Places of performance

Performance spaces

Early theatrical performance in England was not linked either with professional companies or with purpose-built playhouses. Playing arose out of particular sets of circumstances in specific places at specific times: a group of travelling players arriving in town or calling at the great house of a local lord; a group of parishioners wishing to stage a play in order to raise money for a new roof for the church; a city wishing to honour a religious festival and attract visitors to the city; an enterprising individual staging versions of her neighbours' adulterous affairs in her back yard. This absence of any necessary tie to playhouses or professional companies means that it can be quite difficult to put a boundary around what should be classed as 'theatre'.

Performance in churches and churchyards, for example, widespread from medieval times into the early seventeenth century, constitutes a case in point. Scholars argue about whether we should properly seek to mark a boundary between church ritual and church drama and, if so, where it is to be drawn. The problem centres on our notion of performance. Few would argue that a church service is not 'performed' in some sense, but the terms 'theatre' and 'drama' seem to introduce a different dimension, and the former especially was historically used as a term of abuse by Reformers and Protestants attacking the ritual of the Catholic mass.[1] The fact is that the church was host to a whole spectrum of different kinds of performance, ranging from set speeches and responses, singing and the ritual acts of the mass, to slightly expanded and elaborated ritual enactments of liturgical material, sung Latin dramatisations of biblical material and secular, vernacular playing. This medley of practice, however, cannot be represented as an evolutionary development from 'church' drama to 'secular' drama. One reason why we now have such difficulty in making this distinction is that we are imposing it on a culture that did not operate within that kind of binary, but where the church was so inextricably entwined with both the state and everyday life that thinking through their separation would have been very difficult

1

2   *Early English Theatre*

1. Map of England, marking places of performance mentioned in the text.

for someone living in the period covered by this book, especially the early part.

A distinction between religious and secular performance is not one that the places of performance will support. Drama did not simply move, as scholars once argued, from inside to outside the church. Drama that we might consider

secular was sometimes performed inside churches, at least from the sixteenth century, if not before, just as drama that we would consider religious might be performed outside churches. It is arguable, as John Wasson says, 'that far more than half of all vernacular plays of the English Middle Ages and Renaissance were in fact performed in churches'.[2] And vernacular plays might include plays defined, by later standards, as either religious or secular in content, or both simultaneously. Precisely one of the problems encountered by later scholars seeking to divide performance into these two categories is that in practice they constantly overlap: a 'religious' play like the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Play* deliberately sets a farce in which a stolen sheep is swaddled and laid in a cradle alongside a dramatisation of the birth of the Lamb of God, while 'secular' plays like John Bale's *King John* (*c.* 1538) or Shakespeare's history plays naturally set the discourse of politics within a framework of religious thinking (for example, about anointed kings and their duty to God as well as England, or the usurper's need to atone for his sin).

Some kinds of drama can be identified as fairly specifically tied to one performance location. Thus Latin liturgical drama can truly be described as 'church drama', since it was written only for performance within a church; the great cycle plays of biblical drama may be described as 'street theatre', since they were specifically written for performance in the streets of a given city; and court mask (or masque)[3] was designed for a single performance at court. But most plays were and had to be adaptable to a number of different performance locations, since most players travelled. From the King's Men to the smallest travelling company (4–6 was normal in the early sixteenth century, but some plays were written for even fewer),[4] companies expected to be able to put on their plays in whatever indoor or outdoor venue a town, village or great house offered them, from halls, inns, churches and chapels to open fields, innyards, churchyards and market-places.[5]

Enter Player	
M O R E	Welcome good friend, what is your will with me?
P L A Y E R	My lord, my fellows and myself
	Are come to tender ye our willing service,
	So please you to command us.
M O R E	What, for a play, you mean?
	Whom do you serve?
P L A Y E R	My lord Cardinal's grace.
M O R E	My lord Cardinal's players? Now trust me, welcome.
	You happen hither in a lucky time,
	To pleasure me, and benefit yourselves.
	The mayor of London and some aldermen,

4   *Early English Theatre*

	His lady and their wives, are my kind guests
	This night at supper. Now, to have a play
	Before the banquet will be excellent.
	How think you, son Roper?
ROPER	'Twill do well, my lord,
	And be right pleasing pastime to your guests.
MORE	I prithee tell me, what plays have ye?
PLAYER	Diverse, my lord: *The Cradle of Security*,
	Hit Nail o'th'Head, *Impatient Poverty*,
	The Play of Four P's, *Dives and Lazarus*,
	Lusty Juventus, and *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*.
MORE	'The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom'? That, my lads,
	I'll none but that, the theme is very good,
	And may maintain a liberal argument.
	To marry wit to wisdom asks some cunning:
	Many have wit, that may come short of wisdom.

Anthony Munday et al, *Sir Thomas More* (1592–3), III.2.45–68

Conceiving the performance space: *locus* and *platea*

The adaptability of performance to different kinds of places can be approached in terms of the overarching framework within which most styles of early performance are to be understood: namely *locus* and *platea* (terms made familiar through the groundbreaking work of Robert Weimann),[6] alternatively known as place and scaffold. This is basically a method of staging, a *use* of space rather than a demarcation or design of space; but it is necessary to understand a little bit about it in order to see how plays could be so adaptable to the various performance venues available before and after the building of designated playhouses. The two terms denote two interconnected ways of using space. While the place or *platea* is basically an open space, the *locus* can be literally a scaffold, but can also be any specifically demarcated space or architectural feature capable of being given representational meaning. Thus a door, an alcove, a scaffold, or a tent can represent a particular location, such as a house, a temple, a country, heaven or hell, or simply 'the place of (for example) Covetousness' (a conceptual rather than a properly physical place). The essential difference between a *locus* (of which there may be several) and the *platea* (which is by definition singular for any one performance) is precisely one of representational function: whereas a *locus* always represents, for a given stretch of time, a specific location, the *platea* is essentially fluid and frequently non-representational. It is not tied to the illusion, to the fictional places where the drama is set, but is often predominantly an actors' space, a space in which performance can be

recognised as performance rather than as the fiction it intermittently seeks to represent.

If a comic doctor and his servant, for example, burst into a story about the conversion of a Jew who steals the sacrament, as happens in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* (1461–1520), it is no accident that we find them roaming round the *platea*, asking what ailments the audience have, making reference to people and places in the Croxton area, joking and interacting with the audience about familiar aspects of their contemporary world, whilst the characters who people the fictional conversion narrative remain still on their scaffolds. (Though they remain fixed on their scaffolds for the duration of this piece of action, however, they do occasionally cross the platea to get to other locations within the fiction at different points in the play.) Nor is it surprising that when the doctor and his man attempt to mount the scaffold which represents the Jews' house, the Jews beat them away and deny them access. For these two sets of characters embody two different worlds: one which is self-enclosed, illusionary, fictional, separate from the audience; and one which shares the audience's time and space, which is co-existent with them, sharing jokes with them in the knowledge that this is a performance and that two comics are here, now, to give the audience a good time. In the Digby play of *Mary Magdalene* (1480–1520), however, when Mary has to make a journey to Marseilles, she crosses the *platea* in a wheeled ship and arrives, probably, at a scaffold representing the palace of the King of Marseilles.[7] The *platea* is thus temporarily quite strictly representational. For the duration of the ship's crossing, combining seventeen lines of dialogue and some interjected song, it is the sea. But, unlike the scaffolds, which always and only represent single locations such as the King of Marseilles' palace or the castle of Magdalene in Bethany for the entire duration of the production, the *platea* will become many places, and sometimes no particular place, at different points in the action. Indeed, when an angel descends and appears to Mary just before the arrival of the ship, saying 'Abash thee not [be not abashed], Mary, in this place' (l.1376), the fluid meaning of the term 'place' is part of the overall meaning the play seeks to make. 'This place' is simultaneously the general location in which Mary is situated at that point of the narrative (Jerusalem) and the place of performance, where the audience sits in the here and now, seeing and hearing the enactment of past events as they have shaped the present. Moments later, when the ship arrives, the place must be understood to be a non-specific seashore.

The Play of the Sacrament and *Mary Magdalene* were probably performed in very different venues. In neither case do we know exactly where they were performed or how the venue was set up. The Croxton Play may have been staged partly outside and partly inside the parish church of Croxton, while
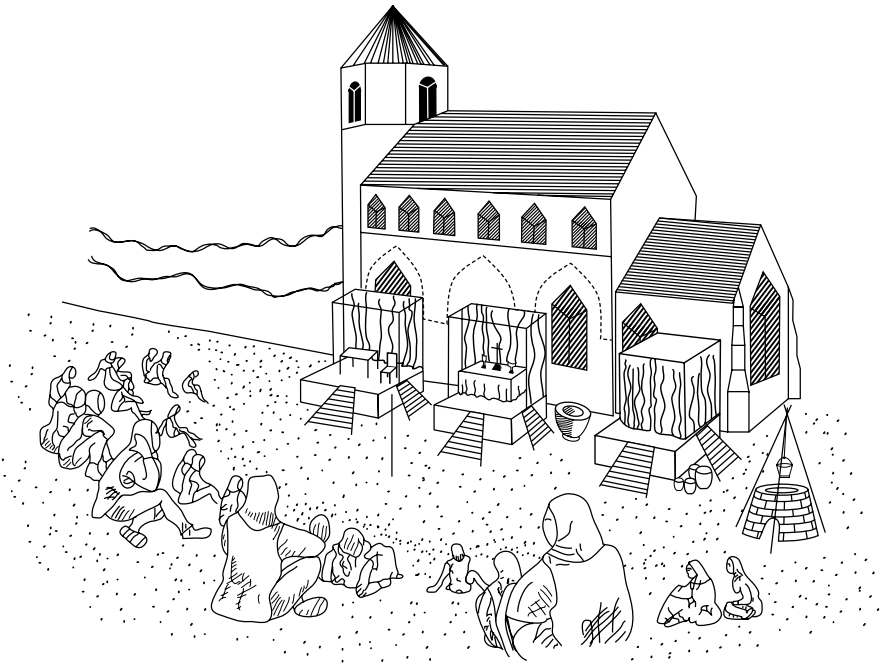
2. A conjectural reconstruction of the *Play of the Sacrament* in Croxton churchyard.

Mary Magdalene may have been staged in a number of different ways, perhaps in a round or a half round or perhaps drawing on the geographical features of a given secular site. What they have in common is the fundamental requirement of a combination of defined structures and open space, and this basic interplay between two kinds of space is deeply rooted in medieval and early modern drama across Europe. If we look at the interiors and exteriors of churches, one of the earliest known venues of performance, we see the potential for *locus* and *platea* staging in the combination of individual architectural features and the open spaces of the nave, the chancel and the 'crossing' (the space where the transept crossed the nave and chancel in cross-shaped churches). If we look at the standard design of great halls in manor houses, at court, in the universities and in the Inns of Court, we can see the potential specificity of features like the screens, the dais, the fireplace and the gallery operating in tension with the open space of the great rectangular frame. If we look at the very few staging diagrams extant in English manuscripts, we see a circular open space surrounded by representational structures.
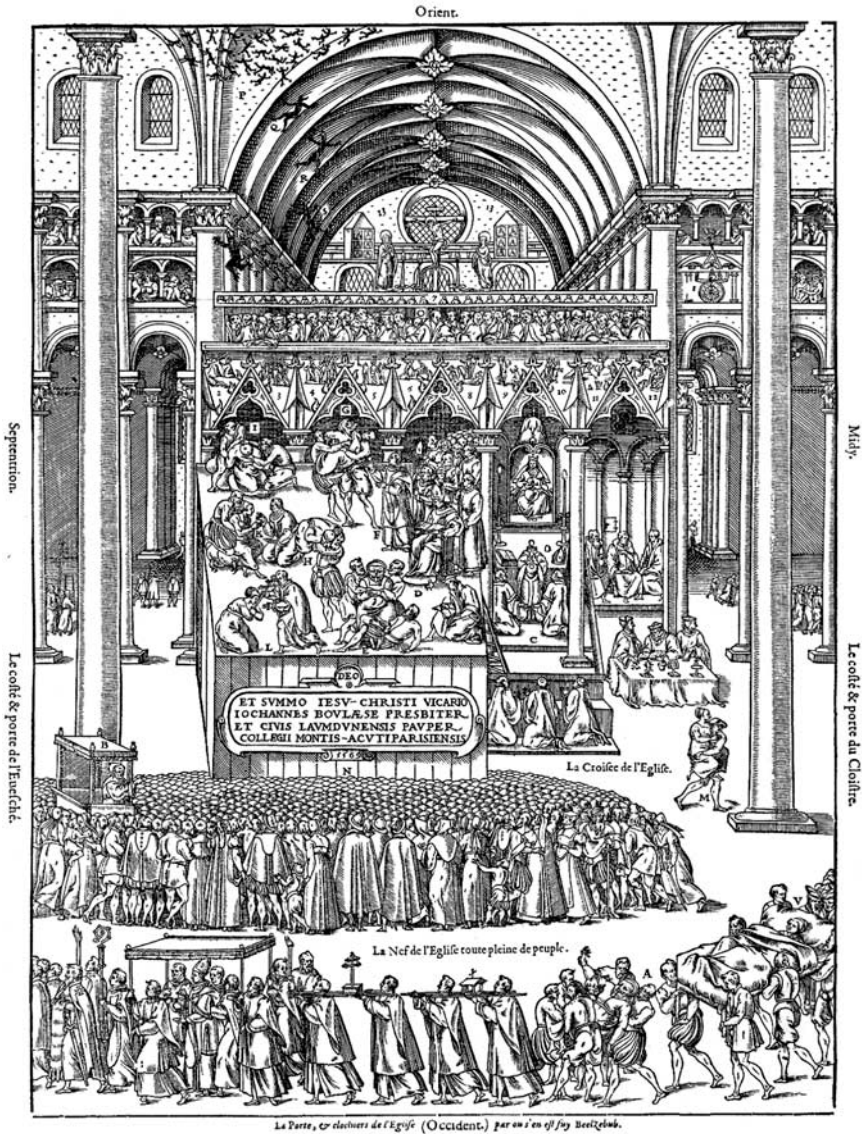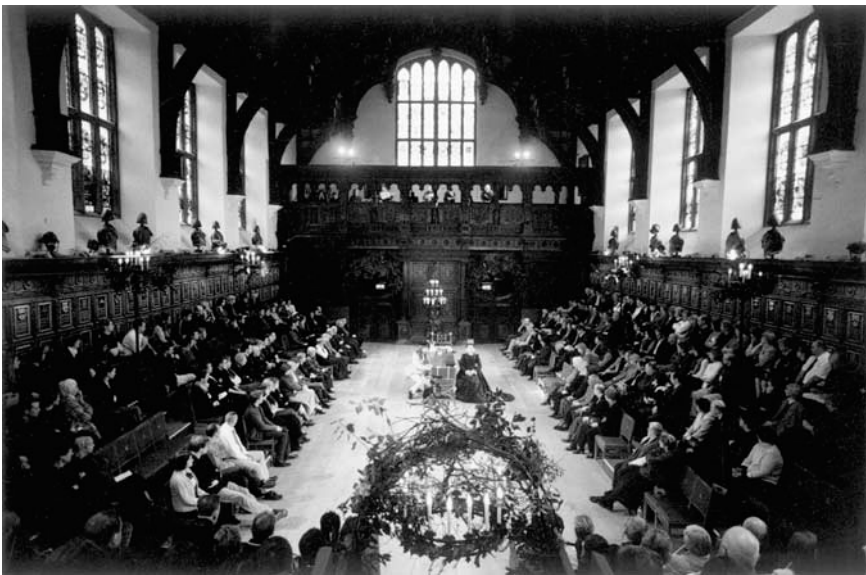
3. A stage erected in the crossing in front of the roodscreen in the
cathedral at Laon, 1566, for exorcism ceremonies. From Jean Boulaese,
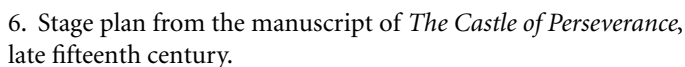*Manuel de Victoire du Corps de Díeu sur l'Esprit Malin*, Paris 1575.
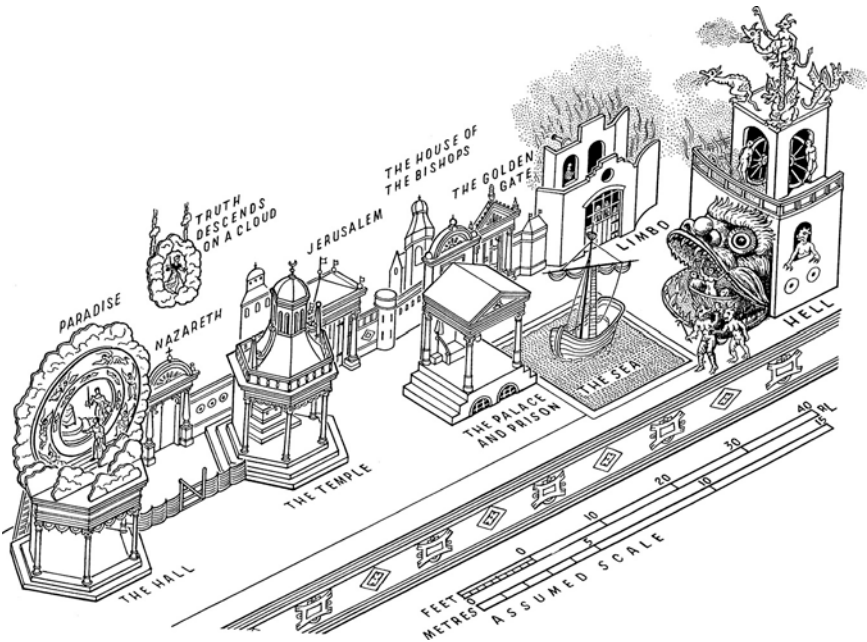
8   *Early English Theatre*
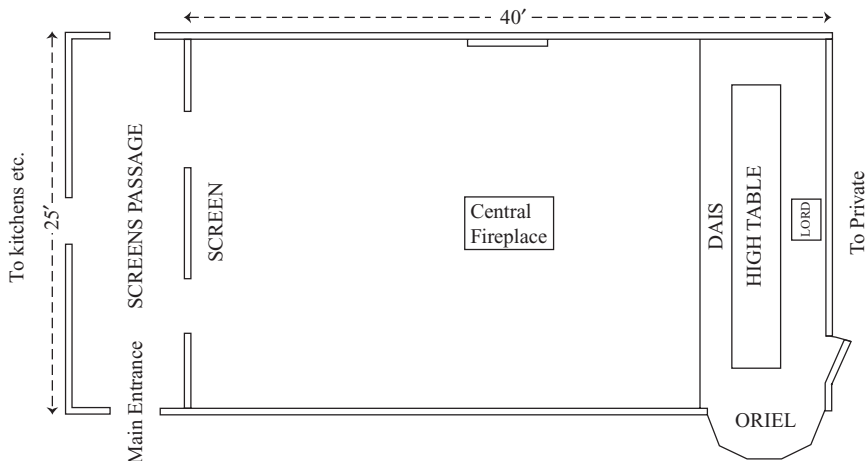
4. Floor plan of a great hall.

5. Performance of *Twelfth Night* in the hall of the Middle Temple,
2 February 2002.

6. Stage plan from the manuscript of *The Castle of Perseverance*,
late fifteenth century.

7. Reconstruction of the staging plan for the Valenciennes Passion Play, 1547.

European pictorial evidence suggests that the structures could be arranged in any number of ways: strung out in a line as at Valenciennes or arranged around a market square as at Lucerne. English urban ceremonies, such as coronation processions or royal entries, show the same combination of feature and space in the progression through open streets from one pageant location to another. (It was usual to adorn or build upon existing structures such as conduits, gates and other features: Glynne Wickham's photograph of the early fifteenth-century Market Cross at Shepton Mallet provides a good example of the kind of structure that naturally lent itself to performance in this way.)[8] Scholars are still divided about how much those cycle plays which used pageant wagons also used the street, but both urban ceremony, as described here, and court mask, which often brought elaborate pageant wagons into the open space of the hall and allowed the performers to descend from the wagon to perform in the open space, show clear precedents for a mode of performance that might use pageant wagons in conjunction with the surrounding space. On the other hand, performance on pageant wagons in narrow streets may have had very restricted opportunities to make use of the surrounding space.