor of the town. Although they used boats and waterways rather than streets, the defendants' taking of previously confiscated goods from Orston, where they were being held, back to the port of Plymouth, the site of their original confiscation, was a physical journey that reversed the power the libellers were trying to seize from Hawkins in the act of libel. All of these cases used significant places in their local geography to stage their libels, and employed public acts such as letter delivery and physical journeys to 'beat the bounds' which connected them. The libels used these locations and journeys to establish links between the key individuals involved in each case and to represent physically the social mobility which the process of libel both commented on and endeavoured to influence. All of this was done for a specific kind of spectator: one who knew their surrounding

landscape and knew the social relationships which it signified. The relationships between people and places, and the connecting local highways that were used to add a spatial dimension to libel performances, only become apparent by mapping each case within its contemporary landscape. This then also allows comparison between cases so that trends can be established.

Communal Spaces

The performance spaces employed in early-modern libel were not only used to establish and dramatise the links that libels made between those they involved; they also used specific communal spaces which acted as public manifestations of the identity of the libel target. In so doing, libels took a space already known to the community which formed their audience, and exploited the associations that the space already had in the minds of the spectators in order to libel their targets. In turn, the libel performance became associated with the space in that spectator's mind and would have been remembered each subsequent time the space was encountered, thus ensuring the continuation of the libel message even after its initial performance and making it a very real danger to anybody's reputation.

In terms of community drama, libels' use of communal outdoor spaces draws on the traditions of public ceremonies and processions which used city spaces to establish and affirm social structures.⁴⁸ One of the closest parallels to libels in their use of communal spaces as performance stages can be found in medieval guild plays, the most renowned of which is York's Corpus Christi Play. Many scholars have seen the use of important locations in the city for staging early civic and religious drama as physically and spatially representing the power struggles of the institutions working in those cities. David Mills, in his book on the early drama of Chester, describes how:

The streets, buildings, and physical geography of the town we live in are the most immediate determinants of our networks of relationships with one another and with our collective past. They also constitute the physical context in which public celebration is conducted. That context is not neutral. It is the product of an ongoing process of urban development which has led to the construction of buildings which may serve not only as functional places for habitation, commerce, and assembly, but also as structures symbolic of authority and tradition.⁴⁹

Anne Higgins also emphasises the role of processions in city life in creating 'a dramatic and sophisticated demotic of space and movement, one that expressed the common identity of citizens within the bounds, as well as the hierarchies that ordered them'.⁵⁰ In their use of movement to connect places, libels can be seen to act in a similar way but, further to this, both Higgins and Janet Hill agree that using familiar communal locations involved the audience more closely with the action:

The streets, houses, churches, and markets [of York] were employed in a specific, sophisticated, and concrete anachronism in order to bring home to the spectators the figural sense of the play's representation of history.⁵¹

Hill stresses the importance of direct or open address between the actors and the audience in achieving this, but also insists that familiar places, costumes, and properties meant that 'these plays constrained the playgoers to see their own lives on stage'; guild drama, she says, 'staged its audiences as themselves ... by making sure that its stages belonged to the playgoers'.⁵² In a very similar way, early-modern libels used familiar spaces to locate their messages in the everyday lives of their audiences; they encouraged spectators to see the message of the libel as functioning within the existing community and to judge those whom it targeted according to their own social norms.

The case of *Hawkins v. Jobson* provides one example of this. In their everyday lives, the spectators of the libel performed in Plymouth by Humphrey Jobson and his men would have seen Richard Hawkins carrying out his duties as Vice Admiral of Devon in and about Plymouth harbour on a daily basis. Therefore, when the defendants wished to defame him they did so in the very arena where his public identity was most manifest. When those spectators saw Hawkins defamed by a mock-royal proclamation on a boat leaving and entering the harbours of Orston and Plymouth, they related it to their everyday lives. In turn the identity of Hawkins and his relationship to them in the local hierarchy were adjusted. This reliance on the memories and associations related to a space in the minds of the local community made performance-based libel particularly effective in defaming a person because their degraded status would have been succinctly and irreversibly conveyed to spectators who had long been adept at reading hierarchy in the ways that ceremonies, processions, and plays used their communal spaces.

In other instances of libel occurring in early-modern Devon, space was used in similar ways. Those cases which made accusations regarding domestic transgression or social climbing through marriage located their libel performances at the doorways of the targets' houses, for example in the cases of *Roupe v. Fortescue*, and others. In these cases the house door served as the physical public location in which the identity of the target was represented. *Roupe v. Fortescue*, along with the case of *Pulton v. Prowse*, also used the church as a performance-space because this was where both complainants, Roupe and Pulton, most commonly publicly enacted their status or profession. The church, during this period and long before, was a place where the congregation were seated according to their status; it was a place where the community was used to seeing hierarchy performed in spatial terms. John Wasson has also emphasised the frequency with which churches were used for staging local drama.⁵³ Performance in church was not unfamiliar to the early-modern congregation, especially that which related to status — hence the use of the church as a space in which to perform a libel which aimed to degrade its target. Such a performance used a place already associated with the public performance of identity and status in the eyes of the spectatorial congregation. Use of the church space in terms of status-performance is most distinctly demonstrated in the case of *Pulton v. Prowse*, which used Hittesleigh church as its central location. The church at Hittesleigh exists relatively unchanged today and its interior still bears witness to the physical performance of status by the early-modern community of the parish: throughout the church there are monuments and plaques dedicated to past ministers and churchwardens. One prominent box pew bears a carving which reads, 'this was bvilt at the cost of Thomas Fvrse of Easte Chvrche Gentleman: 1619'; and even Pulton himself still lies buried inside the church. This space represents a material record of the history and identity of the community of Hittesleigh. Pulton's gravestone, in particular, is significant: it consists of two square stones inscribed with the names of Pulton and his wife, which lie either side of a long rectangular stone carved with an elaborate cross. This large construction is situated in the most prominent place within the church: right in front of the altar, in full view of any seated congregation (see FIG. 5 below).

Both the size and location of Pulton's gravestone demonstrate that the minister was a person whose identity continued to be performed in death just as it had been humiliatingly performed in his life by being dragged out of his church and marched to Okehampton jail. With this gravestone, the



FIG: 5: The altar of Hittesleigh Church with Pulton's gravestone in the foreground.
(Photograph: author's own.)

church space has been manipulated to display Pulton's identity as a prominent and important figure in the local community. Just as the defamation of Pulton survives to us in the performance of a libel recorded by the court of Star Chamber, so too does this gravestone survive as an attempt to re-perform and reinstate Pulton's status. The church space continually reminds us of how important and effective public performance was to the identities of members of the early-modern community. In each of the instances of performance involving Pulton which survive to us today, he was the focus of other people's performing of their views and loyalties, whether these were in defiance or support of the local status quo; in this can be seen the potency of performance for the provincial communities of early-modern England in constructing identity and the

nuanced understanding which they clearly had of the role that communally significant spaces could play in those performances.

In the case of *Knowle v. Hasell* the significance of the space used is slightly different. Instead of defaming Knowle in a church, as we might assume they would have done, given that he was the local vicar, the defendants chose the market place in Axminster to perform their libel. Anne Higgins gives a possible explanation for this in her analysis of the use of the market square called the Pavement as the final location for the York Cycle:

The Pavement ... was an ancient broad space, the centre of the city's commerce. From time out of mind it had been where traitors were executed, drunks pilloried, rogues whipped, kings and queens proclaimed ... it is clear this market was well suited to play a crucial role in the last performance of the Last Judgement episode. Where better to proclaim judgement and to exact punishment after separating the saved from the damned?⁵⁴

The use of the market place as an ancient location for the public administering of justice makes it a fitting place to stage the Last Judgement. If we look particularly at the contents of the libel in the case of *Knowle v. Hasell*, we find a possible parallel in the choice of location. Hasell's libel is particularly aggressive and violent in its tone throughout, but especially so towards the end:

Thou art a cutise, Cockescombe Viper, vicar of Hell,
The gallows groanes to beare thy bones; which will befitt thee well.
To whome I committ thee in this Resolution,
To doe all I can for thy execution;
ffor I would be thy hangman were it in my power,
Thou should not tarry longe noe not an hower;
I would say more but I fall to deeds;
as thou shalt feele and he shall see whoe soe theise verses reeds.

[My lineation]⁵⁵

If the market place of Axminster was, like that of York, the location for public proclamations, judgements, and punishments, then Hasell's judgement and declaration that Knowle should hang would gain a physical dimension by association if it was performed in the market place where spectators would have viewed similar punishments previously. Axminster's market square is said to have included a building called the Market House, where the meat market was held, which also contained the Guildhall and

the town stocks so, whether there was a gallows here or not, the market square would have been associated with some forms of public punishment during the period.⁵⁶ In this case the space chosen for performance was not a public location which represented the identity of the target, but was carefully chosen for the memories and associations that an audience would bring to it and for its relevance to the message of the libel. In all of the Devon cases, the communal spaces chosen for performance-based libels used the function of those spaces in the everyday lives of spectators in order to perform, and so revise, the identity of a member of the community: they staged the communal audience to themselves. Implicitly they also did this by iterating the customary roles of members of the community in a new type of performance, and making them complicit witnesses in the claims of the libel. This would have triggered active involvement from the spectator in judging the libel's contents in the context of their daily lives. Both Anne Higgins and Janet Hill comment that once drama moved from outdoor, communal spaces into indoor, privately-owned theatres, it lost this spatial significance:

The open public areas of English towns, the spaces where freemen and foreigners lived and worked, no longer echoed with outdoor performances of plays that told townspeople in crucial ways who they were and marked out their liberty. With the rise of performance in privately owned, not public, spaces, the rough equality of citizens in the streets of their own city, watching a play produced and largely performed by their neighbours, was lost forever.⁵⁷

Although the contents of early-modern libels were different from those of the plays staged in medieval towns, it is possible that in the ways in which they performed the identities of their communities in familiar public spaces, we can see that the type of performances Higgins describes were not lost forever: they lived on in the expression of communal conflicts in provincial England.

Liminality

Libels used place both to achieve widespread dissemination and to remind spectators of the physical links between the people they involved. They also used communal spaces which were significant to the person libelled or the libel contents through the role that these spaces played in the everyday lives of the local community. These spaces were specifically chosen to suit each case and so their actual locations varied, but all of the performance-

based libels in the Devon material share one common feature in the nature of the spaces they were performed in: liminality. Within the various communal spaces that libels chose as their performance locations, their devisers pin-pointed places which signified boundaries and borderlines; in particular they marked the border between the public identities of those they targeted and their private lives. Doorways were the most common choice in symbolising this, whether at the entrance to somebody's house or to the church, or even the door to the chancel inside the church; but the entrance to and exit from harbours was also used in *Hawkins v. Jobson*. In those cases which we have seen using journeys to link people and places, such as *Pulton v. Prowse* and *Roupe v. Fortescue*, the journey from one place to another was intrinsically liminal, but also symbolically so representing the movement from one social status to another. In the cases which used letters to highlight these links, such as *White v. Gower*, *Neck v. Read*, and *Luccas v. Knowle*, those letters occasioned the meeting of public and private in their moments of issue and receipt. These performance-based libels all exploited borders, boundaries, and entrances to emphasise liminality: this served as a physical representation of the fact that the act of libel only works in defaming somebody because it deliberately crosses the boundaries between the public and private lives of its targets. Libel makes public that which should be private and affects not only the public and private spheres of the target in doing so, but also affects the public identity of the community it seeks to regulate.

Theories of what constituted the 'public' and 'private' spheres of early-modern people are numerous and ever-changing: some theories designate the private sphere as existing within the familial home and others conceive of it as located in a person's own consciousness; some see the moment of distinction between the two as originating at the Reformation and others with the rise of the bourgeoisie.⁵⁸ There is not space enough, and it is not the aim of this article, to explore the theories which have come to be associated with these spheres, but for the purposes of this study, the public and private spheres of early-modern people are defined in a literal sense; working on the distinction that these people had parts of their lives which were kept behind doors — which were private — and had other parts of their lives which they lived in the view of the rest of their community and in which they all, on some level, assumed and performed certain public identities. One thing that most recent explorations of the public and private spheres agree on is that the boundaries and intersections between the two are where scholarly attention should focus, because these were the

places where each sphere influenced and defined the other. These studies also agree that literature of all kinds can be seen as having a 'boundary-penetrating, liminal existence'.⁵⁹ In discussing early modern novels, Paula Backscheider says: 'novels make the private public, and they explore, model, how the public impacts on the private'.⁶⁰ This can also be seen to be true of performance-based libels in both their content and their physical locations.

The example of the case of *Reade v. Peter* demonstrates the importance of liminality in early-modern libel performance.⁶¹ In this case, the libel, a pair of horns tied together with shoemaker's threads, was put up on the door of Reade's house. The doorway of a residence was the exact place where the domestic relations that existed inside the private world of the house physically met with the public space of the street; this was the precise location which came to represent the relationships from inside to the people on the outside. In various other popular customs, the doorway as viewed from the street was the focus for comments from the community relating to domestic relationships: charivaris or skimmington rides often began or ended at the house of those they ridiculed and horns were commonly put up in front of targets' houses; brushing the threshold of the offender was also a frequent element. Although he does not highlight the location of charivaris, Martin Ingram observes of them that they 'demonstrated a contrast between the hidden and the manifest, the private and the public: destroyers of privacy, they asserted the validity of a system of collective values which were stronger than the vagaries of individuals'.⁶² Their use of the doorway as viewed from the street echoes this, and performance-based libels can be seen in the same way. In Reade's case, the libel placed on his door represented a specific previous occasion on which Peter, the defendant, claimed to have seen

One Leonard ffarmer of Tyverton aforesaid (in the absence of Your said subiect [Reade]) present With the said Alice Your subiectes said Wife in the entry of Your said subiectes howse in Tyverton aforesaid in very suspitious Manner, the doore of the same howse beinge then half shutt.⁶³

This quotation makes it clear that people from the community watched and noted things that happened at doorways; furthermore, they made assumptions based on what they saw as to the division of private and public in the domestic relationships carried on inside the house and, in Peter's case, these inferences and assumptions were then publicly broadcast

by the placement of a libel on the same door. This shows that the doorway as viewed from the street was a place where public identity was constructed and performed precisely because it was the place where public and private met. The use of this space by libels, then, physically represents the fact that the purpose of a libel was to make public that information which was hitherto private and in so doing to change the public reputation or identity of the target: Peter's libel was put on the border between the public and private lives of Reade and his wife to signify the fact that his message was a penetration of the private sphere by the public one in order to reveal the private shame to the public community.

The first case of *Roupe v. Fortescue* used this space in the same way by placing the playing-cards libel on the door of Roupe's house, Nutcomb. The later case between the two families also used the church of East Allington as one of its performance spaces. As has been previously discussed, Roupe's ancient seat in the church and his building of two new pews to seat his family and household served as public symbols of his relatively newly acquired status and it was in this arena where his public identity was most visually signified to the rest of the community. What was significant about the libel's use of the church space in the later case of *Roupe v. Fortescue* was its pin-pointing of liminal areas within the church itself. Once Fortescue and his accomplices had broken up Roupe's pews in the church, the family had nowhere to sit and so sat in the chancel of the church. This would if anything have given the Roupes greater prominence and it was clearly disliked by Fortescue. In reaction, Fortescue physically abused Roupe:

John ffortescue sittinge in the saide Chauncell in tyme of devine service [did] spite after your saide Subiect as he was passage by him & imeadiatlie after devine service the saide John ffortescue stode in the dore of the saide Chancell awaitinge the Cominge forth of your said Subiect & as your saide Subiect was passage forth by him he the saide John ffortescue stroke at your saide Subiect with his legge of purpose to haue overturned him in the said Church.⁶⁴

On another occasion, John Fortescue and others, just after divine service,

Came forth into the Porch of the saide Church Armed with their daggers and as your Subiect passed by the said John ffortescue did againe spitt on the face of your Subiect ... & in most vile & vnciuill manner Rayled & reviled both your saide Subiect & his said ffather

with verie scandalous & approbrious termes in publike before most of the *parishioners* there.⁶⁵

In these events, the libellers specifically used the journey of Roupe through the chancel, his passing through the chancel door and his exit from the church as the places where they defamed him through spitting, tripping, and verbal ridicule. These particular spaces within the church are liminal: the porch was the main entrance to the church itself and the chancel door was the entrance into the most central and important part of the church. The bill of complaint emphasised the public nature of these places and as performance spaces they must have served as focal points for the congregation; the chancel door when they were all gathered inside, and the church door when they were all outside after service. The use of church doorways, which recalled the earlier case where playing cards were placed on Roupe's house door, was also surely not lost on an audience made up of the local community who would have seen that libel pinned on Roupe's house door and remembered it when they saw him ridiculed at the doorways of their church. These subtle uses of liminality in church and domestic spaces in the performance of libels reveal a sophisticated understanding of performance space and its significance in representing intersections between the public and private spheres in both those constructing libels and those for which they were constructed.

In the Devon libel cases examined here, then, the performance spaces chosen by libel-makers were liminal; they represented the place where public identities and private lives met and were constructed. Both the spaces and the objects, such as letters, used by libels physically represented the fact that the point of a libel was to make public something that had been or should be private and so affect both the public identity of a target and the social norms of the community through the intersection of the spheres. What all of these uses of geographical place, communal space, and letters show is that the people devising libels were adept at navigating the boundaries between the public and private spheres in order to effect change within their communities. Not only did they understand these subtleties, they envisaged an audience of spectators made up of their local communities who could decode and understand them too.

IV Conclusion

When early-modern provincial libels are viewed as performances their ability to bring about large-scale communal conflicts becomes clear; these instances of public confrontation were dangerous because they used

performance to try to regulate and control the social norms of their communities, causing real damage to the livelihoods and reputations of the people they targeted. Libels used place and space to give a spatial dimension to the messages they performed on many different levels. Devon's libel performances used the county's travel networks in order to ensure the widest possible dissemination for their messages beyond the initial local performance of each case. On this local level, libels used highways, journeys, and letter deliveries to physically connect places significant to those involved and the accusations made against them: these physical connections represented the complex social and communal relations that libels both commented on and sought to affect. However, in addition to making connections between places, their choice of communal spaces relevant to their victim's public identities also meant that libel performances relied on the memories and associations of their local spectators for the messages to be interpreted and understood. Within these communal places, libels also pin-pointed liminal spaces to symbolise the fact that their messages crossed the boundary between the public and private spheres. Digitally mapping a sample of the libels from the county of Devon offers a visually striking and objective way of revealing these spatial elements of the performance of libel. A resource such as this could make these sources more easily comparable to other, more traditional kinds of performance texts giving us a real insight into the role of performance in the everyday lives of early-modern communities at the lower levels of society. Collaborative projects like this one show that by sharing expertise we can critically approach sources in new and productive ways; they also show how digital technology can be used throughout the humanities to display new thinking in more accessible mediums. Above all, they demonstrate that digital presentation is not simply a means of displaying material effectively, but can prompt new critical discoveries.

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NOTES

1. *REED: Somerset* edited James Stokes and Robert J. Alexander, 2 vols (University of Toronto Press, 1996) 1 37.
2. For the most comprehensive historical study of libel in early-modern England see Adam Fox *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500–1700* (Oxford Studies in Social History; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); see also Peter Burke *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978); Andrew McRae 'Reading Libels: An Introduction' *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69:1 (2006) 1–14;

- Early Stuart Libels: A Web-Based Edition of Early Seventeenth-Century Political Poetry from Manuscript Sources* edited Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae (Early Modern Literary Studies Text Series 1; 2005) online at <www.earlystuartlibels.net/htdocs/index.html>; Alastair Bellany 'Singing Libel in Early Stuart England: The Case of the Staines Fiddlers, 1627' *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69:1 (2006) 177-94; C. J. Sisson *Lost Plays of Shakespeare's Age* (Cambridge UP, 1936); Martin Ingram 'Ridings, Rough Music and the "Reform of Popular Culture" in Early Modern England' *Past & Present* 105 (1984) 79-113, and 'Ridings, Rough Music, and Mocking Rhymes in Early Modern England' in *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* edited Barry Reay (London: Routledge, 1985), 166-97.
3. The project is entitled 'Mapping Libel Performance in Early-Modern Devon'.
 4. Adam Fox 'Ballads, Libels and Popular Ridicule in Jacobean England' *Past & Present* 145 (1994) 47-83 at 55.
 5. W. S. Holdsworth *A History of English Law* 17 vols (London: Methuen, 1903-1966) 5 206-7.
 6. Craye v. Heskins in *REED: Somerset* 1 37.
 7. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/254/24.
 8. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/254/26, m. 3.
 9. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/254/24, m. 2.
 10. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/254/26, m. 3.
 11. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/254/26.
 12. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/239/11.
 13. Fox *Oral and Literate Culture* passim.
 14. McRae 'Reading Libels' 2.
 15. McRae 'Reading Libels' 1.
 16. See *Early Stuart Libels* edited Bellany and McRae; but also Bellany 'Singing Libel' 177-94.
 17. Sisson *Lost Plays* and 'Shakespeare Quartos as Prompt-Copies with Some Account of Cholmeley's Players and a New Shakespeare Allusion' *The Review of English Studies* 18 (1942) 129-43; Ingram 'Ridings, Rough Music and Mocking Rhymes' 166-97.
 18. Fox *Oral and Literate Culture* 302 and 317.
 19. Bellany 'Singing Libel' 178.
 20. *REED: Somerset* 1 354.
 21. *REED: Dorset and Cornwall* edited R.C. Hays, C.E. McGee, S.L. Joyce, and E.S. Newlyn (University of Toronto Press, 1999) 157.

22. REED: Dorset 166.
23. Issues relating to audience reception of the libel are too extensive for this article and are the subject of my ongoing work.
24. Allen D. Boyer 'Coke, Sir Edward (1552–1634)' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* online (2009) at <www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5826>.
25. Holdsworth *History of English Law* 5 210.
26. Holdsworth *History of English Law* 5 164.
27. William Hudson 'A Treatise of the Court of Star Chamber' in *Collectanea Juridica: Consisting of Tracts Relative to the Law and Constitution of England* edited Francis Hargrave, 2 vols (London: E. and R. Brooke, 1791–2) 2 1–250 at 102.
28. Hudson 'A Treatise' 2 102.
29. This is only a representative sample chosen from the extant Devon records to broach the main topic and show the possibilities of the digital software; it was not within the time or scope of this project to extend the sample further.
30. Ian Cooper "Intelligences dayly broughte hither to the marchants from sundry ports": News Networks in Late-Elizabethan Devon' *Lives and Letters* 4:1 (2012) 36–57.
31. Cooper 'News Networks' 54.
32. Sally-Beth MacLean 'The Southwest Entertains: Exeter and Local Performance' in *Bring Furth the Pagants: Essays in Early English Drama Presented to Alexandra F. Johnston* edited David Klausner and Karen Sawyer Marsalek (University of Toronto Press, 2007) 58–76.
33. Barbara Palmer 'Early Modern Mobility: Players, Payments, and Patrons' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56:3 (2005) 259–305.
34. Adam Fox 'Religious Satire in English Towns, 1570–1640' in *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500–1640* edited Patrick Collinson and John Craig (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998) 221–40 at 222 and 224.
35. For example in the case of London: BL Lansdowne MS 620 fols 50–51, recorded for the future REED: *Middlesex/Westminster* collection by Jessica Freeman, which shows that London libellers of the Duke of Buckingham in 1628 were punished at locations which would ensure dissemination of the report of punishment: 'for quod Richardson cheife iustice of the common pleas that sentence may spread it selfe from Ware into the North & through Staines come to them in ye west' (fol. 51).
36. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/221/9.
37. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/221/9, m. 2.
38. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/221/9, m. 2.

39. Recent major studies include: James Daybell *The Material Letter: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing in Early Modern England, 1580–1635* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012); Alan Stewart *Shakespeare's Letters* (Oxford UP, 2008); and Gary Schneider *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (Newark DE: University of Delaware Press, 2005).
40. Gary Schneider 'Libelous Letters in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England' *Modern Philology* 105:3 (2008) 475–509 at 476 and 500–501.
41. In the cases of *Edwards v. Woolton* (STAC 8/130/12) and *White v. Gower* (STAC 8/304/12), and indeed many other cases, the presence of a libellous letter did not stop those involved from confronting each other violently.
42. Schneider 'Libelous Letters' 476.
43. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/196/29.
44. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/193/21.
45. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/193/21, m. 2.
46. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/304/12.
47. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/177/9.
48. Anne Higgins 'Streets and Markets' in *A New History of Early English Drama* edited John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 77–92 at 78.
49. David Mills *Recycling the Cycle: The City of Chester and its Whitsun Plays* (University of Toronto Press, 1998) 20.
50. Higgins 'Streets and Markets' 78.
51. Higgins 'Streets and Markets' 89.
52. Janet Hill *Stages and Playgoers: From Guild Plays to Shakespeare* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002) 18–19.
53. John Wasson 'The English Church as Theatrical Space' in *A New History of Early English Drama* edited John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 25–37.
54. Higgins 'Streets and Markets' 89.
55. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/193/21, m. 12.
56. *Open Plaques* <<http://openplaques.org/plaques/11825>>.
57. Higgins 'Streets and Markets' 91.
58. *The Intersections of the Public and Private Spheres in Early Modern England* edited Paula Backscheider and Timothy Dykstal (London: Frank Cass, 1995).
59. Backscheider 'Introduction' in *The Intersections of the Public and Private Spheres* 17.

60. Backscheider 'Introduction' 17.
61. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/253/18.
62. Ingram 'Ridings, Rough Music' *Past & Present* 99 (see note 2).
63. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/253/18, m. 4.
64. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/254/26, m. 3.
65. Kew: The National Archives STAC 8/254/26, m. 3.