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The Early Years

Stratford and Staging Practices

Even in remote, provincial Stratford, Shakespeare would have been familiar with professional theatre, some of it of the highest quality. When he was born, in 1564, playing was an itinerant profession: actors more-or-less nominally in the service of an aristocrat or one of the lesser gentry toured the country. They would wear the livery of their patron as they traveled from town to town, advertising his prestige. We will examine the practical realities of such a way of life later on, but for now let us note that several of these companies visited Stratford at times when Shakespeare might well have been there. Thanks to the efforts of Alan Somerset in collecting evidence of drama in *Warwickshire* for the ongoing *Records of Early English Drama* series (an invaluable project, which has already transformed our knowledge) we now have a complete picture of this, from payments made by Stratford Borough Corporation.¹

We learn that the Earl of Worcester's Men played there in 1576–7, 1580–1, 1581–2, and 1583–4.² (On this last visit they probably included Edward Alleyn, then at the beginning of his stellar acting career; we shall cross his path again in the course of the book: see Cerasano 2004a). The great Earl of Leicester's Men came in 1576–7 and 1587, his brother Earl of Warwick's Men in 1574–5; the Earl or Countess of Essex's Men visited in 1578–9, 1583–4 and 1587. The Earl of Derby's Men came in 1579–80, a year after a troupe patronized by the earl's son, Lord Strange (who were probably acrobats rather than actors). Lord Berkeley's Men (often written "Bartlett's") played in 1580–1 and 1582–3; and Lord Chandos's Men (from whom Shakespeare's company would one day recruit the great comic player, Robert Armin) played in 1582–3. The Earl of Oxford's Men performed in 1583–4 and Lord Stafford's Men in 1587. And the Queen's Men visited in 1587, 1593, and 1594 (Mulryne, 2006, 20). These included some of the finest troupes of the era: Leicester's, Warwick's and Derby's Men (as well as Strange's "tumblers") all played at court in this period, as well, of course, as the Queen's Men, the preeminent company of the 1580s.

A significant number of these patrons had principal residences either in Warwickshire (Leicester, Warwick, Berkeley) or in neighboring counties (Essex at Stafford in Staffordshire, Chandos in Gloucestershire), so asserting their local stature (Tiner, 2006, 88). Others – Derby, Oxford, and, of course, the Queen – were underlining their national standing. Stratford itself was probably never a prime target for the players, but it conveniently straddled routes – Leicester and Coventry to the north-east, Shrewsbury to the north-west, Bristol and Bath to the south-west, and Oxford to the south-east – which most certainly were places where they expected to do well. The great and wealthy wool center of Coventry, with its magnificent guildhall, was the single most popular venue for traveling players in the era.

In earlier years young William may have had privileged access to their performances, because his father – John Shakespeare – was a man of some standing. Over the years he held several responsible offices in the borough: constable, chamberlain (administering property and revenue) and in 1568, bailiff, a position equivalent to mayor. In 1571 he was elected Chief Alderman and deputy to his successor as bailiff. While he held such positions he and perhaps some of his family would have had priority seating when the players performed in Stratford's Guild Hall. The procedures for town visits by the players are described by R. Willis in *Mount Tabor or Private Exercises of a Penitent Sinner* (1639), written when he was seventy-five years old. In it he recalls "a stage-play which I saw when I was a child":

In the city of Gloucester the manner is (as I think it is in other like corporations) that when players of interludes come to town, they first attend the Mayor to inform him what nobleman's servants they are, and so get license for their public playing ... and if the Mayor likes the actors or would show respect to their lord and master, he appoints them to play their first play before himself and the Aldermen and Common Council of the city; and that is called the Mayor's play, where everyone that will comes in without money, the Mayor giving the players a reward he thinks fit to show respect unto them. At such a play my father took me with him and made me stand between his legs as he sat upon one of the benches where we saw and heard very well.

(Bentley, 1984, 189–94)

Did Shakespeare also stand between his father's legs and watch some of the leading players of the day in his own home town? We specifically know that the "Mayor's play" at Stratford would be staged in the Guild Hall for the back-to-front reason that in 1602 the town Corporation forbade such use. (As I have already flagged, much of our information comes to us obliquely, often because of legal disputes of one kind or another.) Whether this ban was as a result of growing puritanical resistance to theatre or because the Corporation wished to

preserve the dignity and fabric of the building we do not know (Mulryne, 2006, 10–13).³ Moreover, we are not actually sure in which room performances had been given: I pursue this issue to tease out a number of matters associated with late sixteenth-century playing.

The two-storey building, formerly the property of The Guild of the Holy Cross, passed into the control of the town Corporation in 1553. They allocated the upper floor to the newly-founded King Edward VI School, which William Shakespeare (as the son of an alderman) was entitled to attend; and they retained the lower floor for civic use. This leads some scholars to suppose that this lower room, on the ground floor, was where the actors performed. Alan Somerset, for example, describes this space: “with approximately eleven ft of headroom and a flat ceiling free of medial supports ... It measures approximately sixty-six ft long by twenty ft wide [20.1 m × 6.1 m]” (2006, 84). The few doors are not particularly convenient to a stage pitched at either end of the room, but the great length would give scope to curtain off one end, or set up canvas “houses,” as tiring room space (where actors changed costumes and kept props), allowing entrances and exits around the sides. Somerset estimates that it could have accommodated “an audience of between two hundred and three hundred seated ... upon benches”; this seems quite realistic, not least since the Elizabethans were, on average, smaller than we are – one reason why the reconstructed Globe on the Bankside holds only half the audience of the original.⁴ And Somerset concludes that “[w]e cannot be absolutely certain, but we are reasonably certain that this commodious lower room in the Stratford guildhall is the room in which Shakespeare first saw a professional production” (84–5).

One objection to this theory, however, is that the 11' headroom would hardly have allowed for the construction of a stage giving the audience a full view of the actors. A stage less than 4' off the ground would hardly give many in the audience a view of the action, while higher than that it might well inhibit a player like Edward Alleyn, who was “apparently a man of exceptional physical stature” (Cerasano, 2008). This is one reason that J. R. Mulryne thinks “[t]he upper Hall seems marginally more probable” as the site of performances; it has a high, vaulted, timber-beamed roof, like many Tudor halls. Another reason is that “any actor/producer/director, then or now, would prefer the commodious, bright and ample upper Hall” (2006, 15). He argues from archaeological evidence that by the time of the players' visits the upper Hall was divided into a room in its south end, used for the School (with an access passageway running down its east side), and a larger open space at the north end, available for Corporation use and so for performances. Mulryne estimates that the space at the north end measured approximately 38'4" by 21'8" (11.68 m × 6.60 m), making it remarkably similar in size and general shape to one of the buildings where Shakespeare himself has been supposed to have first practiced as an actor (17, n. 45: see pp. 55ff).

The positioning of a stage is not obvious, since once more the doors are not ideal. One possibility is that they used a raised dais at the north end of the room, a permanent fixture at the time; but it only measured 11' 8" by 5' (3.6 m × 1.5 m), a very confined performance space. Another is that the stage might have been placed at the south end, with ready access to the passageway running down the side of the schoolroom, which might itself have been used as a tiring room. As in our consideration of the lower Hall, however, these are modern instincts about what would work best for the actors and we need to consider the very real possibility that this was not the primary consideration of the Elizabethans. Think back to the Queen "on stage" in *Palamon and Arcite* (pp. 1–6). Any theatrical event of the era involving figures of authority was first a social event and decorum required that the social hierarchy should be acknowledged and appropriately visible. This would later be true – though in rather different ways – in the purpose-built commercial theatres. But in venues like this – colleges, guildhalls, private houses, and of course the court – it dictated that the hosts of the occasion (college masters and their fellows; mayors, aldermen, and members of the council; the lord and lady; the monarch) should be the real focus of attention, together with their honored guests. And the business of acting was secondary to this. We shall see this again clearly when we consider the first performances of Shakespeare's company at court, given in the Great Chamber at Greenwich, during the Revels season of 1594/5 (see pp. 118ff).

Alan Nelson has assembled considerable evidence, from records at the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, that stages there were normally constructed, not *on* the high-table dais, but just below it. The set-up might not have been as elaborate and spectacular as that for the Queen's visit to Oxford, described in the Introduction, but the principle would have been similar. The Master, senior fellows, and visiting dignitaries were seated on the dias, literally overlooking the performance. Others present sat on benches lower down the hall, and possibly even in a minstrel gallery if there was one (Nelson, 1992). Doors at either end of the hall would thus facilitate the entrance of the audience rather than of the actors, who may have had to make do with cloth-covered booths or ad hoc curtained-off spaces rigged near the stage for entrance and exit points, costume changes, and keeping properties. Where, however, scaffolding was used to erect seating for the audience (both before the stage and to both sides) it was possible to provide something more substantial. The inventory for such scaffolding used at Queens' College, Cambridge, mentions tiring houses on either side of the stage (Nelson, 1989, 691–2).

We may recall that in Bereblock's account of the Great Hall of Corpus Christi in 1566 he observed "On either side of the stage, magnificent palaces and most sumptuous houses are constructed for the comedies and masques." These were almost certainly the kind of structures (called "houses") which were used by the actors at court at this time, when they had no convenient way of entering or leaving the performance space. In the 1571/2 Revels season, for example, we

find William Lyzard paid the equivalent of a very respectable year's salary just for the paints used for these: "for gold, silver and sundry other colours by him spent in painting the houses that served for the plays, & players at the court ... [£13 15s 1d]" (Feuillerat, 1908, 141). No college or city corporation would go to that expense when royalty was not there to be impressed. But such structures could be very cheaply made and easily constructed, and possibly carried around by traveling actors.

The same principle is true of the college seating arrangements described by Alan Nelson: the less privileged members of the audience, sitting lower in the hall, would have seen the action against a backdrop of the Master and senior members of the college. And there is every reason to suppose that this would have been replicated at civic events such as the "Mayor's play" at Stratford Guild Hall, with the audience seeing the actors perform against a tableau of the bailiff, aldermen, and other dignitaries. In an unpublished paper of 2001, reflecting on the evidence accrued from the first eighteen volumes of the *Records of Early English Drama*, Sally-Beth MacLean offered this opinion about staging in guildhalls and the like:

Here we can only speculate, as we seldom have evidence even of demountable stage construction. However I think it is important to bear in mind [Robert] Tittler's emphasis on the symbolic significance of the mayor in his official capacity in the seat of town government – the power and authority of the host which would have been emphasized in these touring play performances. (a) If the mayor and other members of council were accustomed to sit at the high end of the hall, on the dais, how likely is it that they would have given pride of place there to mere players? The same question can be asked of players' performances in the private halls of the nobility. Alan Nelson's research and happy discoveries of descriptive documents for comparable performances in Cambridge college halls suggest that demountable stages were placed near the upper end, but not on the dais. (b) Certainly not at the lower or screens end where the honoured guests would have had to squint to get a view from their otherwise privileged seats at the opposite end! So much for another popular assumption. I would like to suggest that official performances in urban spaces were mounted with a keen awareness of civic hierarchy and that plays were more likely staged "in the round" but towards the upper end so that the mayor and council would have had the best view. And if we look at the stage sketch that survives of the Swan theatre in London, we will note the lords' viewing room above the stage rather than below it.⁵

For these reasons I am inclined to think that the upper Hall, with its dais, is where performances took place in Stratford. I also think it likely that similar

staging arrangements would have been the norm in the great halls of the nobility and gentry which the traveling players would also have graced as they moved around the country. I discuss the practices and protocols of the traveling players, which Shakespeare himself continued to experience even after he was normally settled in London, in the next chapters.

I must pause briefly to acknowledge that this argument about the staging flies in the face of one of the most popular theories about Elizabethan theatre, that advanced by Richard Southern in *The Staging of Plays before Shakespeare* (1973) and still often invoked. He was particularly struck by similarities between the hall screens at the bottom ends of many great halls of the era and what the De Witt/van Buchell drawing appeared to show of the interior of the Swan playhouse (see pp. 8ff). The wooden screens, often quite intricately carved, separated the hall itself from the kitchens and ancillary rooms beyond, or sometimes from the outside doors of the building; they usually had two substantial doors (classically “one-in, one-out” when food was being served) and many of them had so-called “minstrel galleries” above. The drawing very clearly shows two large doorways at the rear of the stage platform. Above them is a row of six windows or openings, from each of which one or two persons look out: a single gallery or possibly a row of boxes. The doors and the upper openings translate so readily into the serving doors and “minstrel gallery” of the hall screen that it is very easy to suppose that the latter inspired the former. The supposition is thus that performances in great halls were organized to focus on the hall screen, which acted as the rear of the acting area; the doors very conveniently allowed for entrances and exits, and the introduction of properties; the kitchens or adjacent rooms served as ad hoc tiring houses; the “minstrel gallery” allowed for action on the upper level, like the “balcony” scene [2.2.] in *Romeo and Juliet* or the entry of “Brabantio above” [1.1.83.1] in *Othello*. So felicitous was it, the argument runs, that this arrangement was later incorporated in the London amphitheaters.

There are, as we noted earlier, many caveats about the De Witt/van Buchell drawing. But the most compelling argument against this theory is that it flies in the face of all the evidence we have that social rank took precedence over all other considerations in the disposition of audiences at Elizabethan theatricals – certainly at court and in colleges but also, as I argue, virtually everywhere else as well. Social protocol and the very clear evidence of practice in the colleges and at court demand that the upper-end of the hall was used, with senior dignitaries sitting on the dais, the stage below them, and the rest of the audience arrayed on benches (or, in bigger venues, scaffolding), watching both the performance and their superiors. The rooms “above” in the Swan drawing are the lords’ rooms, a symbolic embodiment of that order, not a minstrels’ gallery (see p. 234).

Unless there were convenient alcoves adjacent to the stage, they would have required one or more canvas booths as tiring houses: the recessed windows in

the diagram of the Great Chamber at Whitehall and adjacent to the high table at Rufford Old Hall, for example, might well have been used (see pp. 120 and 57). But it is unlikely that the players would have been allowed to use doors that led to private quarters – such as that to the Queen’s Presence Chamber in the former venue or those to the Heskeths’ private rooms at the latter. They would have been treated with the respect due them as emissaries of their patrons, but there were limits to familiarity.

William Shakespeare may not have joined his father on the dias, but he would have seen him there – splendid in his robes and insignia of office, presiding over the players – from a relatively privileged position on the lower benches. But this cannot have lasted. John’s business evidently did not thrive; by the late 1570s he was in debt and stopped attending Corporation meetings. In 1586 he was replaced as alderman. The family would no longer have privileged access to Guild Hall performances, though William could have paid to attend the players’ commercial shows in town. Notice in R. Willis’s account that there is an implicit *quid pro quo* in the agreement between the mayor and the players. The “Mayor’s play” was offered in the spirit of a gift offering from the players’ patron to the worthies of the town (who did not personally pay to see it) and would be rewarded with a gratuity from the borough measured in proportion to the status of the patron. The audience in the limited space would be there by invitations only.

But the council would also permit a strictly limited number of commercial performances to take place in the town. So, for example, in 1580 the Gloucester Common Council authorized the Queen’s Men to play three times over three days in the town; those patronized by barons or nobles of higher degree (viscount, earl, or marquis) were permitted two performances over two days; and anyone with patrons of lower status would be allowed one performance. This is where the players would really hope to make their profit. In Stratford these shows probably took place in one of the inns in Bridge Street, of which the two principal were the Bear and the Swan – though records of such performances have rarely survived. I discuss playing in such inns in Chapter 2.

Princely Pleasures at Kenilworth

The issue of family status has a bearing on another theatrical event that the young Shakespeare might have observed. Did he attend any of the festivities that accompanied the great Earl of Leicester’s sumptuous entertainment of Queen Elizabeth at his Kenilworth estate for nineteen extravagant days in 1575? The whole affair is rumored to have cost Leicester a staggering £60,000 – a figure put in proportion by the relatively comfortable income of

£10 per year which we considered earlier (p. 17). Kenilworth is only fourteen miles from Stratford and if anyone from the borough was invited to attend it might well be the still-respected alderman and members of his family. (William's mother, Mary Arden, came from a notable Warwickshire family in her own right.)

What fuels interest in this possibility is the fact that, some twenty years later, Shakespeare included a passage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which might just glance at one of the spectacles on view at Kenilworth. Oberon asks Puck if:

Thou rememb'rest
 Since once I sat upon a promontory,
 And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
 Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
 That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
 And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
 To hear the sea-maid's music?

(2.1.148–54)

On August 18, 1575 there was a water-pageant on a large lake in Kenilworth's grounds, with a show of the Lady of the Lake, which the Queen watched from a bridge. This is described in a letter, ascribed to Robert Langham or Laneham:

And the Lady by and by, with her two nymphs, floating upon her movable islands (Triton on his mermaid skimming by) approached toward her Highness on the bridge: as well to declare that her Majesty's presence both so graciously thus wrought her deliverance ... and ... to present her Majesty (as a token of her duty and good heart) for her Highness's recreation with his gift, which was Arion that excellent and famous musician, in tire and appointment strange well seeming to his person, riding aloft upon his old friend the dolphin (that from head to tail was a four and twenty foot long) and swam hard by these islands. Herewith Arion, for these great benefits – after a few well couched words unto her Majesty of thanksgiving, in supplement of the same – began a delectable ditty of a song, well apted to a melodious noise, compounded of six several instruments all covert, casting sound from the dolphin's belly within; Arion the seventh, sitting thus singing (as I say) without.⁶

Interestingly, a different image emerges from a second account of the event, by the poet and courtier, George Gascoigne:

From thence her Majesty passing yet further on the bridge, Proteus appeared, sitting on a dolphin's back. And the dolphin was conveyed upon a boat, so that the oars seemed to be his fins. Within which dolphin a consort of music was secretly placed, the which sounded, and Proteus

clearing his voice, sang this song of congratulation, as well in behalf of the Lady distressed, as also in behalf of all the nymphs and gods of the sea.

(*Gascoigne, 1576*)

So one observer thought he saw an actor playing Arion, the Greek poet and lyre-player, singing on a dolphin; another saw Proteus, the shape-changing sea-god, doing it. The only mermaid involved, in Langham's account, was being ridden by Triton, another sea-deity. Did Shakespeare's memory play tricks on him over the years, or did he embroider the event for his own artistic purposes? Or, more prosaically, did Shakespeare simply read about these famous events in one or both of these printed accounts, and adapt them to his needs? Apart from anything else, there is no evidence that a wider public was allowed to witness the events at Kenilworth: Langham had a position at court and Gascoigne was employed by Leicester in devising some of the entertainments. We know that Shakespeare read widely and with a retentive memory. In *Twelfth Night* he would describe Viola's brother as "like Arion on the dolphin's back" (1.2.15), but surely from his copious reading of classical mythology rather than memories of long ago.

Mystery Cycles and Trade Guilds

One other possible experience of theatre in his youth may have made its mark. In 1579, when he was fifteen, Shakespeare could have witnessed one of the last performances of the great cycle of mystery plays at Coventry, staged on moving pageant wagons by the craft guilds around the streets of the old city.⁷ He seems to reference them in Hamlet's advice to the actors:

Oh, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant. It out-Herod's Herod. Pray you, avoid it. (3.2.8–14)

Herod's role in the *Massacre of the Innocents* pageant was one of ranting violence, associated with over-the-top acting, as apparently was that of Termagant, a supposed Moslem deity. The Elizabethan authorities waged a long campaign to suppress these mystery plays, which were closely associated with their Roman Catholic roots and the midsummer festival of Corpus Christi, which was not recognized by the Protestant Church of England. The local authorities in towns where they were traditionally staged – York, Chester and Wakefield, as well as Coventry – fought long and hard to keep them going, as much for the trade they attracted as for their religious associations.⁸ But eventually the

Queen's ministers prevailed. This brought to an end what must have been a strong tradition of amateur theatricals, tied closely to the local community and to the occupations of those who sponsored or performed in them. It perhaps opened up opportunities for the traveling players. As we shall see, many of Shakespeare's actor colleagues retained links with the trade guilds to which they had been attached (either by indenture or by family ties) before they became players. Robert Armin, for example, was apprenticed as a goldsmith; and Ben Jonson – a player before he became a dramatist – had been with the bricklayers. The organization of the London acting companies had some affinities with that of trade guilds.

Competing Authorities

What Shakespeare did not witness at first hand he doubtless heard discussed at great length by those who had. All the theatrical events we have discussed were staged with the clear intention of promoting their patrons and sponsors, of making an impact. Whatever attracted Shakespeare to the world of the theatre – the power of its language, the mystery of mimesis, the potential to travel away from provincial Warwickshire – there were some features of it that must have been apparent from his earliest years. Most particularly, professional acting – especially at its most accomplished levels – was closely associated with royalty and the aristocracy. It reflected Leicester's magnificence that he could stage such shows for his Queen and her court, as well as patronize the most famous acting troupe of the 1570s (who presumably took some of the roles that required professionals at Kenilworth: see MacLean, 2002). In this association the actors straddled at least two worlds. On the one hand they were formally household retainers, lowly members of an intensely hierarchical unit, organized around the service of their lord – and his representatives whenever they toured in his livery. On the other hand they were entrepreneurs, seeking to make a living in a developing marketplace – though one contested by a number of different parties, notably the Crown (the Queen's government); Parliament; their own aristocratic patrons; and local authorities, often in the form of their mayors and councils. The piecemeal suppression of the mystery plays shows that these parties did not always see eye-to-eye or work harmoniously together.

Much of Shakespeare's early career was to be overshadowed by tensions between the Privy Council (the Queen's leading ministers) and the City of London authorities over the control of the players. There is a classic demonstration of this in an incident involving James Burbage, builder of the Theatre and father of Shakespeare's colleague, Richard. (It is described on p. 31.) The incident resolved itself into a confrontation between Burbage, standing on his dignity as a servant of Lord Hunsdon, a Privy Councilor, and William Fleetwood, the City's most senior judge. The clash demonstrates the importance the

players set by their lords' patronage: Burbage thought he was untouchable as a member of a Privy Councilor's household, and was somewhat abashed when Hunsdon himself lent support to Fleetwood. To their chagrin, the City had no authority over the Theatre and its neighbor playhouse, the Curtain (see pp. 83–4). But Fleetwood felt that the disturbance which led to the confrontation sufficiently affected the City (or could be represented as doing so) that it was necessary to take a stand. Hunsdon at least affected to take Fleetwood's concern seriously enough to allow him to take Burbage to law. The Court and the City sparred endlessly, but always with at least a show of respect for each other's authority.

Straws in the Wind

Let us consider a few of the straws in the wind, blown at the actors by those power struggles, in the years when Shakespeare was growing up. In 1572 Parliament passed An Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds, which was meant to control the growing numbers of "masterless men," people with no fixed abode or regular means of support, uncomfortably outside the traditional structures of control: Edgar's disguise as "Poor Tom" in *King Lear* gives us a flavor of the problem. Among those included in these categories were "Common Players in interludes, & Minstrels, not belonging to any Baron of this Realm or towards any other honourable Personage of greater Degree" (*EPF*, 62; see Beier, 1985). This made it essential for any players who wished to make a living by touring beyond the county in which they resided to have the patronage of one of the aristocratic elite of the country. There were only about eighty noble families in England in Elizabeth's reign and by no means all of them wanted to be associated with professional players. The Act removed the former right of knights and gentry to offer such patronage, making it an exclusive privilege. Sir Ralph Lane of Northamptonshire, for example, patronized a company led by Laurence Dutton, which was proficient enough to be called to perform at court in the winter of 1571/2. But the following year they had had to find themselves a patron of greater standing: the Earl of Lincoln, the Lord Admiral (Gurr, 1996, 170–1).

Even the Earl of Leicester's players were disturbed enough to seek reassurance from their patron:

we therefore, your humble servants and daily orators your players, for avoiding all inconvenience that may grow by reason of the said statute, are bold to trouble your lordship with this our suit, humbly desiring your honour that (as you have been always our good lord and master) you will now vouchsafe to retain us at this present as your household servants and daily waiters, not that we mean to crave any further stipend or

benefit at your lordship's hands but our liveries as we have had, and also your honour's licence to travel amongst our friends as we do usually once a year, and as other noblemen's players do and have done in time past, whereby we may enjoy our faculty in your lordship's name as we have done heretofore. (*EPE*, 205)

They persist in the polite fiction that their touring amounts to "travel amongst our friends as we do usually once a year," as once it might have been. But it was by now a fully professional operation, albeit conducted within the courtesies of Elizabethan social constraint. The first signatory to this letter was the leader of Leicester's Men, the aforementioned James Burbage. No individual was more influential in shaping the theatrical world that Shakespeare knew. He probably visited Stratford with Leicester's Men in 1573/4 and possibly 1576/7, though by the latter date he had other business on his mind: the building of the Theatre, the first successful purpose-built playhouse in London since Roman times.⁹

Box 1.1 James Burbage¹⁰

James Burbage (circa 1531–1597) was a joiner (woodworker), actor, and theatrical entrepreneur. His family appear to derive from Bromley in Kent, some ten miles south-east of London. He was apprenticed in London as a joiner, but by 1572 was established as a player with Leicester's Men. Indeed by then he was their leader, so it is likely that he had been playing for some time. This troupe was founded in 1564 and, under the patronage of the Queen's favorite, had become a leading company. Burbage was the lead signatory on a letter to the earl, begging him to certify them as members of his household, in order to avoid legislation that would render them vagabonds and masterless men (p. 29). In May 1574 the first royal patent to players was issued to Leicester's Men, licensing them to play in London and elsewhere under the authority of the court.

On April 23 1559 Burbage had married Ellen, the daughter of Thomas Brayne, a tailor and freeman of the Girdlers' Company. Two of their children have significant roles in our narrative: Cuthbert Burbage, baptised on June 15, 1565, who was never a player but was closely associated with the theatrical business all his life; and Richard Burbage, baptized on July 7, 1568, who was to play Richard III, Hamlet, Othello, and (we believe) most of the other leading tragic roles in Shakespeare's plays. Ellen Burbage's brother, John Brayne, was a member of the Grocer's Company (guild). In 1567 Brayne hired two carpenters to build a playhouse in the yard of the Red Lion, a farmhouse east of Aldgate, near Mile End in East London. It apparently consisted of little more than a stage (5 ft [1.52 m] high, 40 ft [12.19 m] "in length," north to south, 30 ft [9.14 m] "in breadth," east to west, with a portion to be left unboarded, for a trapdoor), a "turret" rising some

30 ft above the stage, with a floor some 7 ft [2.13 m] from the top (possibly for upper-level playing), and scaffolding to hold the audience. But it was the first purpose-fitted professional playhouse in England since Roman times. It was due to open with *The Story of Sampson* on July 8, 1567; it did not, however, flourish and little more is known about it (EPF, 290–4).

In 1576 Brayne went into partnership with Burbage to build a much more substantial playhouse named, on Roman precedent, the Theatre; doubtless, like Philip Henslowe's grocer partner in the later building of the Rose, he expected to make a profit from the food and drink sold on-site, as well as the playing. The details of their enterprise are related below (see pp. 83ff).

By 1584 Burbage had left Leicester's patronage (possibly after Leicester's Men lost many of their leading players to the newly-created Queen's Men) and sought instead that of the queen's cousin Henry, Lord Hunsdon, already a Privy Councillor and shortly to become Lord Chamberlain of the royal household. This was of some consequence in June of that year, when a series of disturbances in the region of the Theatre and the neighboring Curtain led the City of London authorities to seek their "suppressing and pulling down" (ES, 4: 298). William Fleetwood, the Recorder of London (the City's principal judge), reported to Lord Treasurer Burghley in a letter of June 18 that he had been advised:

to send for the owner of the Theatre, who was a stubborn fellow, and to bind him. I did so; he sent me word that he was my lord of Hunsdon's man, and that he would not come at me, but he would in the morning ride to my lord; then I sent the under-sheriff for him and he brought him to me; and at his coming he stouted me out very hasty; and in the end I showed him my lord his master's hand [signature] and then he was more quiet; but to die for it he would not be bound.¹¹ And then I, minding to send him to prison, he made suit that he might be bound to appear at the [court of] oyer and determiner, the which is tomorrow¹²; where he said he was sure the court would not bind him, being a Councillor's man. And so I have granted his request, where he shall be sure to be bound or else like to do worse. (ibid.)

It is not clear how matters were resolved, but the playhouses remained safe.

Burbage's relations with John Brayne deteriorated, with money at the heart of the contention. Keeping track of profits, probably derived from a share of the takings when a company of players used the Theatre as a London base, must have been difficult – and readily disputable. Brayne died in 1586 without making a will, and his widow Margaret pursued his claim to a moiety (half) of the playhouse and its profits. She made Robert Miles, a freeman of the Goldsmiths' Company, her agent. The matter dragged on in the courts between 1590 and Margaret's own death in 1593. This included the notorious events of

November 16, 1590, recounted elsewhere, when Richard Burbage repelled Miles and Margaret Brayne with a broom (see p. 61). A further confrontation occurred in May 1591, with James Burbage still loudly refusing to accede to any court orders. And only days after that there was a falling out between Burbage and members of the Admiral's Men, over the division of the take, which led to the Admiral's and Strange's Men leaving the Theatre and transferring to the Rose. Burbage was indeed a "stubborn fellow," given to "stout[ing]" people out.

As early as 1585 Burbage attempted to extend his lease on the land on which the Theatre stood. But the landlord, Giles Allen, evaded the request and it eventually became clear that he would not extend it beyond April 1597 – by which time it was the permanent base of Shakespeare's Chamberlain's Men. In 1596 the Burbages moved from their house in Shoreditch, near the Theatre, to Blackfriars, a prosperous liberty on the north bank of the Thames, within the City's walls but outside its jurisdiction. Between 1576 and 1584 the Children of the Chapel Royal, under their Master William Hunnis and his deputy, Richard Farrant, had performed their plays for the public in a playhouse constructed in the hall of the great former friary complex of the Blackfriars. Burbage now paid £600 for a different part of this old stone complex and a further £400 to have it converted to a splendid new playhouse. Clearly some of this was done on credit. As Cuthbert deposed many years later: "our father purchased it at extreme rates & made it into a playhouse with great charge and trouble" (Gurr, 2004a: Appendix 3, 278). In November 1596, however, some of the more distinguished residents of the Blackfriars petitioned the Privy Council to make known "what inconveniencies were likely to fall upon them by a common playhouse which was then preparing to be erected there, whereupon their honours then forbade the use of the said house, for plays" (ES, 4: 320). Embarrassingly these petitioners had included the second Lord Hunsdon, who had inherited the patronage of the Chamberlain's Men from his deceased father (p. 130). Apparently the boy players who were formally attached to the court had been acceptable in the Blackfriars, but the adult players would make this a "common playhouse," which was not.

James Burbage did not live to see the resolution of the problems this posed for Shakespeare's company, denied the use of both their old and new playhouses. I pursue this elsewhere (see p. 198). He died in February 1597. He left only a modest £37, but he had already conveyed the lease of the Theatre and its residual value to Cuthbert, and the Blackfriars property to Richard. Fortunately they were to collaborate amicably about realizing the potential of both properties. James Burbage's gambles in building both the Theatre and the second Blackfriars playhouse were foundational to the whole history of professional playing in Elizabethan London, and in particular to that of Shakespeare's Chamberlain's Men.

A System of Protection and Control

Leicester and others at the court may have reflected on the consequences for themselves of Parliament's statute restricting the patronage of players. Certainly in 1574 his players stole a march on their rivals. They were granted a royal patent calculated to protect them from the attentions of lesser authorities. It "licensed and authorised" them "to use, exercise, and occupy the art and faculty of playing comedies, tragedies, interludes, stage plays, and such other like as they have already used and studied ... as well for the recreation of our loving subjects, as for our solace and pleasure when we shall think good to see them." This applied "as well within our City of London and liberties of the same, as also within the liberties and freedoms of any our cities, towns, boroughs &c. ... throughout our realm of England." They were to be allowed to play "without any your lets, hindrance or molestation," subject to some key conditions: "Provided that the said comedies [etc.] be by the Master of our Revels ... before seen and allowed, and that the same be not published or shown in the time of common prayer, or in the time of great and common plague in our said City of London" (*EPF*, 206).

There were constant concerns about the players drawing people away from the churches and also helping to spread the plague in London – a problem which only grew as the city did. The patent looked to answer those concerns, and also to address what amounted to the issue of censorship: who should decide what was acceptable to be performed? The court put itself forward as the true arbiter, in the form of the Master of the Revels, whose primary function was to oversee theatricals and entertainment for the Queen. Any play "seen and allowed" by him was deemed to be fit to be shown before her and should not therefore be challenged by others. This was soon to be extended to a system of censorship and licensing for the plays of all major companies but was resisted, notably, by City of London authorities, who really wanted to apply their own terms and conditions (Dutton 1991 and see pp. 84ff).

The patent specifically draws attention to "our solace and pleasure when we shall think good to see them" – the Queen's royal plural. At Christmas 1578 the Privy Council wrote to the Lord Mayor of London, requesting him:

to suffer the Children of her Majesty's Chapel, the servants of the Lord Chamberlain [the Earl of Sussex], the Earl of Warwick, the Earl of Leicester, the Earl of Essex and the Children of Paul's, and no companies else, to exercise playing within the City, whom their Lordships have only allowed thereunto by reason that the companies aforementioned are appointed to play this time of Christmas before her Majesty.

(Gurr, 1996, 55)

The battle was developing over rights to perform in and around London. The Privy Council's trump card was invariably that playing must be allowed because

it amounted to rehearsing for performance at court, before the Queen. But, with some concession to the City authorities, such playing was henceforth to be limited to an elite circle of troupes who had a realistic chance of being asked to perform at court. What the Privy Council expected in return was that the adult players be allowed to perform in inner-city inns, which was always their preference in winter until the practice was phased out in the 1590s.¹³ The favored companies would change over time, as patrons faded away or tastes changed, but they never numbered above six (as here) and usually rather less. This would be critical to Shakespeare's career.

One last straw in the wind: in 1575 the Laurence Dutton whom we last observed moving from Sir Robert Lane's company to that of Lord Admiral Clinton now moved (with his brother, John) to that of the Earl of Warwick, one of those companies listed in 1578 as "appointed to play this time of Christmas before her Majesty." For some reason the two brothers moved again in 1580, to a new company established by the Earl of Oxford. This elicited an anonymous satirical response: "The Duttons and their fellow-players, forsaking the Earl of Warwick their master, became followers of the Earl of Oxford, and wrote themselves his *comedians*, which certain gentlemen altered and made *chameleons*" (*ES*, 2: 98). (The Elizabethans commonly described players as "comedians." It does not imply that they only appeared in comic plays.) Wry verses followed. But this pointed to serious underlying issues: the quasi-feudal ties of servants to their masters were being preempted by other forces, which must have boiled down to money. The precise motivation here is actually rather opaque. The defection of the Duttons and some of their followers seems to have ensured that Warwick's Men never appeared at court again and the company may even have been wound up. But Oxford's Men were not invited to court until 1584, by which time (as we shall see) the Duttons had moved on again. They were evidently chancers, but the market was moving in their direction.

Roads Not Taken

We may pause to consider that there were various forms of theatre hypothetically available to Shakespeare for which, whether by choice or otherwise, he did *not* write. If he did see any of the *Princely Pleasures* at Kenilworth, he did not himself script any such occasional drama for royalty or aristocracy. These were often scripted by gentlemen amateurs like George Gascoigne, using their pens to seek other forms of advancement; but Shakespeare's friend and rival, Ben Jonson, a true literary professional, eventually built a career around writing such entertainments, especially the court masques which graced the court of King James and Queen Anne almost every year from 1605 to 1625. Shakespeare might offer a representation of such shows in *Love's Labor's Lost* or *The Tempest*, but never the real thing. Nor did he write shows for the

artisans of the great London livery companies (trade guilds). Although the mystery plays had been suppressed in the provinces, the guilds were still involved in theatricals in London, most notably in the Lord Mayors' Shows which developed from the mid-sixteenth century. Every year on October 28 the new Lord Mayor was installed in the City; on the following day he went upriver to Westminster to take the oath to the king, and that day became an occasion for revelry both on water and on land, with pageants paid for by the livery company to which this Lord Mayor belonged. George Peele, Anthony Munday, Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton, John Webster, and Thomas Heywood all wrote "books" for these shows – but not William Shakespeare (Bergeron, 2003; Lancashire, 2009).

And one final omission: although Shakespeare wrote many memorable female roles for the boy actors who were recruited into his companies, he never wrote for any of the all-boy companies (see p. 270). The Children of the Queen's Chapel and the Children of Paul's (early favorites of Queen Elizabeth and both mentioned in the 1578 Privy Council letter) went out of business, the one in 1584, the other shortly after 1590, but both were revived around 1599/1600. As we shall see, the Children of the Chapel – the "little eyases" mentioned in the folio text of *Hamlet* (2.2.338–62) – have a role in Shakespeare's career, but he never wrote for them or their ilk: unlike John Marston, Ben Jonson, George Chapman, Thomas Middleton, John Day, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, and others (see Shapiro 1977, 2009; Bly 2000, 2009; Munro 2005). All of these omissions may have arisen from the contractual conditions Shakespeare negotiated with the companies for whom he did write, but they do make his career distinctively different from those of many of his contemporaries.

To the best of our knowledge, Shakespeare wrote exclusively for adult playing companies, normally performing in the purpose-built outdoor amphitheatres in the London suburbs. Over time we know that his plays were performed specifically at Newington Butts, the Theatre, the Curtain, and the Globe. They were also performed at inns within the city. And latterly they were performed at the indoor Blackfriars playhouse. But they were also performed at court, in a variety of royal palaces: Hampton Court, Greenwich, Richmond, and Whitehall. And at other great establishments, such as the Inns of Court (law schools), as in the 1594 fiasco when they performed *The Comedy of Errors* in impossible conditions at Gray's Inn (see p. 132); and at the London houses of grandees such as their patron, the younger Lord Hunsdon (e.g. March 6, 1600, when they performed *1 Henry IV* for the visiting Flemish Ambassador). But there were occasions, usually dictated by the plague, when they had to take to the roads, just as those companies which visited Stratford in his youth had done; the 1603 first quarto of *Hamlet* tells us that it had "been divers times acted ... in the City of London: as also in the two Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and elsewhere" (title page). The university authorities, particularly at

Cambridge, often tried to prevent professional players from performing near the colleges (though there was an active tradition of *amateur* playing and play-writing within them). But the players found venues just outside university jurisdiction, to which students and scholars flocked (White 2009; *EPT*, 113–16).

And these would just have been two of the stops in tours which took in numerous guildhalls, inns and great houses (such as that of Sir John Harington of Exton at Burley on the Hill in Rutland, where it was probably Shakespeare's company who performed *Titus Andronicus* on New Year's Day 1596).¹⁴ Elizabethan plays had to be portable in this sense, which meant that they had to be adaptable – few venues outside of the professional playhouses, for example, would have had upper stages or trapdoors; but it does not follow that they were all written to the same blue-print. *Shakespeare's Theatre* aims to trace such differences and the circumstances which generated them.

Notes

- 1 Somerset's volume awaits publication, but scholars such as Elza Tiner (2006) and J. R. Mulryne (2007) have been allowed access to his findings. Details of the REED project can be found at its web site, <http://www.reed.utoronto.ca/>. Of particular value is their *Patrons and Performances Web Site* (<http://link.library.utoronto.ca/reed/>).
- 2 Many records relate to a fiscal year spanning two calendar years and cannot be dated more precisely. A payment to Worcester's "players" in 1568–9 is much lower than others and may refer to musicians rather than to actors. Several other payments are similarly open to interpretation.
- 3 As early as 1571–2 Liverpool denied use of their town hall to all but the most prestigious companies, and even they had to pay 5s. in advance against the cost of subsequent repairs (George, 1991, 39).
- 4 The seating plan for "Shakespeare's Globe" allows for 857 bodies, plus 700 standing "groundlings." The original was said to hold 3,000. Fire regulations partly explain the reduction, but body size seems to be the main contributing factor.
- 5 MacLean, 2001, 8–9, kindly shared with me by the author. Her internal references are (a) "Tittler, 1991, 105–18"; and (b) "see Nelson, 1994, 16–60 for full discussion and diagrams of the Queens' and Trinity College hall stages in particular. For a popular (but I think erroneous) view of lower end hall staging, see J. Leeds Barroll *et al.*, 1975, 128–30." In private correspondence, Professor MacLean adds: "Evidence accumulated since that time has not changed my view, by the way."

- 6 Quoted from Langham, 1575. Langham is only identified from some clues within the letter. The *Letter* might be a joke at his expense, possibly by William Patten, another courtier who was certainly at the Kenilworth entertainments.
- 7 “Mystery” here is an old term for a trade or craft and refers to the performers, not to the subject-matter of the plays.
- 8 The correspondence about the suppression of the mystery plays in Coventry is not very revealing. But see *EPT*, 64–9, for that relating to York, Chester, and Wakefield.
- 9 Strictly speaking the Red Lion, built in Mile End in 1567, was the first purpose-built Elizabethan theatre but it seems not to have thrived beyond its first season. see p. 30; Ingram, 1992, 92–113.
- 10 This section is particularly indebted to Wallace, 1913; Ingram, 1992; and Edmond, 2004.
- 11 This presumably refers to being bound over to keep the peace, or held responsible for keeping order, rather than physically restrained. The issue was one of authority over someone in the service of a senior minister of the Queen.
- 12 A commission of Oyer and Terminer (Anglo-French, literally meaning “to hear and determine”) was one under which a judge of assize sat. He was charged with enquiring into all treasons, felonies and misdemeanours committed in its jurisdiction and resolving it by law. Burbage doubtless assumed that such a court would respect his status as Hunsdon’s man more than Fleetwood did.
- 13 The boy companies did not need this permission. The Blackfriars playhouse was outside the City’s jurisdiction (see p. 197), while Paul’s playhouse was in the cathedral precinct, on church property.
- 14 The element of doubt is when the Lord Chamberlain’s Men acquired ownership of *Titus*, which was written before Shakespeare joined them. The 1594 quarto tells us that it had been “been played by the Right Honourable the Earl of Pembroke, the Earl of Derby, and the Earl of Sussex their servants” – probably successively, as companies broke up and reorganized during the prolonged plague. The 1600 quarto adds “and the Lord Chamberlain” to the list.