

*A Companion to Renaissance Drama* edited by Arthur F. Kinney  
Chapter 19

*“What Revels are in Hand?”: Performances in the Great Households* by Suzanne Westfall

“Entertainments in great households were almost always occasional, multimedial, frequently non-textual, and ephemeral...” (did not happen often; included costumes, music, and props; performed from memory; and lasted just one day)

The aristocracy would sponsor private performances even after the public theaters opened. The details of these performances were not recorded outside of the courts. Financial and historical accounts provide clues.

Jousts, disguisings (early form of the masque), masques (pantomime and dancing), cookery, heraldry (the show and ceremony of bearing armor), tournaments, and ceremony would be included in this category. These do not have scripts and therefore there is debate as to whether they are theater.

Some idea of the structure and household staff for occasional theater can be found in records of household management. Occasional theater was not improvised but rather planned and managed.

The household moved from property to property. It had an economic unit, political unit, and a social unit. They ranged in size from a few to over 250 servants. The patron provided food, livery, lodging, entertainment, and protection to those that served him.

“While resident in the household, a retained performer could expect a salary, gratuities from the patron and his friends, lodging (and perhaps employment and lodging for family members while the performer was touring), meals, candles, fuel, and a suit of livery once a year.”

Servants might have more than one occupational capacity (they might entertain and cook). Entertainers may have been employed part-time or only as needed. A household might have actors, singers, dancing henchmen, court fools, animal trainers, barbers, painters, writers, cooks, carpenters and musicians. Musicians were almost always present in the great households. All of the playwrights had some position in one or more patronage networks.

Any space could be a stage. Examples include Queen Katherine's bedchamber, King Henry VIII's tents, the Thames River for Edward VI's water tournaments, chapel choirs and lofts, and the great halls.

“Household revels too often blur the distinction between communal and personal space, actor and audience, public and private experiences, liturgical and secular activities.” The king that is performing might choose a dancing partner from the audience.

Productions could have specific political and religious agendas that were not allowed in the public theaters and could be made specific to the audience. Since the patron paid, designers were free to be more elaborate than in the public sphere. Plays were commissioned by aristocratic patrons, performed within their households, and toured by their players.

Women were active in private theater. They served as patrons, created household entertainments, sang, played musical instruments, spoke text, and danced.