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Wheatcroft and Whythorne's 'Passports in Rhyme': Place in seventeenth-century village performance

Susan Wiseman

Weare—leaue
 Good master and good dame I say
 for you I pray
 that of your charity youl something lend me
 you know
 my wages they are small & very low.
 pray now bestow
 some of your siluer, that will much befrend me:
 A pye... Apudding or a chine,
 or else a little piece of Beefe
 sumthing I craue, I faine would haue,
 For now I want reliefe,
 And to... you all I will be thankfull.
 and teach you Davids psalmes to sing
 and when your Lives is at an end
 A passing bell l'le ring

To the tune of gerards mistris (D5433: 148)

Here we read a parish clerk singing for his supper. How can we understand the performance of songs like this, and what may that tell us about the work done by such village performers in relation to the proximities of social positioning of seventeenth-century England? Exploring this question on a small scale, what follows asks how we can begin to investigate the values and frames of non-elite village performances, and their negotiations of movement in both literal and figurative terms. If Natalie Zemon Davis (1987) found fiction in the early modern archives, the clerk's song prompts us to ask whether there is performance in the archive, and this essay contends that there is. What happens if we approach Wheatcroft's song, and other

voiced texts generated in provincial seventeenth-century England, in terms of performance?

The song appears as ‘My Soung When I gather Clerk-wages’ in a manuscript compiled, and probably bound, by Leonard Wheatcroft of Ashover, Derbyshire, in the period 1656 to 1706, in a section covering 1680s onwards when he was parish clerk in Ashover. The punctuation (retained above) clearly refers to its status as song. Within the book it is in a quire of paper of a different length from its neighbours, and written neatly throughout in what looks like the same ink. The quire is signed by Titus and William Wheatcroft. At first sight, this seems to be all the evidence we have of the meaning of the clerk’s song, but much additional evidence contextualizes this.

If we consider the role of the clerk, we can begin to see a large context for the text and one involving multiple performances. The clerk was ‘to bear a part in all the Divine Offices of the Church’ (P[ayne] 1694: A2r), which in rural parishes like Ashover often included keeping the register and digging graves, but also, crucially, involved repeated collective performance in leading singers and responsibility for the performance of bell-ringing. Administering life, death, the marriage banns and the sacraments, the clerk was one of the most significant officers in the parish, and insofar as church practices were controversial, as in the Civil War period, the role was at times potentially politicized.

When Wheatcroft sang his clerk’s song (or sang it again) in the 1680s, he had not always been embraced as his parish’s clerk. He was by trade a tailor, with many other occupations (alehouse keeper, debtor, gardener, teacher) and, later, had investments. In his autobiography, Wheatcroft tells us that in 1680 he was on business in connection with a lead-mine investment, about twelve miles from home, when parish officers ‘Mr Bourne and Mr Dakine’ come to find him to tell him that the parish clerk is dead and, if he hurries to Ashover:

I might very well be Clarke of the parrish againe, to whose words I gave heed and hom I went and speaking to some friends the did perswade the parson to ent[ert]aine me, which he did, so as I entered upon the office both of Clarke and saxton August 6 1680. (Wheatcroft 1993: 82–3)

The significant words here are ‘againe’ and ‘entertaine’, and the rush home to lobby for the post is indeed motivated. Wheatcroft had been parish clerk before—from

1653 to, by his reckoning, 1666. And that he was reasonably enthusiastic about the Cromwellian government that began in 1653 is supported by the fact that, although unwillingly, he served as a soldier in the militia of the hugely unpopular Major Generals and by the notable fact that, where most parishes have no record of ever using the Directory of Worship (the Civil War replacement for the Book of Common prayer, no sacraments, no kneeling), Wheatcroft seems to have kept a copy, as implied by the fact that his son lists it in his inventory of his and Leonard's books. However, in 1680 Wheatcroft had not been clerk of the parish for fourteen years, during which time he had lived in a village presumably as closely divided in politics and religion as the rest of Derbyshire. The minister, son of the earlier Bourne, knew where Wheatcroft's political and religious sympathies tended, and shared them sufficiently to sing and pray with him regularly.

Evidence tells us something about Wheatcroft's audience and his place. The song was performed while on his rounds collecting a form of tax in the parish, a tax that functioned as his wage. An audience who knew Wheatcroft and who knew about the past, either by experience or by word of mouth, would have heard it. As archival materials tell us, the clerk's income was implemented by customary collection from the parish—the activity addressed by the song seems to be described in 1722 by Titus Wheatcroft, Leonard Wheatcroft's son and also clerk in his turn, as a customary circuit around a very large parish:

At Christmas go round all the 4 quarters, as of the parish, as Ashover, Miltowne, Alton, and Northedge and the Over-end. Demand according to the antient Custom a halfpenny Cottage, and a penny plough, and wt y^e good-woman of y^e house please's to give besides in the wallet. See antient custom p. 106

Go to Lea and Holloway, on thursday before Easter, demanding the same dues, But remember to enquire what children hath been baptized by any other Minister, that they may be carefully Registered according to y^e year. (D5433/2: 49)

The note to page 106 takes us to a text that underlies the song—'An Antient Rule of Clerkwages made to my father Leonard Wheatcroft in the year 1650'. This text is a contract regarding 'antient wages' between Leonard Wheatcroft, who was 'publicly

chosen Clerk', and signatories who agree to 'pay unto him yearly upon Newyears Day the several sums of money set downe to our several names' (D5433/2: 106). Putting aside possible confusion over the conflicting dates of 1650 and 1653, the song, then, seems a re-affirmation and adaptation of a contractual formalization of ancient practice, and affirmed in the politically volatile circumstances of the Republic or Protectorate. The song reinforces the paying of the clerk, remembered as ancient, as customary, but also contractual.

Leonard's recording of the clerk's song suggests an assumption that a reader, being local, would be able to correlate 'my' special song with a pre-existing, semi-formal, house-to-house performance, which Wheatcroft elaborates as his own through song. The text itself tells us that the song was to the tune of 'Gerard's Mistress', a standard secular ballad tune with several versions. That these versions were matched to titles such as 'Cordelias lamentation for the/ absence of her Gerhard' and 'An Excellent Sonnet of the Two Unfortunate Lovers, Hero and Leander' suggests seriousness. Wheatcroft's song is a reminder and promise of recompense:

And teach you David's Psalms to sing:
And when your lives are at an end
A passing bell I'll ring

In this way reminding his auditors of what a parish clerk did for his money, the song evokes Wheatcroft's relationships to them within Ashover's social fabric and hierarchies: collective singing and the tolling of the funeral bell. The performance attempts to use memory to affirm both custom and consent to contract and to ease a cash extraction with pleasure.

Psalms and performance

The song reminds auditors of another clerky performance context—his role in prompting and shaping church psalm-singing. As Christopher Marsh tells us, the psalms were a hugely important part of the liturgy, and the selection and use of the psalms usually involved the clerk leading responses. It is unsurprising that Titus Wheatcroft's book inventory lists six books on or of the psalms (Marsh 2010: 391–

453). The role of psalm-leading may well have been significant in the way a delegation rushed to ask Wheatcroft to be clerk in 1680, as soon as the resident clerk died: Wheatcroft could sing like anything—and write, and count. The Parish-clerk's Vade Mecum, a guide to clerk's duties, specified selection on the basis of 'competent skill in Reading, Writing, and Singing', but notes especially exemplary 'civil Life and Conversation' (P[ayne] 1694: A2r). Immanuel Bourne in 1653, and his son Obediah Bourne in 1679, had to appoint a man able to lead the congregation in its psalmodic performance of itself, and who would enhance the music of the church; the clerk's role mediated community and music, crucially uniting knowledge of individuals with group performance.

Wheatcroft's very voice, singing, reminds the village that he could perform the parish to advantage. That would have been clear from his first stint as clerk, for the Directory of Worship had embedded congregational psalm singing as a compulsory part of the duty of Christian praise (Marsh 2010: 41, n. 42). The psalms had a complex performative proxemics. The leader was of the congregation and at that moment was always brought forward to lead it in its own performance of faith—a verbal, musical performance visually marked by standing and the possible separation of the choir—and with a performance ethics spanning inward and outward qualities in each singer. Twice elected to lead such performances, as we see and hear Wheatcroft on his rounds, singing songs and collecting monies, we need to know him as a conductor of himself and others through the marking of life events. Socially, in church proxemics and in conducting duties he is of, and yet beyond, the congregation—experiencing with them and leading, neither ordinary nor the minister, he is crucially between. So, in the single instance of the song, several proximities are at work: emotional (shared key moments in baptism and burial); spatial and mobile (the procession to doorsteps marked by approaching and receding voice); and the proxemics of led collectivity in the church. Literal doorstep proxemics mix with those of memory and knowledge, and the song uses both. Thus, Wheatcroft helped the parish to perform itself in its religious aspects and in such a context was bound into and a binding agent in community, with all its power-plays.

Wheatcroft's selection as clerk is suggestive in terms of the value and permissions his ability in performing may have brought with it in a village. Wheatcroft was clearly a performer, and his musical and performance skills must have been crucial in his being selected. His talents were well known to the extent that although

we have no evidence that he could read music, he nevertheless records tuning the virginals at the house of a local magnate—a clear musical accomplishment, and even greater if by ear (Riden 1993: 89). That Wheatcroft was an ex-Cromwellian soldier may not have been a problem for either of the Bourne clergymen who used his services as a singer. However, he also happened to be an all-round partygoer, public poet, ale-seller, debtor and maker of drinking songs, as well as at the forefront of and memorializing hunts, expeditions, races and revels. That Wheatcroft was, nevertheless, ‘entertained’, suggests that an ability in music may allow not only social movement but recognized position regardless of sociable social flaws (themselves already associated with musicianship) (Merriam 1964: 140–1). If we compare Wheatcroft’s song with the aggression invited by provocative songs that we find in the Derbyshire legal records, it emerges as engaged in not dissimilar kinds of audience-building.^[note]¹ The short text in Wheatcroft’s big book suggests, then, that local performance had layered contexts; the song had an immediate proxemics designed to foster cohesiveness to custom at the point of payment and to soften divisions; the performer of village life emerges here as a mediator of political, social, financial and legal structures.

Once we begin to think of Wheatcroft as performing to and with the village of Ashover in its incorporation as a parish through the singing of the psalms and in burying and marrying parishoners, we can begin to see his individual place as a performer not only in but of the village, and beyond. Wheatcroft wrote several kinds of song, but here it is worth noting in full his scripting of a song in the voice of a bonelace weaver. The song appears in the same quire as the clerkwages song.

I am a maid new com to towne
 But lounge I will not tarry,
 I have but two years for to stay,
 and then I thinke to marry,
 But if a briske younge man com in,
 and that is no decever,
 to corte him then I will begin
 Like abone-lace weauer,

If that he be a jentellman,

and vowes he'll love me kindly.
 then for him I'll doe what I can.
 and strive to please him finely.
 Or if he be a yoman good,
 and to me no deceuer,
 then I will strive to pleas his mood,
 Like abone-lace weauer.

We get our living with our hands.
 having our wits about us.
 We hope to purches hous & lands.
 tho young men the doe flout us.
 But let them all say what y^e can
 Wee'l trust no decever,
 Wee'l sing you songs of peg and nan,
 Like abone-lace weauer.

We keepe our hands both whit and neat.
 our pritty lace to handle,
 We sing our sonits all compleat,
 By daylight or a candell,
 And when out Task we ended haue,
 Our Mistris shews such fauer,
 We sport and sing, that all doth ring,
 O brave Bone-lace weauer.

And thus we leade most merry lives,
 We heed no young mens saying.
 We scorne for to be married wives.
 Wee'l keepe our fingers playing.
 Wee'l weare braue laces on our heads,
 We scorne as yet a Beaver,
 Wee'l worke a pace, Brave flanders lace
 o brave Bone-lace weauaer.

Leo. W.{{note}}2

Lacemaking was a female industry. In the eighteenth century it was understood to employ groups of women, often young women and children working together in groups, and this was probably also the case earlier (Wright 1924). Folklorists discuss lacemakers in investigations of the work song, plausibly including Wheatcroft's song as an example. As Gerald Porter notes, scholars take the work song to embrace both 'lacemakers' songs, songs about lacemakers and songs by those inside and outside the industry, and he identifies songs in the 'women's tradition' that were 'expressively and territorially the women's own' that include both songs of the lacemakers and 'tells' to facilitate concentration at work (Porter 1994: 39, 41; on 'tells' 43). More abstractly, as Antonio Gramsci suggests in his analysis of the 'popular' song, it is neither a song by the people nor for the people, but one that they take up (1985: 195). These terms are helpful in understanding Wheatcroft's song, which, although authored by an 'outsider' (a tailor), uses the voice of the lacemaker and, in part, is about the activities of the industry and so appears to be a donation to the voice of a lacemaker and chorus. He addresses the situations often described in lacemaker's 'tells' or pin counting songs, where work is done by daylight 'or by candle', the key point being to be on time in having it 'all compleat', but this also suggests the lacemaking culture of work song—their 'sonits'.

Once again, contextual material may illuminate the song. It is possible, even likely, that one context of the song was Wheatcroft's apprenticing of his daughter, Elizabeth, born in June 1670, to a lacemaker in 1681—at the age of 11. Wheatcroft writes:

And upon Sept 5 1681 I had accasion to go to Chesterfield, where I met with a bone-lace-weaver with whom I burgined to take a daughter of myne apprentis, Elizabeth by name so for 3 pounds 10 shillings we agreed and bound she was Sep. 14 being Chasterfield fair day. (Riden 1993: 91, 93)

Chesterfield's fair was a day for apprentice hire (Riden 1993: 93, 94, 98). For all that folklore studies has a complex and ambiguous relationship to specific time and the relationships between oral performance and written text, and that the examples tend

to be from the well-documented Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire industry, there seems to be a good case for a longstanding tradition of unmarried women singing while making lace in groups (Wright 1924; Porter 1994). Nineteenth-century records locate the 'girls' (many actually children) in parlours in winter, outdoors in summer. Porter's assertion that Northamptonshire song makers 'formed a cohesive group in each village' may also have pertained in Derbyshire, and Wheatcroft's song may be a performative gift with specific recipients (Porter 1994: 41, 42). Clearly, such a gift may smooth the path of his young daughter, enhance her status within the group and, above all, make work something that can give pleasure. And if brought to the group by Elizabeth, it may perform also as a subtle protection and indication of her worth through performance. So Wheatcroft's text leads us towards a complex world of women's work and performance—and, again, the song may have work to do in the power-plays of a social and labouring world of close-by sitters.

A third sphere of Wheatcroft's performance is his celebrated role as an oral and written poet, singer and politicized performer of local identity. In 1694 Wheatcroft was 'desired of sum jentellmen' to have a dispute with a poet called Ouldham who had written verses against him:

I was desired of sum jentellmen to come to Tupton to discour with one Ouldham who professed himselfe to be a poet, and was one who had writ severall verses, not only against me but in derision of the fabricke which I had Bulded upon the top of Ashover hill, so according to their desirs we met, where great company gathered together, there did I challenge him to whake with me to Parnishus Hill, but we both missing our way, we chanced to light of an all-hous, and after we had drunk awhile we fell into discour concerning the 9 Muses which he could not namre, naithe could he tell from whence the came, or what the had done, or what the might doe, so I in the audienc of all the company gave them their right names and all their right titles, where upon they decked my head round with lorill branches to the great vexation of my antagonist Ouldham. So ever since I am called the Black Poet (Riden 1993: 97)

Wheatcroft attends the meeting but subtly removes the event from the forcefield of gentry sponsorship, first to a walk and then, 'missing our way', oops, somehow, to an

alehouse. Enacted there is a competition over the muses, ending in a collective triumph of his village who wreath him in 'lorills' as their successful poetic champion. Part of what Wheatcroft sees himself as having performed is his education; to know and name the Muses is a point of honour and distinction. The laurel crown, too, suggests an induction into public and visual reward—he playfully, but assertively, claiming local primacy.

What is at stake in who performs, where and for whom? It is clear that performance was proximate, intimate and recorded. Yet, as we see in all these examples, the relationship between performance and authority looks different at different distances. Is it the Wheatcroft–Oldham dyad that is at the centre of the performance? Or must we also consider the audience, and what has happened to the temporarily evaded 'jentillmen' who desired a sporting contest of two labouring status poets who outran and maybe out-drunk them? Moreover, we must assume that Wheatcroft was back singing the psalms possibly the next day. This incident suggests the social and political complexity of the performances. What we see in this picture of proximity and authority we generate depends on where we cut the frame of the event. Close up and everyday they may be, but each one is freighted with social meaning, politics and memory.³

Performing passports

This essay has so far acquiesced to the celebratory tone suggested in Wheatcroft's memorials of performance. However, a text apparently written as a private journal, Thomas Whythorne's life-text, illuminates a function of performance that Wheatcroft's text eschews, that of perpetuating oppression and social exclusion. The 'diary' of the music master, Thomas Whythorne, was written for a male friend to read about a hundred years earlier than Wheatcroft made his book. Poverty forced the well-educated musician to be a music tutor, which he regarded as 'to be a serving-creature or servingman'; 'it was so like the life of a water-spaniel, that must be at commandment to fetch or bring here, or carry there' (Whythorne 1962: 28).

When Whythorne was working in a rural gentry household, he notes 'there came a poor woman to this house' who 'had been there divers times' (Whythorne 1962: 28, 133). He observes that 'some great trouble' had made her 'very nigh or altogether oppressed with frenzy or madness', and describes her as a wage-worker:

poor, vagrant and on the cusp of madness and sanity. The woman asks Whythorne to 'make her a passport in rhyme' to 'show to such as would examine of her travelling' (133). It is perfectly clear that she anticipates trouble from the justices and wants a rhyming document that will prevent her from being arrested as a vagrant. So, the performance she imagines is very close to Wheatcroft's song—just as his song hopes to encourage willing payment and to smooth his way, she imagines a scene where the parish officers read over an engaging rhyming passport and, mollified by a mixture of pathos and performance, allow her to pass on her way to a real or fantasized 'Essex'.

Justifying his action by explaining that it is for the authorities to see her 'as she was; and so not to trouble her weak brains' (134), Whythorne makes her a passport with a vengeance. It begins as she would have imagined, 'All you that list the truth to know, who she is that is here,/Her name is Sybil Slius by Jis, 'tis known both var and near' (ibid.), but it uses a Somersetshire dialect (itself coded as comic) and by half way through has become full-blown misogynist satire. She works at spinning all day so hard that 'through spinning, had broke her twatling strings' and in the evening '[o]f all the junkets that she knows, pease pottage she loves well' and if it makes her bloated she 'vist and vart, and piss and cack, along she lets them tumble'. Devolving into a cruel satire in which a third-person voice evokes a grotesque female figure, who can 'curtsey' and 'dance' until 'her bum doth wag', the song makes the bearer a spectacle of inside-out degraded humanity (ibid.).

The performance event that actually happens, then, is not of Sybil offering a passport to the justices to carry on as an itinerant labourer but a status-negotiation between music master (or servant) and the gentleman and lady of the household:

When the gentleman of the house and his wife were disposed to be merry with her and at her, they would have her come into the parlour where they were, and among the toys that they would be merry at, they would have me to read her testimonial (because I was best acquainted with it). And while I was a-reading thereof she would have many passions and interjections, as sometimes she would be in a chafe and sometimes she would laugh heartily at it. (Whythorne 1962: 136)

So, the passport that Sybil imagines, to pass from place to place in search of work, issues as a complex performance enhancing Whythorne's standing as the household's words-and-music man. Whythorne uses her, and her reaction, as a complex and intimate domestic performance. For a second time, the text places Sybil on the threshold of society—just as she is 'very nigh or altogether' mad, the sport is 'with her and at her', although the 'with', may mean only that she is gratifyingly present, and her reaction is part of the fun. This performance relies, then, on the animal-baiting of a liminal human, pushing her temporarily to one or other side of the division between frenzy and full humanity in a performance that revels in control and its loss. It is designed to precipitate her reliably provoked reaction, which, although in each repetition perhaps momentarily unpredictable, even frightening, is nevertheless always disciplinable. If in relation to a contemporary ethics of performance we see an early modern period apparently untroubled by the real-time, real-life dimensions of non- or partly elective theatre, in terms of early modern local performance we see hierarchy and performance at work together as a subject. And we remember that Whythorne saw his performances as music master as making himself a hired 'spaniel' or servant.

Even as the performance record of Sybil's passport confirms Christopher Marsh's point that musicians 'mediated between "high" and "low" society' (2010: 163, 155–72), carrying their power to make music with them as they moved, paid by high or low, it suggests that such mobility was bound in to situations of power. Here performance is not paid free play, but addresses the hierarchies and powers of the household to produce winners and losers as well as pleasure, as Whythorne enhances his position and reward, and perhaps assuages his humiliation, at the woman's expense. Such a cruel and stark example of the social effects of performance is nevertheless similar in many aspects to the doorstep scene we can imagine for Wheatcroft's song. In each case all participants know one another, a power dynamic is at play, and performance enables the manipulation and changing of those circumstances, temporarily or otherwise. Possibly passport poems and songs were not so unusual. Indeed, when Wheatcroft writes for himself a way-smoothing passport to charm gifts from the implicated listener, he effects a simple and empathetically rooted version of singing for his supper.

Performing agency

Why does any of this matter? This small case does have implications for where we find primary evidence of performance, and perhaps wider performance proxemics, in seventeenth-century England, and, potentially, for how we approach it. Whythorne's passport play and Wheatcroft's song, performed a hundred years apart, indicates the consistent place of performance in rural communities that is as deeply embedded, perhaps, as the known context of travelling players, travelling bands of waits and the sports of cock- and bear-baiting using passing or local animals. However, in being organized within the proximities of everyday exchanges, they are distinct from these visiting shows in their exploitation of and capacity to draw on villagers' understanding of the nuanced graduations in the nature and, indeed, amount of intimacy and distance required within the negotiation of social space. As we see, the rural community offered opportunities for, even necessitated, the use of performance in shaping the successful outcomes of work and leisure, whether in terms of parish honour, earning a living or personal prestige.

If we return to the question of the work done by local performance with which we began, we can find in Wheatcroft's and Whythorne's writings much evidence of performance using formal and informal, flexible, spontaneous or pre-ordained conventions of proximity. But what frames of social and political as well as event-specific proximity or distance, authority, exchange, ethics and aesthetics are helpful in looking at such texts? First, meaningful local place and practice—what Yi Fu Tuan calls 'pays'—suggests that local practices of proximity are negotiated through performance (Tuan 1990 [1974]: 100). What we have been considering is not exactly the paid musicianship of the minstrels' court. Rather, they are the records of motivated moments of performance generating energy around aims that are local and yet, as we see, have ramifications in wider political and social formations. Whythorne and Wheatcroft inhabited worlds in which performance offered a way to organize, contest and reinforce significant relationships—with differing kinds of motivation and aim, these performances used and created relations of proximity to shape social worlds.

Notes

I am grateful to the editors for their help and patience, to Simon Smith for helpful discussion of ballad music and tuning and to Darrel Gill for discussion of lacemaking in the south midlands.

1 See DRO Q/SB2/629 and on sung libels Lotte Fikkers, 'Women's Testimony: Legal Records as Forms of Life Writing, 1558—1649' Phd unpub. 2016 pp. 129, 219, 250-253. I am grateful for permission to cite this unpublished work.

2 See also William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, II sc.iv.

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