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Open access and the academic

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Open Access and the Academic

My specialism is theatre history, so I'll start where it all gets interesting historically. The Roman's left Britain in the 5th century Common Era, and afterwards no-one in this country constructed purpose-built venues for the performance of drama for over 1100 years. Then, suddenly and apparently out of the blue, open-air amphitheatres on the Roman model sprung up seemingly spontaneously in Stepney, Shoreditch, and Southwark in London. Shortly after the first of these was built in 1567, there were 5 or 6 amphitheatres showing plays daily and one can comfortably say that the Renaissance had come to London. For about 75 years, until the start of the Civil War in the 1640s, something like a tenth of London's population could be found, on any given weekday afternoon, at the playhouse watching the works of Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare, and their competitors.

There had been fairly informal travelling troupes of players in the late medieval period, comprising on average 4-6 men, and they might even receive royal patronage, but they had lacked the element that characterizes professionalism: accumulated capital. Fairly early in queen Elizabeth's reign companies who could not accumulate capital were forced out and the remaining companies were professionalized and brought under the direct control of leading aristocrats. Members of an acting company were technically the household servants of one lord or another, so for example Shakespeare's company (with Richard Burbage their leading actor) were the lord Chamberlain's men and their main rivals were the lord Admiral's men. The actors officially existed solely to provide amusing performances for their aristocratic patrons and the monarch.

Theatre historians wishing to track the membership of these playing companies, their repertoires of plays, the touring routes they followed, and their residences at particular open-air amphitheatres have a distinct problem in finding evidence. Being joint-stock companies rather than businesses regulated by a guild, the players tended to leave few traces of themselves in official records unless things went wrong and they sued one another in court. When their plays were published as books, the companies that performed them were often named on the title-pages, but this could occur many years after the original performances and the forms of their company names might be highly confusing. For example, if a play by Christopher Marlowe was published in 1633, 40 years after his death, and described as one performed by the "her majesty's servants", just who is meant: the monarch Elizabeth who was queen when Marlowe wrote the play, or the wife of the current king Charles I? Theatre historians are just now tackling these problems and writing the first comprehensive histories of these playing companies, and Open Access resources are making it possible.

Not all the relevant evidence is in London. The playing companies toured the country in the summer months, stopping at major towns where they might hope to persuade the authorities to let them play in a suitably-sized hall, and at the houses of major aristocrats. Where local authorities paid the players--either paid them to perform or, as not infrequently happened, paid them to move on without performing--a record would be made in the corporation books. If these are preserved anywhere, it is in county records offices. A project at the University of Toronto called the Records of Early English Drama (REED) is seeking to collate these records, and it does so by

sending a loan scholar to read through all the corporation records for a given town or county and transcribe for publication all references to the visits made by touring companies of actors. These are published in large and expensive volumes, one per town or county, that appear every few years from the project and when complete they will give us a national picture of what the actors were doing when they were not playing at the amphitheatres in London. These expensive books are bought solely by larger research libraries. However, when negotiating a publication deal with the press more than 30 years ago, the project's leader Alan Somerset added a peculiar clause to the contract, which the press accepted with simple bemusement. Somerset got them to agree that the rights for digital reproduction of the contents of each volume were to remain with him personally.

Because of this far-sighted proviso, Somerset is now able to deposit at The Internet Archive a full PDF of the contents of each volume of REED as it appears. Thus these very expensive and utterly niche-market books are available for free to the theatre historians who need them. Moreover, because he can do what he likes with the digital contents, Somerset has been able to rework them as an ongoing online database of actors, their patrons, their places of performance, and their plays. This database is provided for free over the Internet and has made possible the kinds of theatre-history writing, especially the writing of company histories, that was simply impossible before full and accurate details of touring activities were available. There is currently a boom in the publication of these histories, and in a large part it can be attributed to Somerset's innovative approach to publishing negotiated 30 years ago.

The Records of Early English Drama is a signal success of Open Access publication. Looking at the same artistic material from the point of view of the printed book rather than the performance that it recaptures, there are alternative focal points (besides the playing company) around which the data can be reorganized. Instead of the individual playing company, one can look at the individual book publisher and examine what kinds of plays (from which dramatists, performed by which companies) appeared from a single printing press. Here the primary evidence is not the accounts books of corporations stored in local records offices but rather the title-pages of plays, which typically name the actors that performed them, the theatres that they were played in, and (less frequently) the dramatists who wrote them. To gather this information, one needs to examine just the title-pages of printed plays from the 1560s to the 1630s. Fortunately, these are now available online because a post-war project called Early English Books microfilmed one copy of each of the books printed in this era, and in the 1990s these microfilms were digitized and sold as a subscription-only database called Early English Books Online (EEBO). This database has utterly transformed early-modern literary and historical studies. Reading through just the title-pages of books, Alan Farmer and Zachary Lesser have produced a Database of Early English Playbooks (DEEP) that records playwrights, titles, playing companies, venues, dates, and other ancillary data such as whether Latin is used on the title-page and whether the dramatist is given a title that indicates social class, such as 'gentleman'. This database DEEP is freely available at no cost over the Internet, and is greatly assisting those writing histories of theatre companies and venues.

I have made it all sound like a nirvana of Open Access resources, but actually theatre history is hampered by the fact that REED and DEEP are exceptions and

that the main resources for theatre historians are still subscription-only. This applies especially to EEBO, the database that provides images of the pages of every book published in this country up to the end of the 17th century. Because JISC has secured a national deal with the product's owner, ProQuest, EEBO is available to every university at a reasonable cost and UK academics are well served. But most theatre historians live in the US, where there is no equivalent to JISC and where even state-wide consortia of academic institutions are, I believe, somewhat rare. Worse still, a significant amount of work in theatre history is done by non-affiliated amateur scholars who spend enormous amounts of their free time reading neglected manuscript sources such as the records of London livery companies. The chances of finding something significant in these records are relatively small and for that reason affiliated scholars with careers to develop by publication ignore them. Yet, ever so often these manuscript records throw up something very surprising, such as the recent discovery of the articles of apprenticeship of a number of boy actors, leading to a groundbreaking paper from an amateur showing that only boys, never adult men, played female roles in the plays.

So, a significant number of theatre historians do not have routine access to the essential primary materials for their subject and for them the difference between Open Access and subscription-only sources comes sharply into focus. One of the oddities of the current situation in the UK is that academics are not necessarily aware of this difference, because seamless authentication to subscription-only services conceals it from them. Because EEBO just works when an academic accesses it from a computer on campus, many of my colleagues are unaware that EEBO is subscription-only and they cannot see why some of us are making a fuss about Open Access. In this the librarians and systems programmers are victims of their own success. Because authentication happens via IP address--and hence every computer on the campus network is automatically authenticated and allowed in--these highly expensive databases are, in operation, exactly like the Open Access databases from REED and DEEP. When using EEBO, my colleagues are not reminded that they are using a database that costs the university many thousands of pounds in yearly subscription fees. I am only half joking when I suggest that it would be useful if our systems programmers could find a way to project a small taxi-cab meter into the corner of the screen whenever someone uses EEBO, with a fee representing their access time as a proportion of total access to these databases in a year.

I am, with others, the editor of two academic journals: one a journal of British theatre history, *Theatre Notebook*, published by a learned society, and the other called *Shakespeare* published by Routledge Taylor & Francis. Why are these not Open Access? In the case of *Theatre Notebook*, the learned society that publishes the journal is, it must be confessed, somewhat conservative in its approaches, and to make matters worse the journal uses a lot of images from such sources as the Victoria and Albert Museum's picture library. Other pictures we use may represent actors doing their work, and the rules for paying fees to use such images are positively Byzantine. The complexities of rights management in respect of theatre history are currently so great that the journal could not go Open Access. But what about my other journal, *Shakespeare*, which was started by a couple of us 4 years

ago -- why did we go with a commercial publisher rather than Open Access? One of the reasons is that the Open Access movement had gained little coverage in literary studies 4 years ago, and my co-editors simply thought I was commercially naive to suggest that we might operate without a publisher. But the main and continuing reason was that Routledge offered us an editors' stipend, which enabled us to actively promote the journal and to hire editorial assistance. Routledge were also able to take out impressive advertisements to promote the new journal, and to offer would-be peer-review readers financial inducements (such as cut-price copies of its books) to work for us. If the British tax-payer wants to get free access to the new knowledge published in our journal, she needs to spend money doing for the editors what Routledge does for us. I have not done the impressive calculations that John Houghton and Charles Oppenheim have shown us, but my hunch is that it would still be much cheaper to fund the journal directly in this way so that we can go Open Access than the present arrangement, in which around 100 university libraries pay a couple of hundred pounds each for their subscriptions.