

English Renaissance Drama

Peter Womack

English Renaissance Drama

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English Renaissance Drama

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Introduction

Imagine putting the clock back by exactly four hundred years, so that I finish writing this book in the summer of 1605. In the spring I could have seen the first performance of *King Lear*, followed a few weeks later by *Eastward Ho!*, a topical satire two of whose authors, Ben Jonson and George Chapman, are still in jail as a result of it. In the meantime, Thomas Middleton is producing a string of comedies of contemporary London life, a genre he invented about a year ago. *Macbeth*, *Volpone* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* are currently being written; all three will have had their first performances by the time this book comes out in the middle of 1606. This is a schedule whose energy and ambition are unmatched in the history of English drama. The year 1605–6 is an *annus mirabilis* in the middle of an extraordinary half-century: to get the measure of it, we could wonder which five new plays of 2005–6 will be holding the stage in the early twenty-fifth century. Besides marvelling at it, there are two things to say about it by way of introduction to this guide.

First, the site of this extraordinary productivity was the theatre. As far as we can tell, all these plays were staged as soon as they were written, and printed only after they had been staged: they were shows first and books second. Their making was a theatrical rather than a literary process in the sense that, typically, the writers were not independent authors, but theatre managers, collaborators, dramatizers, adaptors. The pace of production, the visual and formal conventions, the size of the cast, the distinction of genres, the language spoken on the stage – all these things were determined in the playhouse rather than the study. In a sense, the scripts were produced partly by individual poets, but partly by the fast-

moving theatrical culture to which – more or less closely, more or less discontentedly – they all belonged.

To reflect that mode of work, this guide to drama will concentrate not so much on dramatists as on the institution they worked in, not on the personal emphases that distinguish Massinger from Middleton, or Beaumont from Fletcher, but rather on what they all shared. Accordingly, the first two substantive sections are ‘The Set-Up’ – an analytic description of the early modern theatre and its social and material environment – and ‘Background Voices’ – an account of some of the discourses and tones out of which plays were made, the raw materials, as it were, to which all dramatists had access. Only then is there a section on the principal ‘Writers’ of English Renaissance plays, giving a brief biographical account of each, and focusing on each one’s particular relationship with the theatre.

In other words, I have deliberately downplayed the category of authorship. This decision has an effect of paradox, because one of the people who wrote for the early modern stage happens to have become the most famous author on the planet. One view of this phenomenon is that it is a posthumous distortion – that if the mechanisms of eighteenth-century publishing and nineteenth-century imperialism had worked slightly differently, we would now be patronizing the Royal Jonson Company, or securing our credit cards with holographic images of Marlowe. I should perhaps say that I don’t share this view: it seems to me that Shakespeare’s personal mastery of the medium was of a different order to everyone else’s, and that what made 1605–6 not just a good year but an astonishing one was the arrival in the repertoire of *Lear* and *Macbeth*. But that is a point on which readers of this book can freely make up their own minds; the trickier question concerns Shakespeare’s proper place in a guide to English Renaissance drama. If he is placed according to his position in our knowledge and understanding of Elizabethan theatre, he will simply take over the book. If he is excluded – a fairly common strategy, which makes ‘Renaissance drama’ mean everyone *else’s* plays – that leaves a bizarre hole in the centre of the dramatic landscape. Shakespeare was, after all, not an obscure figure in his own time. He was much quoted, much alluded to, much imitated; his collected plays were grandiosely published within a few years of his death; for most of his career he was the principal dramatist in the most successful of the theatre companies; he was the only dramatist who retired rich. In short, he was one of the leading playwrights

of his age, not only in bardolatrous retrospect but also at the time. To represent the drama of 1590–1610 without him would be to misrepresent it. In this dilemma, what I have done is to refer to Shakespeare's plays readily and often, considering them, however, not as products of an individual imagination but as uses (sometimes supremely exact and forceful uses) of a common language. To the limited extent that this is a book about Shakespeare, then, it is about the collective character of what we call his genius. He didn't become Shakespeare all by himself.

The second point to make about the 1605–6 season concerns the tempo of production. I mentioned only the better-known plays; in the season as a whole there were probably thirty or forty new productions, mounted by four or five London companies between them. That was on top of the existing repertoire, which was already large: hobbled by official prohibitions, companies needed to act every day they could, and to keep drawing audiences by changing the programme every day. These are the imperatives of an entertainment industry: underlying the immense expressive range of the great plays was a technical fluency that came from high turnover, precarious success, and the relentless demand for material. Today, the scripts that survive from this business do so primarily in academic contexts, so we tend to think of them as academic texts, and to ask what values they embody, what ideological problems they address, what doctrines they are designed to enforce or question. And of course it is bound to be true that playwrights also aspired to be moralists, political activists, representatives of this or that social or confessional grouping. But before they could be any of those things in practice, they had to be entertaining. Academics tend to underestimate the seriousness and complexity of this requirement, perhaps because their own audience is a captive one.

To correct that underestimation, this guide adopts an attitude of conscious superficiality. In discussing the selection of 'Key Plays', it often neglects the question of what the play means in favour of the question of what pleasure it affords, and how (and whether) it works. Similarly, for the final substantive section, I have chosen not to identify the 'themes' or 'topics' which appear at the same point in other books in this series, but instead to consider a range of 'Actions That A Man Might Play' – the things that are literally done on the stage – and to ask what makes them interesting to watch. I hope the effect of these decisions is to make the book itself more entertaining than it would otherwise have been. There

are too many critical essays about these reckless and inventive scripts which, unforgivably, make them sound dull.

Note on Dates and Readings

Throughout this book, the date attached to a play is the year of its first performance, not necessarily the year it was written, or the year it was published. Very often, these dates are uncertain: the early modern theatre kept no systematic record of performances, and its chronology has been established by scholarly detective work that includes a good deal of guessing. Since the exact date is often not important, I have simply adopted the dates given in the standard reference work, Alfred Harbage's *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700*, revised by S. Schoenbaum (London: Routledge, 1989), and not added the many question-marks and caveats which the state of the evidence strictly requires. Whenever a play receives more than a passing mention I have given its date, except in the case of 'key plays', which are asterisked.

Getting access to the texts of these plays is also a matter of making reasonable compromises. Most of the playwrights are available in university libraries in multi-volume editions of their collected works – but in some cases these editions are well over a century old, and very dated in their presentation of the text, their sense of what sort of notes and explanations a reader needs, even in their assumptions about who wrote what. Wherever a relatively modern and student-friendly edition is available, it offers a much better way of getting at the play. Most of the plays that are studied or performed today can be found in single-play series such as the New Mermaids from A. & C. Black and W. W. Norton, or the Revels Plays from Manchester University Press, or else in the selected editions produced by Penguin and by the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses. It can also happen that a play is republished to coincide with a new production in the theatre: these editions should be treated with a little care, because sometimes they give the acting text of the new production, which may well be heavily adapted from the original. There is nothing wrong with adaptation, but it's as well to know what you're reading.

In this rather muddled situation, I have elected to be user-friendly rather than consistent. Each entry in the 'Writers' section notes the fullest edition of a dramatist's complete plays, however old and dusty it is. But

when I am discussing an individual play, in the 'Key Plays' section or elsewhere, I have used a helpful and readily available modern edition. All the editions used are listed in the bibliography at the end of the book.

Some editors choose to preserve the archaic (and various) spelling of the earliest texts, others use modern spelling. I have modernized the spelling in all my quotations, so as not to give the impression that some Renaissance writers are more ancient than others.

It is worth adding that all these scripts are also available in electronic form. Two databases produced by Chadwyck-Healey both include virtually all the extant drama texts from 1576–1642 and beyond: Literature Online (www.lion.chadwyck.co.uk) and Early English Books Online (www.eebo.chadwyck.com). Neither of these resources is in the public domain, but many university libraries are subscribers, so they make an enormous library of drama available to students. And there is also a selection of full texts on the open web, less comprehensive, but large and growing.

Acknowledgements

I'm grateful to Andrew McNeillie for suggesting this project, to the University of East Anglia for giving me the time to complete it, to Tony Gash for literally inexhaustible advice and encouragement, and above all to Laura Scott, the reader without whom there would be no text.

Timeline

With a few exceptions, this table logs only those plays and events which I have touched on elsewhere in the book. The idea is to avoid burdening the reader with items whose significance she has no way of seeing. It does mean, though, that the table is not a safe guide to the history of the period, as it omits many things which a different point of view might register as centrally important.

Plays are assigned to the year of first performance, other writings to the year of first publication unless otherwise stated. Performance dates are of course subject to the health warning I issued in the Introduction. As for the writers, I have tried to show when they entered and left the theatre rather than the world; so there are no births in the timeline, and deaths only in the cases where a dramatist died more or less in harness. If anyone is referred to by surname alone, he has an entry in the 'Writers' section. As throughout the book, titles discussed in the 'Key Plays' section are asterisked.

	In the theatre	Events and publications
1576	The Theatre, Shoreditch, opens Children's company begins playing commercially at Blackfriars	
1577	The Curtain playhouse opens John Northbrooke, <i>A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays and Interludes</i>	Francis Drake's world voyage (–1580) Raphael Holinshed, <i>Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland</i>

	In the theatre	Events and publications
1580	Last (unsuccessful) attempt to stage biblical cycle plays in York	Population of London about 100,000 Proclamation prohibits building in City of London because of overcrowding
1581	The Master of the Revels is commissioned to regulate all playing companies	Philip Sidney writes <i>Arcadia</i> Thomas Newton and others, <i>Seneca His Ten Tragedies</i>
1582		Philip Sidney writes <i>Astrophil and Stella</i> and <i>The Defence of Poesy</i>
1583	Formation of the Queen's Men Edward Alleyn begins acting career Philip Stubbes, <i>An Anatomy of Abuses</i> , attacks theatre, fashion and popular festivities	
1584		End of Elizabeth's last marriage negotiations opens the way to the cult of the Virgin Queen
1585		Declaration of war with Spain (-1604)
1586	<i>The Famous Victories of Henry V</i> Richard Tarlton at the height of his fame	Death of Philip Sidney
1587	Kyd, <i>The Spanish Tragedy</i> * Marlowe, <i>Tamburlaine the Great</i> * Rose playhouse built	Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots Launch of papal crusade against England
1588	Thomas Lodge, <i>The Wounds of Civil War</i>	Failure of Spanish invasion force, the 'Armada'
1589	Greene, <i>Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay</i> Peele's first play	Richard Hakluyt, <i>The Principal Navigations of the English Nation</i>

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| <p>1590 Greene, <i>The Scottish History of James IV</i>
 Peele, <i>The Old Wives Tale</i>
 Shakespeare, <i>1 Henry VI</i>
 Children's companies close down</p> | <p>Thomas Lodge, <i>Rosalind</i>
 Philip Sidney, <i>Arcadia</i>
 Edmund Spenser, <i>The Faerie Queene</i>, Books I–III</p> |
| <p>1591 <i>Arden of Faversham</i></p> | |
| <p>1592 <i>Thomas of Woodstock</i>
 Marlowe, <i>Edward II</i>, <i>Doctor Faustus</i>*
 Shakespeare, <i>The Comedy of Errors</i>,
 <i>Richard III</i></p> | <p>Thomas Nashe, <i>Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil</i>
 Death of Greene
 Plague (–1594)</p> |
| <p>1593 Arrest and interrogation of Kyd
 Death of Marlowe</p> | <p>Marlowe, <i>Hero and Leander</i>
 Shakespeare, <i>Venus and Adonis</i></p> |
| <p>1594 Heywood, <i>The Four Prentices of London</i>
 Establishment of Lord Admiral's Men and Lord Chamberlain's Men; emergence of Richard Burbage as Lord Chamberlain's Men's leading actor</p> | <p>First of five consecutive bad harvests
 Start of Irish insurgency
 Thomas Nashe, <i>The Unfortunate Traveller</i></p> |
| <p>1595 Anthony Munday and others, <i>Sir Thomas More</i>
 Shakespeare, <i>Richard II</i>*
 Swan playhouse built</p> | <p>Edmund Spenser, <i>Amoretti</i></p> |
| <p>1596 Shakespeare, <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>, <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
 Death of Peele</p> | <p>Edmund Spenser, <i>The Faerie Queene</i>, Books I–VI
 Drake's last (unsuccessful) voyage</p> |
| <p>1597 Shakespeare, <i>Henry IV</i>
 Edward Alleyn withdraws from full-time acting
 Chapman, Dekker and Heywood begin writing for the stage</p> | <p>Francis Bacon, <i>Essays</i>
 John Dowland, <i>First Book of Songs</i>
 The 'Islands Voyage' (unsuccessful naval expedition to the Azores)</p> |
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	In the theatre	Events and publications
1598	Jonson, <i>Every Man In His Humour</i> * First of the series of 'Parnassus' plays at Cambridge (-1601)	James VI of Scotland, <i>The True Law of Free Monarchies</i> John Marston, <i>The Scourge of Villainy</i> Anti-vagrancy law
1599	Chapman, <i>All Fools</i> Dekker, <i>The Shoemakers' Holiday</i> * Jonson, <i>Every Man Out Of His Humour</i> Marston, <i>Antonio and Mellida</i> Shakespeare, <i>As You Like It</i> , <i>Henry V</i> Globe playhouse built New children's companies launched	Proclamation prohibiting verse satire Death of Spenser
1600	Michael Drayton and others, <i>Sir John Oldcastle</i> Fortune playhouse built	Population of London about 200,000
1601	Jonson, <i>Poetaster</i> and Dekker, <i>Satiromastix</i> mark the height of the 'War of the Theatres' Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i> *, <i>Twelfth Night</i>	Fall and execution of the Earl of Essex Foundation of East India Company
1602	Middleton and Webster begin writing for the stage	Foundation of Bodleian Library, Oxford
1603	Heywood, <i>A Woman Killed With Kindness</i> Jonson, <i>Sejanus</i> Lord Chamberlain's Men become King's Men, Lord Admiral's Men become Prince Henry's Men	Death of Elizabeth I and accession of James I Plague Montaigne, <i>Essays</i> , translated into English by John Florio
1604	Dekker and Middleton, <i>The Honest Whore</i> Marston, <i>The Malcontent</i> Shakespeare, <i>Othello</i>	King's triumphal entry into the City of London End of war with Spain Beginning of negotiations to unite England and Scotland

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| 1605 | Chapman, Jonson, Marston,
<i>Eastward Ho!</i>
Marston, <i>The Dutch Courtesan</i> *
Middleton, <i>A Trick to Catch the
 Old One</i>
Shakespeare, <i>King Lear</i> *
Jonson, with Inigo Jones, <i>The
 Masque of Blackness</i> (their first
masque)
Red Bull playhouse built | The Gunpowder Plot
Francis Bacon, <i>The
 Advancement of Learning</i>
Miguel de Cervantes, <i>Don
 Quixote</i> , Part I |
| 1606 | <i>The Revenger's Tragedy</i> *
John Day, <i>The Isle of Gulls</i>
Jonson, <i>Volpone</i> *
Shakespeare, <i>Macbeth</i>
Law restraining profane oaths in plays | Virginia Company founded |
| 1607 | Beaumont and Fletcher, <i>The Knight of
 the Burning Pestle</i> * | |
| 1608 | Fletcher, <i>The Faithful Shepherdess</i>
Shakespeare, <i>Coriolanus</i>
Children at Blackfriars suspended due
to scandals
Marston retires from theatre | |
| 1609 | Beaumont and Fletcher, <i>Philaster</i>
Jonson, <i>Epicoene</i>
King's Men begin playing at
Blackfriars | New Exchange opens in the
Strand
Dekker, <i>The Gull's Hornbook</i> |
| 1610 | Beaumont and Fletcher, <i>The Maid's
 Tragedy</i> *
Jonson, <i>The Alchemist</i>
Shakespeare, <i>The Winter's Tale</i> | Unresolved tensions over
taxation between King and
Parliament |
| 1611 | Dekker and Middleton, <i>The Roaring
 Girl</i> *
Fletcher, <i>The Woman's Prize</i>
Shakespeare, <i>The Tempest</i> *
Tourneur, <i>The Atheist's Tragedy</i> | The Authorised Version of
the Bible
Chapman's translation of the
<i>Iliad</i>
John Donne, <i>The Anatomy of
 the World</i> |

	In the theatre	Events and publications
1612	Webster, <i>The White Devil</i> Publication of Heywood's <i>Apology for Actors</i> Shakespeare leaves London	Death of Henry, Prince of Wales <i>Don Quixote</i> appears in English
1613	Middleton, <i>A Chaste Maid in Cheapside</i> * Globe playhouse burnt down Beaumont's career ends Massinger begins writing for the stage	Marriage of James's daughter Elizabeth Murder of Sir Thomas Overbury Elizabeth Cary, <i>The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry</i>
1614	Jonson, <i>Bartholomew Fair</i> * Webster, <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> * Globe playhouse rebuilt, Hope playhouse built – the last amphitheatres Chapman leaves London	Sir Walter Raleigh, <i>The History of the World</i>
1616	Jonson, <i>The Devil Is An Ass</i> Cockpit playhouse, Drury Lane, built	Jonson's <i>Works</i> published in folio William Harvey lectures on the circulation of the blood
1617	Fletcher, <i>The Chances</i>	
1618		Beginning of 'Thirty Years' War in Europe James I publishes <i>The Book of Sports</i> , endorsing traditional pastimes
1619	Death of Richard Burbage	
1621	Dekker, Ford, Rowley, <i>The Witch of Edmonton</i> Fletcher, <i>The Wild-Goose Chase</i> Middleton, <i>Women Beware Women</i>	Political fall of Francis Bacon Confrontation between King and Parliament over the latter's rights John Donne becomes Dean of St Paul's

1622	Middleton and Rowley, <i>The Changeling</i> *	Building of the Banqueting House at Whitehall, designed by Inigo Jones
1623		James I seeks marriage between Prince Charles and the Infanta of Spain Shakespeare First Folio published
1624	Middleton, <i>A Game At Chess</i> , attacking the Spanish marriage Middleton and Webster retire from playwriting	
1625	Massinger, <i>A New Way to Pay Old Debts</i> Shirley's first play Death of Fletcher	Death of James I, accession of Charles I Plague
1626	Massinger, <i>The Roman Actor</i> * Death of Rowley	
1629	Brome, <i>The Northern Lass</i> Jonson, <i>The New Inn</i> Salisbury Court playhouse built	Breakdown in relations between King and Parliament leads to 11-year period of personal rule by Charles (-1640) Duke of Bedford obtains licence to develop Covent Garden area
1630	Ford, <i>The Broken Heart</i>	Milton's early poetry written
1631	Heywood, <i>The Fair Maid of the West</i> *	Death of John Donne
1632	Ford, <i>'Tis Pity She's A Whore</i> * Death of Dekker	
1633	William Prynne, <i>Histriomastix; or the Player's Scourge</i> – the most ambitious of the tracts attacking theatre	Building of the Covent Garden Piazza Charles I reissues the 1618 <i>Book of Sports</i> George Herbert, <i>The Temple</i>

	In the theatre	Events and publications
1637	Death of Jonson	Charles's personal rule threatened by taxation crisis
1640	Death of Massinger	War with Scotland, recall of Parliament Population of London exceeds 350,000
1641	Brome, <i>A Jovial Crew</i> * Death of Heywood	Parliament embarks on revolutionary overhaul of royal institutions
1642	Parliamentary order closes playhouses	Outbreak of English Civil War

The Set-Up

The Moment

From around 1570, playhouses appeared in various parts of London: Shoreditch, Southwark, Blackfriars, Clerkenwell. Some were open-air amphitheatres, others (less famous today) were existing buildings converted for use as indoor playhouses. Altogether some twenty theatres opened between the 1570s and their eventual closure in 1642, though there were never more than six or seven operating at any one time. These were the first buildings since Roman times to be designed specifically for the performance of plays, and they were both cause and sign of a new age in English drama.

Not that there was anything magical about the buildings themselves. Their layout is quite interesting, and lends itself to some distinctive performing conventions. But throughout the period, actors regularly took plays out to non-theatrical spaces at Court or in the provinces: the purpose-built stage was never essential. Rather, the significance of the new departure was economic. Building and equipping a playhouse from scratch cost something like £1,000, at a time when a labourer might earn £10 a year. Whoever invested this large sum was expecting to recoup it from the proceeds of playing. What was new, then, was the assumption that putting on plays could be a sustainably profitable thing to do.

Moreover, if building a playhouse made profit necessary, it also made it more likely. Professional actors were nothing new, but until now, they had been, in effect, servants, performing in someone else's space. They might literally be household servants, mounting occasional shows for their master's feasts; or they might be touring players bought in for a special occasion, rather like a band hired for a party today; or else, further down the social scale, some played in public space, that is, they were busking. None of these models offered a predictable income, or any opportunity to establish much in the way of status, audience or repertoire. Actors established in their own house were in a different position. They were there by no one's favour, they could take money from everyone who wanted to come in, they could play day after day so long as they could keep the customers coming through the door, and as for that, they were free to try any species of entertainment they thought would attract an audience. In other words, the new set-up established the actors as independent producers, offering their wares for public sale on a permanent

basis. The purpose-built theatre is implicitly the commercial theatre, where the show is a commodity.

When we talk about English Renaissance drama, we centrally mean the plays performed in these commercial playhouses. Here, over a period of about sixty years, a distinctive theatre culture rose, flourished and declined. On the whole, its scripts were for immediate, not to say hurried, production. The turnover was high; about 500 plays survive, and hundreds more were never printed and are now lost. In the rather frantic process, the writers achieved far more than was necessary: they not only kept the players supplied with fresh material, but also somehow produced most of the classics of English drama.

This theatre was not the only context of dramatic writing in the period. Poets wrote so-called 'closet' drama – plays written not for public performance, but for reading, or perhaps for private recitation in noble households. Academic plays, in English or Latin, were presented by amateurs at Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Institutions such as the Court, the City of London or the Inns of Court staged seasonal revels and shows, many of which took theatre-like forms – masques, triumphs, dialogues, mock-ceremonies. This para-dramatic activity is historically interesting – the closet dramas, for example, include Elizabeth Cary's *Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry*, the first English play known to have been written by a woman – but it did not generate scripts that still live on our stages, bridging or complicating or articulating the great gap of time between then and now. For that remarkable effect – for English Renaissance drama as it plays for us, today – we have to concentrate on the professional theatre.

It lasted a lifetime, which is long enough for a good deal of variation: there were differing theatrical organizations, assorted playing spaces, changing styles of play, passing fashions. All the same, the theatre which staged *A Jovial Crew* in 1641 was fundamentally the same one, socially, spatially and organizationally, that had done *Tamburlaine the Great* in 1587. The purpose of this section, then, is to provide a historical understanding of that theatre.

In the terms of conventional national history, it took shape at a moment of relative stability. In 1485, the first Tudor king, Henry VII, had taken the crown from Richard III in the final battle of the Wars of the Roses; and in 1642, the royal and parliamentary armies would meet in the first engagement of the Civil War (it was because of this emergency that the theatres were closed permanently by parliamentary order). In the

intervening century and a half, there were no battles on English soil, and four more Tudor and two Stuart monarchs succeeded fairly peacefully to the throne. This long civil peace, though, was marked by a cultural upheaval more radical than violence. Early in the sixteenth century, the authority of the universal Catholic church was being challenged across Europe by what would later be called Protestantism. In the 1530s, Henry VIII took advantage of this ideological fissure to break with the pope, expropriate the rich network of monastic establishments, and declare himself Supreme Head of the Church in England, thus precipitating a political and doctrinal revolution – the English Reformation – that far outran his immediate purposes. The outcome was uncertain for decades. When Henry VIII died in 1547, he was succeeded first by his nine-year-old son Edward, whose regents were militantly Protestant, and then by his daughter Mary, a Catholic who tried to reverse the whole process. Mary died in 1558 and was succeeded by her younger sister Elizabeth, who imposed a Protestant religious order and, by reigning for forty-five years, effectively ended the disturbing oscillations of the preceding thirty. By the time of the first great Elizabethan plays, in the 1580s, this settlement was starting to seem irreversible, even natural. Internationally, it was more contentious, setting England against Catholic Spain: war between the two states was formally declared in 1585 and not concluded until after Elizabeth's death in 1603. But although this was gruelling and expensive, it was not politically disruptive; on the contrary, the external threat had the effect of reinforcing internal stability.

This mattered to the theatre because it was a new business which needed reasonably secure conditions for investment. But there is more to this than the mere absence of disorder. If we wanted – simplifying of course – to identify a common theme in these broad epochal developments, we could adopt one of Elizabeth's mottoes: *semper una* (forever one). The consolidation of Tudor rule after the baronial wars of the fifteenth century involved concentrating power at the centre, curtailing the rights of the aristocracy, and seeking to define local jurisdictions as royal agencies rather than autonomous lordships. Exactly the same principle informed the establishment of a national church. The medieval realm had been a dual sovereignty, in which the king was the temporal head and the pope the spiritual head: Henry VIII's coup converted this into a single structure, a single principle of legitimacy. This formal unification was then confirmed in practice by the war, which conflated Protestantism,

patriotism and loyalty to the throne in a single ideological formation. So the Elizabethan state was working to secure a monopoly on law *and* belief *and* physical force. It was appropriate, to say the least, that Elizabeth's successor was already the king of Scotland before reigning as James I of England (1603–25), thus irreversibly combining the two crowns and creating the 'United Kingdom'.

In short, English Renaissance drama emerged in the context of a forceful drive towards national unity. This was reflected directly in stage images of England, notably in the chronicle plays of the 1590s. But more indirectly and radically, unification formed the theatre itself. For one thing, it was the centralization of political and economic life that made London into a metropolis capable of sustaining a permanent professional theatre. And for another, closing the gap between church and state had the inadvertent effect of creating space for a *secular* culture. I will take this second point first.

Irreligious Drama

Today, when Christian churches are fairly marginal to the national life, an effort of historical imagination is needed to grasp how *total* the English Reformation was. The medieval church was the principal agency, not only for the worship of God, but for education, scholarship, welfare, health care and a large part of the legal system. It was also the medium of most neighbourhood and professional organizations, and by far the most significant patron of music, art and architecture. Restructuring this vast organization, then, by stripping it of much of its wealth, revising its central doctrines and subordinating it to the nation-state, affected literally everything. No significant activity was untouched, certainly not doing plays. Moreover, the effects of reformation were far too complex to be controlled by the intentions of the reformers. Nobody could know how it would turn out.

Most surviving medieval plays are religious in one way or another: they narrate the life of Christ, or enact miracles, or stage allegories of sin and repentance. The records probably exaggerate this emphasis – there was a lively secular drama whose scripts are mostly lost – nevertheless, it is fair to say that serious theatre was primarily a religious tradition. And as Protestant orthodoxy established itself in the second half of the sixteenth century, this tradition was increasingly identified as Catholic, and so abandoned or suppressed. It was not only that many individual plays articulated distinctively Catholic doctrines, such as the cult of the Blessed Virgin; it was also that the reforming movement was hostile to theatrical representation as such. One of the central accusations against the medieval church was that in its weakness for effigies, relics and spectacle, it had forgotten the commandment prohibiting graven images, and substituted external shows for the inward reality of faith. It is easy to see how religious theatre falls within the scope of this attack. By about 1580, virtually the whole of the medieval dramatic tradition was dead.

At just this point, in an order of 1581, the Elizabethan state established a fairly effective method for regulating the content of the drama that was beginning to emerge in the new playhouses. A Court official called the Master of the Revels was charged with licensing scripts for public performance; to perform an unlicensed play was an offence. This system of pre-censorship, which continued essentially unchanged through to 1642,

depended on the Master of the Revels' discretion, but he did have guidelines, one of the firmest of which was that the stage was not to meddle in matters of religion. In part, this insistence just reflected the antitheatrical values of the Protestant church: for players to dress up as prophets, or angels, or the persons of God, which in the old order had been a type of devotion, now appeared as a type of blasphemy which could not be allowed. Jesus Christ did not appear on the English stage again until 1968. But there was also another reason for this enforced separation between theatre and religion. To an unprecedented degree, the Reformation itself had made belief a matter of controversy. Ancient authorities had been found to be corrupt; scripture was interpreted in drastically differing ways; monarchs denounced one another as heretics. In this ideologically unstable situation, what the state wanted from unauthorized people like actors was not that their performances should be doctrinally correct (a demand liable to produce endless debate and thus further instability) but that they should keep away from the entire topic. So in this sense, too, the theatre was enjoined to be secular.

This is not only a question of subject matter. Medieval theatre had been religious in another sense too: that the business of putting on a play – the script, the finance, the organization of the company, the costumes and props, the time and place of the performance – everywhere involved religious considerations and institutions. This is most obviously true of the best-known form of English medieval drama, the biblical cycles presented by the guilds of towns such as York and Chester. These were annual holiday performances, celebrating the feast of Corpus Christi, their dramatic values inseparable from their ritual functions. But it applies across the range of pre-Reformation theatrical practices. A show might be a parochial initiative to raise funds for the church; or it might be conceived as a sort of dramatized sermon, with didactic or polemical purposes; or it could form part of the consciously Christian hospitality of a nobleman or corporation. In any of these cases, doing the play was not a free-standing activity, but one element in a more extensive event. Theatre was as it were lodged in a network of social and religious relationships.

The revolutions of the sixteenth century had the effect of dislodging it. The reformed church – at once purified of its corruptions and relieved of much of its wealth and scope – was no longer worldly enough to embrace all these social and cultural functions. Mingling divinity with

entertainment now seemed, in the phrase of one antitheatrical preacher, like eating meat with unwashed hands.¹ The church was to become unambiguously sacred, the theatre unambiguously profane, and the two institutions were to find their separate places within the overarching framework of the nation-state. Looked at in this way, the building of the London playhouses appears as a kind of loss, as well as a kind of renaissance. The players built their own house because they had been evicted from the house of God. Autonomy, you could say, was thrust upon them.

Ironically, then, the effect of Protestantism upon the theatre was to *make* it irreligious. The actors were forbidden to engage seriously with sacred matters; they were released from every obligation to the church and required instead to meet their obligations to their customers and creditors. This is a situation conducive to moral and ideological neutrality, such that the good is whatever is applauded, and the bad is whatever is booed. Its spokesman is the clown, singing to the audience at the end of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601):

A great while ago the world begun,
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
 But that's all one, our play is done,
 And we'll strive to please you every day. (5.1.405–9)

The lyric glances at the story of the whole world from its creation (the subject of the medieval Corpus Christi play) and then casually gives up on it. The theatre is more modest nowadays, more like a restaurant, where these great questions are 'all one' so long as the customers are pleased. Unsurprisingly, preachers thought this attitude frivolous and profane. Shakespeare's clown, with his childish rhyme, rather suggests that it is conscientious and innocent. Whatever judgement one makes, it is the accent of a changed identity for the theatre, a new role.

¹ John Northbrooke, *Spiritus est vicarius Christi in terra. A treatise wherein dicing, dauncing, vaine playes or enterluds . . . are reprovued*, London, 1577, p. 65.