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Introduction

The fundamental way in which people interact socially is how they address each other (or, when not in face-to-face situations, refer to each other). In their interaction—circumscribed and influenced by emotional responses and (the avoidance of) embarrassment—social actors employ a variety of forms of address: names, nicknames, social titles, which impute familiarity and closeness; distance and respect; courtesy; or dismissiveness.⁵ Many of those responses are dispersed through the deposition in the archdeaconry court of Oxford above. Reported social address can thus furnish an insight into the praxis of social relationships with an elemental poignancy.

Quotidian social interaction through the “speech community’s” language use in addressing individuals, when considered in its totality, moreover, can take us further

than the relationships between individuals. The accumulation of this social interaction can reveal something about the ordering of local society.

Two perceptions of early-modern social ordering—through “national” and local lenses (though not necessarily antithetical) have been suggested, the one established on a social language of “sorts” and the other of “chief inhabitants,” “core” or “focal” families.⁶ When reduced to great poverty by a fire which consumed his barns and goods, John Throe of Hitchen, a weaver, addressed the justices of Hertfordshire in 1626 for a brief for collecting assistance. In his support, he adduced a petition testifying to his character, certifying that he had been a man who had lived by his labor and had maintained his wife and children. The appeal was importantly subscribed by the “better sorte of the same towne.”⁷ In this context of the language of “sorts,” for example, the charge was addressed to the constables in Norfolk for enforcing the Book of Orders in 1596 to sustain “the poorer sort.”⁸ “The names of such recusantes as be either married wives or of the meaner sorte whose estates wee finde to be meane & uncertayne” were certified to the justices of that county in 1586.⁹ “The better sort of people beinge muche greived & offended that the ruder sorte would not be stayed nor by the magystrates restrayned...” was a complaint to the assembly of Norwich in 1604.¹⁰ “And that the poorer sorte of people and others may not be oppressed by an unequal proporcion...” exercised the minds of the aldermen of Northampton in 1605.¹¹

By the late sixteenth century, then, informal descriptions of English social differences existed alongside the formal classification of degrees and estates. Prominent amongst these colloquial distinctions was the language of “sorts.”¹² This development reflected the instability and transformation of social relationships occurring in early-modern England, so that fluidity of terminology ensued.¹³ During the late sixteenth century, the language of sorts was itself transformed into a more elaborate and rhetorical form of social distinction through the association of adjectives of discrimination.¹⁴ Inspiring this process was the use of this language by hegemonic social groups to demarcate themselves from the less privileged or the less compliant: it became deployed in a hierarchical and polarizing manner, particularly in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.¹⁵

A different paradigm conceives of a more localized social description characterized by the use of terms which identify the principal inhabitants within villages, expressed in locally-produced documents such as manorial court rolls and parish records. Such chief inhabitants were described purely in terms of their local position—as officeholders—rather than with reference to wider society.¹⁶

What we may be observing in these descriptions is two different, but co-existing perceptions of social ordering in early-modern England. They need not be exclusive; they might even be commensurate. To these formulations and perceptions, we might add a third, again in no way precluding the other two, but complementing them. The language of address and naming informs any consideration of the ordering of society, but perhaps also avoids two principal issues.¹⁷ First, although all language use consists of rhetoric, the self-acclamation of “chief inhabitants” persuasively projected a self-representation of a particular group.¹⁸ Secondly, those social categories hitherto formulated were problematically and resolutely male-centered. Now, although local society’s use of names and forms of address was no less imbued with rhetorical overtones, it allows some penetration into the world of quotidian exchange and how female actors were incorporated into local social ordering—all at an elemental, fundamental social level.

In selecting the categories of analysis below, the primary objective has been to build up from social relationships rather than read back from social structure. Contemporary descriptions of social organization—or social structure—are freighted with rhetoric and thus may constitute ideological constructions of social organization. The intention here then is to look at social relationships as they were negotiated and worked through in practice, and only then to relate those social events to “social structure.” It is the politics of address which take precedence here and those politics are best illustrated by forms of colloquial address negotiated between social actors, the attribution and reception or acceptance of nicknames and aliases, and the expectations of and respect for forms of address as titles.

During the later middle ages, a certain amount of fluidity developed in the ordering of society, one of the consequences being the implementation of the Statute of Additions in 1413, which required all defendants in criminal cases to be attributed an occupation or status. By the early sixteenth century, so much ambiguity had arisen that in 1520, More K.B.J. could opine that the statute should be understood that: if the son of a knight was engaged in husbandry, he should be designated “husbandman,” not “gentleman,” whilst, conversely, the son of a husbandman who attained an office associated with gentle status (an officer or clerk in a common law court) should be denominated “gentleman,” not “yeoman,” for everyone should always be described according to actual occupation.¹⁹

Throughout the discussion of address, illustrative examples are extracted from contemporary dramatic performances. In one sense, this recourse is felicitous, for Goffman likened social interaction—both verbal and through gesture—to theatrical

performance. Indeed, that analogy was intrinsic to his observation.²⁰ That sort of justification, however, would be, on its own, rather spurious. The real justification for importing material from contemporary theater is that by doing so, we are observing the observers.²¹ To that end, material is derived only from the City Comedies and Jonson—what on the surface appear to be two radically different political and social perspectives.²² Concentration on the City comedies, of course, begs the question of metropolitan influence over a wider space. No doubt there are arguments for perceiving some cultural influence of the City in other areas of the country. The point remains, however, that the City was extraordinary. Here then the use of the City comedies is allusive. What we know of provincial theater does not yet allow us to make more categorical statements about the theater and society elsewhere.²³

How the playwrights can inform our comprehension of social interaction and relationships can be illuminated from a single play: Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*. The central male figure, Witgood, exclaimed: "I have rins'd the whoreson's gums in mull-sack many a time and often ..."²⁴ As will be confirmed below, that sort of social reference fractured social relations, even in its deployment against the clergy. When Witgood addressed the two usurers as "O Master Dampit" and "Master Gulf," even "Kind Master Gulf," Middleton was, amongst other meanings, reflecting how the category of gentility and the title master had become obfuscated and transformed by the late sixteenth century, by the intrusion of new commercial wealth—a social critique of contemporary social trends exhibited in aspirations for this title.²⁵ That social ambiguity and fluidity was elucidated further by Middleton:

The son, once a gentleman, may revel in it, though his father were a dauber.²⁶

When Witgood adopted a more familiar register, addressing Dampit as "my old Harry," he engaged in another social discourse: the use of hypocorism to express (false) closeness and the *double entendre* of "old," intending familiarity, but also expressing Dampit's age.²⁷ So too, Witgood's avaricious uncle, Lucre, referred to his adversary, "old Hoard," and it is clarified later, not least at his marriage to the anonymous Courtesan, that Hoard was indeed of advanced years—and Hoard is undoubtedly "the old one" in the play's title.²⁸ Finally, the terms of abuse bandied about in the play were principally "knave," "rascal" and "villain," common words of rebuke in direct social interaction which challenged male honor and character.²⁹

The relevance of the playwrights to social practice is, of course, ambiguous. Dekker was probably the closest to the quotidian life of the populace of London, although little

is known of his origins. His career was checkered, including a spell imprisoned for debt, and he never enjoyed the patronage which Jonson acquired. His work perhaps best represents “citizen values and low life realism.”³⁰ Superficially, Jonson appears as the opposite. His traditionalism longed for the aristocracy to stand to its obligations as he imagined it had in a previous era. He aspired to and achieved courtly patronage, particularly through masques. Jonson returned to classical forms of literature.³¹ On the other hand, his earlier life had been punctuated with dissolute episodes when he most certainly acquired a knowledge and understanding of London life. He had, indeed, followed a criminal existence, close to the gallows.³² In the case of Middleton, his background was intimately connected with the City, since his father, William, had been a citizen and bricklayer, who had achieved gentle status in his later years. Nonetheless, because of his earlier career, William’s status was ambiguous. For Thomas, however, fortune smiled less kindly because of the second marriage of William’s widow, so that Thomas descended the City hierarchy. Even when he achieved some recognition as a playwright, his social position remained ambiguous and he, indeed, emphasized the craft quality.³³

We can agree then with McLuskie that the City Comedies of Dekker, Heywood, Middleton and Rowley “enacted and articulated the beliefs and aspirations of the society which produced and consumed them” and attracted an audience from diverse sectors of London’s population.³⁴ The difficulty is, of course, differentiating representation and realism. None of the playwrights eschewed ideology: Dekker was empathetic to the City and its values; Middleton was critical, ironically or otherwise; and Jonson, with his conservative mentality, desire for high-level patronage, and demand for the aristocracy to stand to its obligations, had an entirely different agendum. All, nonetheless, inevitably introduced into their works an element of “dramatic realism.”³⁵

What these literary sources thus provide us is direct speech—if imagined—in social interaction. The parts played convey the meanings of address. That direct—or reported—speech is only otherwise available when court cases—in Quarter Sessions and ecclesiastical courts—or the minutes of meetings of borough councils reiterated the alleged words. Such are the sources examined below for direct or reported address in social interaction.

Otherwise, we are dependent on references to people rather than direct address between them. Principally, some parish registers and some parochial accounts—of churchwardens and constables, for example—furnish references to people which inform us how they might have been addressed. For example, shirts and smocks were provided by the corporation of Reading in 1624 to “Blynd Sample” and “Old Harrison.”³⁶ In 1625,

a complaint about an apprentice to the Corporation involved the testimony that Goodwife Symes and “the Runinge begger called Cowper” had purchased shoes.³⁷ An example of the informality of address is presented in the reference to “bawld Lewes wife” in the Hall papers of the borough of Stratford-upon-Avon in 1594.³⁸ Now, although these are references in written records rather than direct face-to-face address, there is sufficient evidence, not least in the plays, that those were also forms of direct address to these individuals.

We have been appraised, of course, of the narrative strategies that are embedded in depositions in legal *fora*.³⁹ Attention to contexts and claims are as advisable here as when dealing with literary texts. Those strictures apply no less in forms of address represented in depositions. It was contended in Chancery in 1566 that when Edward Baily walked with John Taylor in Stotfield (Staffordshire), Taylor enquired: “goodman Baily how happeneth the high way to Tamworth to be changed?” - to which Baily responded: “Mr Bretten requested me saying, Neighbour Baily, the way was altered by means of Agarr for his case...”⁴⁰ These alleged terms of address were reported to persuade the Orator’s case—parties in disputes in Chancery were denominated Orators. Whether the forms of address were actually spoken, remains uncertain. What we can, however, deduce is that such terms were contemplated and would have been deployed in favorable circumstances.

The rhetoric of language use in courts is also exemplified in proceedings about land in Barton-under-Needwood (Staffs.) in 1561. The nub of the different claims depended on whether John Holland otherwise called Great John Holland and John Holland otherwise called Crabb John Holland were the same person or two different people. We can, nonetheless, assume that one or more people were recognized by these nickname affixes—Great and Crabb—in local society.⁴¹

To substantiate that claim, the material from the churchwardens’ accounts in particular is likely to express the form of address of local society. Even parish registers, although composed by the incumbent, might well reflect a wider social usage, since the incumbent was part of local society and so might well have inculcated local usage, and the churchwardens inspected the registers. For good measure, however, we can recite debts owed to George Daniell, yeoman, deceased, as enumerated in the probate inventory of his estate in 1592, consisting of arrears from “ould good wyffe Dodge of the hill toppe” and “litell John Henshaw.”⁴²

Below, then our concern is how address reflects how far social actors were integrated into local society and how address was expressed in social interaction. In the latter investigation, two issues are paramount: how address was informed by an attempt to

manipulate social interchange; and how address informed the social status of the actors.⁴³ In chapter 1, the emphasis is on titles of address, formal and informal. The former—formal address—principally engages with the contested and fluid status of Master and Mistress as titles of address reflecting some status of gentility—contested because of social flux at this time which brought these titles into the aspiration of more social groups, particularly in the urban context. Formality in address is consistent with social distance.⁴⁴ Thus, although he received a “cordial reception” in 1618 on his journeying through England and Scotland, the “water poet,” John Taylor, consistently referred to his hosts by their formal title of Master where such obtained.⁴⁵ Within this section, however, are also investigated the semi-formal titles of Goodwife and Goodman, but it is divulged how these forms were attributed discretely and selectively, often dependent on context. Finally, more informal “titles” are considered, especially “old” so-and-so, but also the use of adjectives (sometimes from disability) in referring to some social actors (as “Blynd Sample” above).

We should also acknowledge that these expressions existed before 1500 – that being a purely arbitrary *terminus a quo* to make this project manageable. For example, the churchwardens’ accounts of Saint Mary at Hill, London, introduce us to these forms of address in the late fifteenth century. At the top echelon constituted by formal titles, the status of Mistress Agnes Breton was expressed in her financing the painting and gilding of the lady tabernacle in 1488, amounting to £27.⁴⁶ Correspondingly, the alderman of the ward was constantly titled Mr. Alderman or Mr. Remyngton.⁴⁷ If we move down the scale to semi-formal address, in 1487-8 Goodwife Blyn paid the standard 6s. 8d. for her husband’s burial.⁴⁸ The interment of her son was expensive for Goodwife Mascall in 1500.⁴⁹ For her service in making up four albs, Goodwife Hunt was remunerated with 1s. in 1504-5.⁵⁰ In 1550-1, Goodmen Derhame, Howtyng and Collyns contributed for the burial of their children, whilst Goodman Proyse had been compensated for rope in 1492-3.⁵¹ Considering next informal titles, Mother Selbye was involved over the matter of one penny in 1485, 1s. had been exacted from Mother Boyis in 1492-3 and 10s. was received from Mother Browne in 1494-5.⁵² Assuming another sobriquet, “olde Mouce” in 1487-8 took the tenancy of a house which required the carpenter’s attention.⁵³ These forms of address—both formal and informal—were not then novel in the sixteenth century. Their inclusion in written records depended, to some extent, on the wider use of the vernacular in documents, although court records, even when composed in Latin, had included and continued to include direct speech in Middle English. Accordingly, then, the first part of chapter 1 is concerned with informal or colloquial address (such as “old so-and-so”) whilst more formal titles are the subject of the second section of chapter 1.

From the certainty of those titles, both formal and informal, chapter 2 is concerned, in contrast, with people imperfectly acknowledged in their local society. So, in comparison with the full forms of address above in the accounts for the parish of Saint Mary at Hill, there is the payment in 1493-4 of £6 13s. 7d. to Constantine the carpenter for constructing all the new pews and enclosing the font.⁵⁴ Various degrees of ignorance of people's identification become visible: from no knowledge at all of a person's names ("anonymity"), through information about either forename or surname, but not both. Here too are discussed issues of ambiguity about names: the varying approaches to imposing a name on the bastard; changes of name and its motives; and the significance of the *alias*. The issues encountered here were of great consequence, marking out or labeling people at the margins, indicating their reception into and inclusion in local society or their exclusion from it; or alternatively providing social cohesion of small groups.

The issues of social nearness and distance are also well illustrated in some personal memoranda. We might single out here—purely for the purposes of exemplification—the account and memoranda book of Edward Don.⁵⁵ In his transactions with people, Don adopted a variety of forms of reference: occupation and habitation of the person; surname only; surname and habitation; forename and surname; pet form of forename and surname; and surname and occupation. He employed these forms consistently for each individual, reflecting their closeness or distance in the relationship. His personal shaving was always performed by Carow the barber.⁵⁶ Shoes were constantly repaired by Hykman.⁵⁷ Disbursements were made to Robyns.⁵⁸ Comestibles, especially fish, were purchased from Bate, once Bate of Risborough.⁵⁹ On the other hand, those closest were identified in his household book by their forename—often by a hypocorism or pet form—and their surname, profusely his servant Dyk Furberer for his many journeys and errands.⁶⁰ The Middleton household accounts included the expense of dispatching "lyttle Dycke" to collect a gelding in 1556.⁶¹

From titles of address—formal and informal—and the ignorance of identification, the discussion next considers, in chapter 3, expressions in social interaction which had an emotional content: either love and friendship, or denigration. As explained below, recovering genuine and sincere articulations of amity and devotion is complicated by context and source. Some situations (and sources) are suffused with formalism (requiring expected expressions) or dissimulation (attempting to manipulate through a false rhetoric). As explained below, then, attempting to differentiate instrumentality from affection is not always achievable: the motives for articulating friendship were complex. Early-modern society, moreover, had ideologies of neighborliness and

community which, even if themselves only rhetorical, had an impact on language use. Those obligations are exhibited by a Yorkshire testator who in 1544 desired not only a mass and dirige for his own soul and those of his “good frendes” but also “to make a dynner to my frendes and goode neghbors the same day...”⁶² The contexts and implications of those discourses and complexities receive fuller treatment below, in chapter 3, and so are not elaborated here.

In the later parts of chapter 3, the discussion moves into the realm of unbridled responses in which a failure to manage the emotions brought forth incandescent abuse of authority.⁶³ For the most part, these subversive speeches occurred in Quarter Sessions, in ecclesiastical courts and in borough council meetings. Their common thread was the denial of deference. What was at issue was how these speech acts undermined social honor, credit and status. It might be considered that words were but words, but in fact every attempt was made either to punish the miscreant who made the obnoxious utterances or to ensure the submission of that offender to the authority in question. In the fifteenth century, both the good wife who taught her daughter and the wise man who instructed his son reflected on the power of words in an honor society.

For þi tongue may be thy fo⁶⁴

Fayre wordes wreth do slake;
Fayre wordes wreth schall neuer make;
Ne fayre wordes brake neuer bone,
Ne neuer schall' in no wone.⁶⁵

Assuredly, the implication was that conversely insalubrious comment would cause perturbation.

In the final part of the book, we move to well-trodden ground, surveyed particularly by Scott Smith-Bannister. Despite the extensive nature of his discussion of forenames between the introduction of parish registration in 1538 and his arbitrary *terminus ad quem* of 1700, some interesting interstices remain about which much more can be established. In this present context of social interaction, the most significant issue is the question of the use of pet forms of forename—hypocorisms—particularly important for forms of address (chapter 4). In what circumstances were full formal forenames and pet forms respectively employed? What do they signify about the relationship between social actors and social intercourse? Although Smith-Bannister recognized these aspects and cursorily alluded to them, they can be explored more expansively.⁶⁶

After all these proposals, what follows is not an attempt to replace analyses of social ordering (“social structure”) by a micro-sociological emphasis on social interaction. It is, rather, an effort to complement and refine. Moreover, the “domain” of social interaction is not fixed and immutable; it too is influenced by discursive transformations in society.⁶⁷ In our own context, we might consider the forms of address and language use associated with the “gallants” of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.⁶⁸ Although abrupt and not often expansive, forms of address as social interaction inform us about how people were negotiating their place within local society.