Introduction
Entering the bear pit
Cultural geography and early modern drama

Accessed by the highly symbolic contemporary space of a garden centre in the village of Wentworth in Yorkshire can be found the physical traces of that site’s historical past and usage and, along with those traces, some very particular ideas about the practices of theatre in the early modern period and after. A 1630s stone gateway marks the point of entrance to a bear pit (see Figure 1). The visitor enters through a tunnel to a circular area containing small chambers which most likely formed the cages that would have held the poor incarcerated animals which were kept there for the amusement and grisly entertainment of visitors in centuries past. The historical record remains ambiguous as to just how long the site was in operation as a bear pit, although a bear is known to have been kept there as recently as the early twentieth century.1 There is certainly a traceable tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bear pits in this region (another extant from 1836 is in the Sheffield Botanical Gardens) and many historical accounts suggest that the 1630s doorway which provides the splendid portal to the Wentworth example was relocated there when the Jacobean household and estate were demolished to make way for the new high-profile eighteenth-century property complete with its landscaped gardens by Humphrey Repton.

The Jacobean property at Wentworth Woodhouse, to give the estate its proper name, although now reduced to mere traces on the landscape, has a significant story of its own to tell, however, in the context of a local and a national political and cultural geography. It was one of the first significant brick houses in the county, constructed for the purposes of displaying individual, family, and state power by Thomas Wentworth, Lord President

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1 Paula Henderson, The Tudor House and Garden: Architecture and Landscape in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 148, implies that the pit was in use for holding bears as early as the 1630s, but tourist information relating to the site today suggests that the doorway was moved there from the Jacobean property as part of eighteenth-century reworkings of the site.
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Figure 1: 1630s entrance to the bear pit at Wentworth Woodhouse. Photo: John Higham.
of the Council of the North in the 1620s and later Lord Deputy of Ireland and Earl of Strafford (he would be executed in 1641 following a high-profile trial in the months leading up to the outbreak of the English Civil War). Wentworth was not alone in making such architectural statements in the region; his colleague in the Council, Sir Arthur Ingram, embarked upon similar high-profile building projects in York (on the resonant site of the former Archbishop’s Palace) and in the nearby villages of Temple Newsam and Knottingley in the 1620s and 1630s, respectively. It is through the link to Ingram that we gain a hint that Wentworth himself might have been interested in the use of bears for performance sport on his estate grounds, if not necessarily proving that he built a ‘theatre’ for the purpose. In a political metaphor deployed in a letter to Christopher Wandesford in 1624, Wentworth declares that the situation ‘represents unto me the Sport of whipping the Blind Bear (not that of Sir Arthur Ingram’s, but the other of Parish Garden) . . . ‘. Several things are revealed to us in this instance; we learn of Wentworth’s awareness of bear-baiting traditions both in the provinces and in the capital (the Paris Garden site had been in operation from as early as 1562 and was by 1624 better known as the site of the Hope Theatre); we learn that he was a man not without empathy for the animal’s condition in the context of such ‘sports’; and we learn that a member of his Yorkshire peer group was actively involved in either the keeping of bears for performance or the hiring of itinerant bearwards and their animals.

Participation in performances involving ‘bear theatre’, from rural baitings of blind bears to the more extravagant and circus-like displays of the London bear-baiting arenas, via the more restrained appearances of bears within the context of the early Stuart court, was just one tiny part of Wentworth’s strategic self-fashioning within the specific geopolitics of the different locations through which his career required him to move. The semiotics and significance of his Yorkshire estate begin in this way also to tell a story about the semiotics of the ‘North’ in the early modern period: Wentworth was acutely conscious of his Yorkshire origins, a point which rival courtiers highlighted when referring to him pejoratively as the

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3 Intriguingly, Knottingley is the site of the last recorded bear-baiting to have taken place in England.
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‘Northern clowne’. The area of the country north of London and north of the royal and governmental centres of Whitehall and Westminster was in itself a significant spatial and geographical concept in this period, a way of bringing into being a cartographic understanding of the nation. The political map of the country contributed to these kinds of constructions by determining key administrative roles and jurisdictions geographically, not least by their placement north or south of the River Trent: Wentworth’s Council of the North was located, as its name suggests, on the northern banks of that all-important riverine boundary (which will be the focus of further discussion in Chapter 1). Wentworth was a figure for whom the local and the national were ‘integrally linked’ in exactly the ways that early modern historians have suggested we need to understand in order fully to appreciate the relationship between early modern politics and culture.7

Wentworth’s reshaping of his Wentworth Woodhouse estate in the 1620s and 1630s (there are further tantalizing references in contemporary correspondence to his involvement in building works in York, which was his official location as Lord President)8 was undoubtedly part of establishing a northern power base as an extension of the authority of the crown, but it was also a conscious performance of the self. In Wentworth’s case it is significant that this complex political and social persona was one that he frequently chose to enact through the medium of drama and not least through the formal and institutional space of the playhouse. Richard Dutton, for example, has detailed the various engagements with theatre, both in a private and public playhouse context, that Wentworth made while resident in Dublin during his stint as Lord Deputy of Ireland from 1633 onwards.9 What we also interpret from the particular reference in Wentworth’s correspondence is, at the local and personal level, his highly conscious comparison of provincial and metropolitan experiences of bearbaiting and their intrinsic differences. What the single example of an extant 1630s Yorkshire gatehouse, however ambiguous its meanings, provides us

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6 National Archives C135, m35/8406; cited in Merritt (ed.), The Political World of Thomas Wentworth, p. 129. The remark was made by the Earl of Pembroke in 1632.
7 The phrase is Peter Lake’s from his concluding essay to Merritt (ed.), The Political World of Thomas Wentworth, ‘Retrospective: Wentworth’s political world in revisionist and post-revisionist perspective’, pp. 252–83 (p. 275).
8 Sir William Pennyman to the Lord Viscount Wentworth, Lord President of the North, 12 March 1630; in Knowler (ed.), The Earl of Strafford’s Letters, p. 55.
with, then, is an entry point into something other than the literal bear pit; it enables us to start to reconstruct, albeit partially, the cultural world in which a key figure such as Wentworth moved, (re)locating him in the space of his Yorkshire estate and its adjacent neighbourhoods, and restoring him in the process to a more quotidian set of practices and behaviours. In turn we gain access to a fuller understanding of what theatre and performance constituted in the cultural life of England in the decades leading up to the civil wars (this study will focus, in particular, on the 1620s–1640s). It is through this kind of methodology that I hope in this study to indicate the ways in which cultural geography as both a disciplinary field and an approach might prove insightful for literary criticism and theatre history. We are already beginning in this single example to think about the role of the individual within wider networks: of patronage, politics, local identity, manuscript and artistic and theatrical circles, neighbourhoods, and the potent domain of the estate itself, and these ideas will all play a crucial role in the cultural geography I am attempting to limn for the early seventeenth century and, in particular, for its drama.

The early modern estate is one prime spatial means of exploring cultural geography and in its variant forms it will prove an important conceptual and material site throughout this study. Thomas Wentworth’s engagement, however partial or tangential, with the particular form of theatre that was represented by performing bears in the early seventeenth century provides us with yet another fruitful point of access to the cultural geography of the age in which he lived. The remarkable archive that has been provided for us by the Records of Early English Drama project (henceforth REED) offers considerable evidence for the frequency of visits to country estates and towns by performing bears with names such as Tarleton, Robin Hood, Will Tookey, and Mad Besse, sometimes transported in carts and sometimes walked there on foot by their keepers and wards; and the vibrant cultural context of Yorkshire in the 1620s would have been no exception to this rule. Blind bears appear to have been a particular subcategory

10 Payments to bearwards can be identified in the records in the early 1600s; see, for example, House Books York, 1606, p. 521 and City Chamberlain’s Rolls, 1611 (REED: York, i: 521, 539). Ingram’s house is also notably a site for the reception of King Charles I on entry into York in 1641 (i: 611).

On the phenomenon of itinerant bearwards, see Mark Brayshay, ‘Waits, musicians, bearwards, and players: the inter-urban road travel and performances of itinerant entertainers in sixteenth and seventeenth century England’. Journal of Historical Geography, 31: 3 (2005), 430–58. For reflections on the theatrical naming of bears, among many other things, see Barbara Ravelhofer’s fine article, “Beasts of recreacion”: Henslowe’s white bears’, English Literary Renaissance, 32: 2 (2002), 287–323 (293), and also John Taylor’s contemporary pamphlet Bull, Beare and Horse (London, 1638), sig. D3r, in which he specifically discusses those of Paris Garden.
of this cruel form of drama but bears more generally prove a vibrant means of engaging with the relationship between the physical and cultural landscapes of England at this time. As indicated by the quotation from Wentworth’s correspondence, these creatures were an established part of popular amphitheatrical theatre in London, regularly displayed and baited on the Bankside where they were also housed. By the 1620s they were part of the performance lexicon of elite courtly entertainments and masques; as well as the infamous stage direction in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (1611) – ‘exit pursued by a bear’ (3.3. s.d. 57) – which may or may not have indicated the use of a real bear or an actor in a bear costume, masques by Ben Jonson included the display of polar bears (*Oberon* in 1611, *Masque of Augurs* in 1621). Two polar bear cubs transported to England from a Muscovy Company expedition to Greenland in 1609 are known to have been presented to King James VI and I at Whitehall but appear to have ended up residing in the Bankside bear houses, suggesting a definite crossover between high and low culture, between the private consumption of courts and aristocratic country estates and the public commercial space of the Paris Garden, in much the same way that Wentworth’s ursine allusions implied.

If the early modern provenance of the Wentworth Woodhouse bear pit is in doubt, we do know for certain that there were private bear houses in England at this time. Sir Sanders Duncombe, a renowned traveller credited with the introduction of sedan chairs to London from France in the early 1630s (sedans will feature in later discussions of mobility), had by 1639 been accorded a royal patent for the ‘sole practising and making profitt of the combatynge and fightynge of wild and domestic beasts within the realm of England for fowertene years’.

Ravelhofer, ‘Beasts of recreacion’, recounts the fact that in the 1610s Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn held the Mastership and Serjeantship of the Bears from the Crown. They issued licences to bearwards as well as breeding mastiffs for baitings (p. 288). Bearhouses stood adjacent to the Hope Theatre at least into the 1620s (p. 292). See also S. P. Cerasano, ‘The master of the bears in art and enterprise’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 5 (1991), 195–221.


Ravelhofer, ‘Beasts of recreacion’, starts with the anecdote of the polar bear cubs transported from Cherry Island in 1609. See the account published in Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, 20 vols. (Glasgow, 1906), 11: 281.

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Strange and horrible newes which happened betwixt St Johns Street, and Islington on Thursday morning... Being a terrible murther committed by one of Sir Sander Duncomes Beares on the body of his Gardner, that usually came to feed them, where thousands of people were eye-witnesses.15

The pamphlet informs us that Duncombe, ‘This worthy Knight’, had so liked the site that he had built a bear house there some two years earlier ‘betwixt the Red Bull and Islington’; we know that this was a private small-scale enterprise owing to the pamphlet’s observation that it was ‘not quite furnished in the full manner of a beare-garden...’.16 On this particular day in October 1642, a strong storm blew down the bear house, causing two of its inmates to escape with disastrous consequences. The pamphlet’s account of the huge audience that gathered to witness the gardener’s demise (there is grim detail of how his bowels were torn from his body) is striking, not least for the implicit parallels it draws between this grisly spectacle and the mainstream theatrical entertainment of the kind that would have been seen on a daily basis at the nearby Red Bull theatre. Pamphlets such as this will prove to be a crucial non-dramatic source of primary material in this study and we will, on countless occasions, witness rich interplay and cross-fertilization between the public theatres and print culture in the manner suggested in this instance. Here, though, we also have contemporary description offering us access to the ways in which theatre and performance were woven deep into the contemporary psyche and, not least, the experience of specific spaces and places like the Bankside.

The Bankside was also the locale in 1623 for the spectacular sight (if deeply distressing to a modern sensibility) of a polar bear swimming in the Thames, the poor beast having been ‘turned’ into the water to be baited by dogs.17 The association of polar bears, in particular, with swimming was clearly potent in the early modern imagination and John Taylor’s reference to the ‘white swimming Beares’ in his 1638 pamphlet Bull, Beare and Horse suggests either that this kind of occasion was a repeated occurrence or, perhaps, that the bear houses, which like many cages for exotic animals at this time, do appear to have doubled as miniature theatres for visiting and, often, paying spectators, contained some kind of space for

16 Strange and Horrible News, sig. A2r.
These London spectacles may have been very different in tenor and tone to the regional displays of individual bears at properties such as Sir Arthur Ingram’s, but the link between the kinds of cultural activity, habits of thought, and structures of belief to which they appealed can tell us much about the early modern period. If bears, though, were part of surprisingly everyday spectacles on the roads and common highways of England, they also formed part of a complex flow of bodies and cultural practices around the nation, acting as a bridge between metropolis and region, and between those smaller ‘circuits of knowledge’ constituted by those regions themselves. All of these ideas of flow, of circulation, and of network and mobility paradigms which are so resonant in contemporary cultural geographical practice will have their influence on the particular narratives of space and place and their integral relationship to early modern theatre that I seek to recount here.

There are a host of ways, then, in which the Wentworth bear pit proves a suggestive example of the built environment and the practical theatre in the focus decades of my study – a period stretching from the latter years of James VI and I’s reigns to the end of the English Civil Wars and the onset of quasi-republican government in 1649. This period was selected partly because of the obvious potential of a holistic study of Caroline theatrical culture in this regard, focusing on drama produced during the reign of Charles I from 1625 to 1649, and encompassing the particular cultural moment of the Personal Rule from 1629 to 1640 when the King governed without summoning any parliaments. By extending the focus beyond the somewhat arbitrary time frame of a particular monarch’s reign, we are also able to account for continuities of practice, and for evidence of performance beyond the frequently perceived endpoint of the closure of the commercial theatre houses in 1642 at the outbreak of the civil war.

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18 Taylor, Bull, Beare and Horse, sig. C4v. Ravelhofer, ‘Beasts of recreacion’, reproduces a later seventeenth-century engraving of a bear compound in Dresden that clearly depicts swimming areas as part of the architectural design.

19 The phrase is actually Iain Sinclair’s in application to the perambulations and poetry of John Clare and delivered as part of his presentation to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Landscape and Environment conference on Art and Environment held at Tate Britain in June 2010, but seems equally resonant in application to my early modern subjects. Jason Scott-Warren, who refers to theatre and bear-baiting as ‘culturally isomorphic events’ at this time, describes ‘bearwards wearing the liveries of their lordly patrons [taking] their masters’ animals on tour to the country houses of the kingdom’ (‘When theaters were bear-gardens: or what is at stake in the comedy of humor?’, Shakespeare Quarterly, 54: 1 (2003), 63–82 (65, 64)).

20 On the Personal Rule as an organizing category, see the editorial introduction to Ian Atherton and Julie Sanders (eds.), The 1630s: Interdisciplinary Essays on Culture and Politics in the Caroline Era (Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 1–27. On the topic of post-1642 theatrical practice, see the pioneering work of Susan Wiseman in Politics and Drama in the English Civil War (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
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Facilitating examples of this kind enable us to think about a number of the connecting lines of thought between literary criticism, theatre history, and cultural geography that will form the basis of my methodology here when trying to unlock new ways of approaching and understanding early modern drama as form and practice.²¹

It is necessary at this point to define what I mean by the term ‘cultural geography’ in this context. Mike Crang has spoken helpfully of geography’s capacity as a discipline to look at cultures as ‘locatable, specific phenomena’ and how this in turn helps us to understand not only ‘how cultures are spread over space but also . . . how cultures make sense of space’.²² It is my opinion that drama was one of the key means by which early modern English society strove to make sense of space and that attending not only to the spaces and places represented in plays written both for household and commercial performances but also to the agency those representations held in contemporary society in terms of what Henri Lefebvre termed the ‘production of space’ can be a highly fruitful exercise.²³ Cultural geography ‘looks at the ways different processes come together in particular places and how those places develop meanings for people’.²⁴ This driving idea of ‘process’ is key to my approach throughout and my aim in bringing together literary criticism, theatre history, and cultural geography in an early modern context is to reveal several of these processes at work in different spaces and places and on different levels and scales: in the region, in the city, in specific habitats and milieux such as forests and wetlands, in the ‘micro-geography’ of the household or estate, and in the early modern playhouse itself.²⁵ I am interested in the complex interactions that take place between people and the spatial structures and concepts (it should be stressed that my aim throughout is to interweave natural and built environments in the

²¹ The work of fellow scholars who are working in parallel ways with ideas and practices derived from cultural geography requires acknowledgement here; see, for example, Andrew McRae, Literature and Domestic Travel in Early Modern England (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Philip Schwezer, ‘Purity and danger on the west bank of the Severn: the cultural geography of A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634’, Representations, 60 (1997), 22–48; and Kate Chedgzoy, ‘The cultural geographies of early modern women’s writings: journeys across spaces and times’, Literature Compass, 3/4 (2006), 884–95.

²² Mike Crang, Cultural Geography (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1, 2.


²⁴ Crang, Cultural Geography, p. 3.

²⁵ In making these interdisciplinary accommodations, I am keen to stress that many cultural geographers have themselves been pioneering in bringing together the consideration of space and place as material and measurable phenomena with their textual and aesthetic histories of representation: seminal work in this respect includes Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (eds.), The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments (Cambridge University Press, 1989).
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discussion as much as possible) that shape their understanding and practice of the world and how behaviours, to quote James Sutton, ‘imbricate with place’. It is my view that literary forms and genres are one key way in which these accommodations take place and in this respect I am able to benefit from recent moves in geography as a discipline to embrace ideas of text, representation, and performance as central to its own evidence base.

The natural meeting ground or space of encounter that is the so-called subfield of ‘literary geographies’ can be seen in areas like mapping, chorography (a seventeenth-century form with crucial overlaps with antiquarian practice), and cultural cartographies, as well as in more phenomenologically informed theories of sensory geographies and embodied landscapes. Through this kind of multidisciplinary work – which embraces not just literature, performance studies, and geography as subjects but also adjacent and complementary disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology and, of course, social and environmental history – landscape and environment have come to be viewed not simply as static texts to be ‘read’ but as dynamic sites of enactment, re-enactment, and performance. As a consequence, theatre can provide key terms for describing and articulating this kind of research as well as its raw materials in terms of buildings, sites, places, texts, performances, and practices. The raw material of that drama itself needs to be considered as part of this process of investigation – to that end, pamphlet culture will be a particularly prevalent printed source throughout this study, alongside letters and correspondence, which altogether provide a key to contemporary mindsets as well as that difficult-to-reconstruct sphere of spoken discourse. As will already be clear, my intention is to stress throughout the agency of the artistic form as much as its reflective or representational power.

In the context of the recent so-called ‘spatial turn’ in a range of disciplines, literary criticism and theatre history not least, certain key theorists

