

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

CLARE EGAN

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.<sup>7</sup> 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 'lawghinge foole'.<sup>8</sup> The derogatory terms were said to have been written on 'twoe ... knaues of diamondes ... one ... knave of Clubbes ... [and] one ... knave of hartes'.<sup>9</sup> 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'.<sup>10</sup> 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