

in the upcoming companion piece to this article, that the practical public function of the *Castle* and *Croxton* proclamation texts cannot be reduced to the fleeting publicity plugs in their penultimate stanzas. Regardless, the link from the banns of the records to the ‘banns’ of *Castle*, *Croxton*, and *N.Town* is rather weak to start with — none of those three pre-show proclamations explicitly refer to themselves as ‘banns’, nor are they titled as such (nor does Voigts’s medical advertisement use the term), which surely explains the paucity of references to play-banns in the *MED*.¹²

Present-day common sense dictates, simply, that a proclamation summarising an upcoming play, delivered through multiple locations well in advance of that play, is most likely an attempt to entice a broad base of potential attendees to the play.¹³ If the extant textual and archival evidence from early banns in Lincolnshire, Sussex, and eastern Kent chafes against that common-sense assumption — and, as I will show below, most of it does — then that misalignment, as counterintuitive as it feels, offers an opportunity for theatre historians to re-examine our understanding of how early economies produced drama. The economic exchanges recorded in these records make clear, as I will demonstrate, that while some banns may have had a small positive impact on show attendance, audience-building advertisement was unlikely to have been the primary purpose behind their proclamation. I argue, instead, that the banns visible in the *REED* volumes are best understood as *fundraising appeals*, ceremoniously and publicly delivered to those donors who were likely to help cover production costs, or to otherwise provide financial support to the subsequent plays or their parishes. In the give-and-take of that fundraising system, plays emerge less as capitalist ventures (in which, through marketing and advertisement, productions compete to win potential audiences) than as a large-scale and long-term series of collaborations, manifesting and maintaining a network of mutual good will.

Banns were serious business. In 1498, the New Romney chamberlains recorded a local legal decision, regarding delinquent bann-criers for their town’s play:

Quo die viz. in festo annunciacionis Beate Marie Anno regni Regis supradicti terciodecimo quod proclamatores bannorum ludi de Romene Communarij eiusdem ville adinuicem contardabant, quod ijdem proclamatores important banna saltem billas eorundem citra ffestum sancti Georgij proximo post datam presencium, & illo deficiente incarceretur xl dayes ...

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On which day, namely, on the Feast of the Annunciation to the Blessed Mary [March 25] in the thirteenth year of the reign of the abovesaid king [Henry VII, i.e. 1498] that the proclaimers of the banns of the play of Romney, commoners of the same town, were both mutually tardy; that these same proclaimers should convey the banns, or at least *billas* of the same, before the feast of Saint George [April 23] next, after the date of the present [decision], & if anyone fails in that, he shall be imprisoned for forty days ...¹⁴

Tardiness for the proclamation of New Romney's banns had already resulted in civic admonition threatening legal action; failure to deliver the banns was to be punishable by significant jail time. It is the aim of this study to understand how and why the work of banns could be so important.

Above, I have left the Anglo-Latin *billas* untranslated. Since the court at New Romney rules that the tardy proclaimers might 'at least' (*saltem*) convey *billas* as a substitute for the banns, it follows that these *billas* likely also accomplished, if less effectively, whatever function the court felt to be most essential in the usual bann-proclamations. Abigail Ann Young glosses *billa*, in this 1498 case, as 'a handbill or placard containing an announcement, *here* one containing the banns of a play'.¹⁵ However, I am aware of no other attested Anglo-Latin or English example in which the word *bill* signifies publicly visible, written marketing or publicity before 1590 — after a century-long interval in which early modern attitudes toward the circulation of written material changed radically.¹⁶ During that century, the use of printed handbills developed 'at the forefront of media breakthroughs', in which advertisers — the most prominent being quack doctors, as M.A. Katritzky has shown — 'pioneered printing and performing techniques, their publicity and distribution networks support[ing] the earliest mass media'.¹⁷

Before those breakthroughs, Latin *billa* and English *bille* almost always occur in business, formal ceremonies, or legal actions, directed at an individual or small group: to convey a *bille* is usually to send a personal letter or to provide a financial record, a binding contract, or the official documentation — usually delivered by a formal reading aloud — of a plea, charge, bull, petition, supplication, or summons.¹⁸ These formal uses of *bille* are very common in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and attested throughout the *REED* volumes and the Middle English corpus.¹⁹ Before 1590, the only instances in which a *bille* appears to be a publicly posted or circulated document of any kind — a rare occurrence — is for posted *denunciations* of a person or group, in which a prankster or insurrectionist