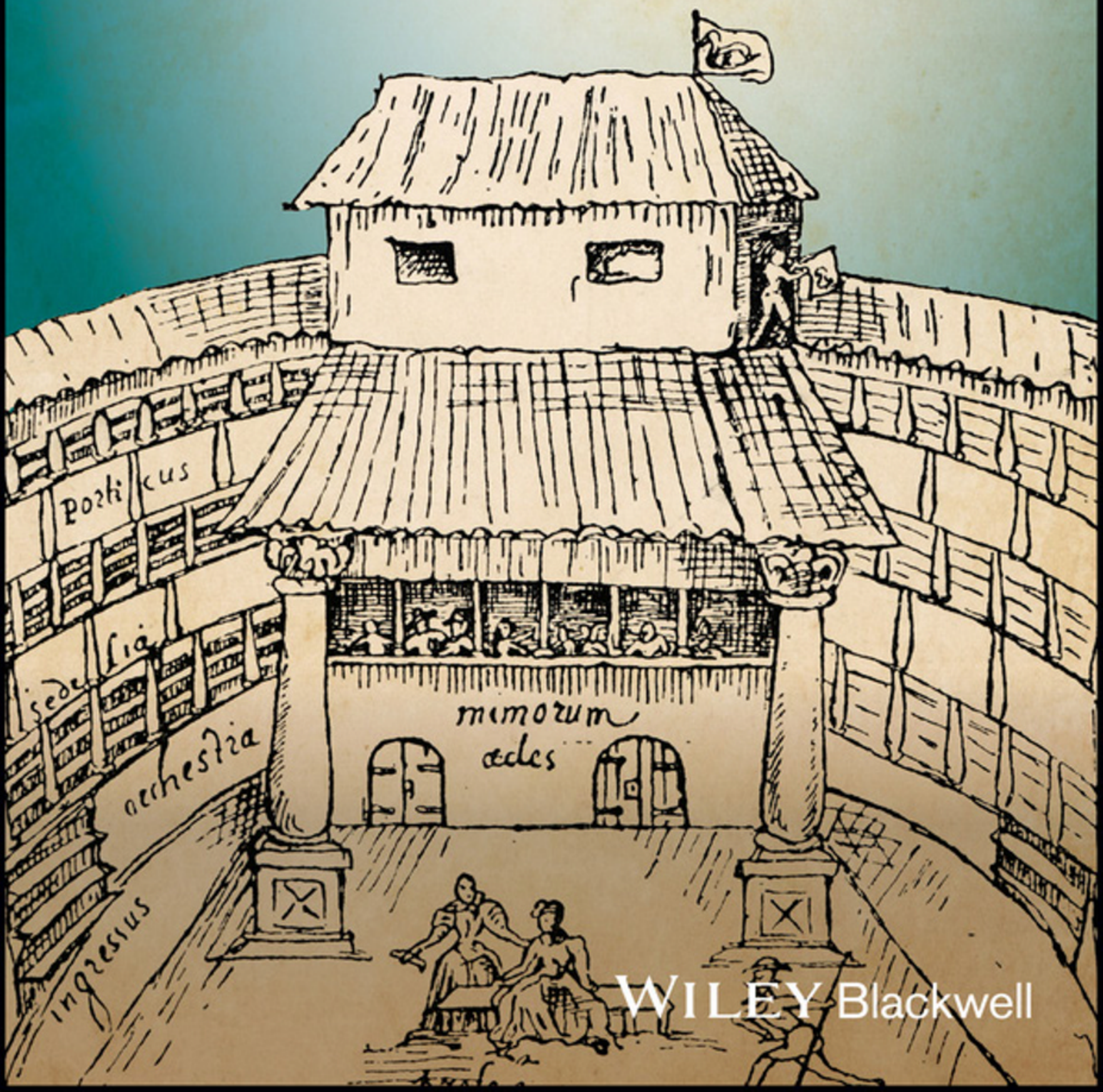
RICHARD DUTTON

SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRE

A HISTORY



WILEY Blackwell

Shakespeare’s Theatre

MAY 26, 1888

THE SWAN THEATRE IN THE TIME OF SHAKESPEARE

Facsimile of a Sketch made by John de Witt, a learned Dutchman, during a visit to London in 1596. The Sketch has recently been discovered by Dr. Gaedertz, of the Royal Library, Berlin

The De Witt drawing of the Swan playhouse.
Source: ART Vol. d57, no. 45c, Folger Shakespeare Library.

Shakespeare's Theatre

A History

Richard Dutton

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For Hollea, who likes books

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Preface

Shakespeare's Theatre is a narrative history of the playing spaces that Shakespeare wrote for – not just the famous ones, like the Globe and the Blackfriars playhouses, but the country houses, inns, guild halls, Inns of Court and the royal palaces where he knew that his plays would also be performed. It is a history in that it follows a chronological arc, from about the time of his birth in 1564 until his retirement from the stage around 1613/14.

This is to underline the point that there was no single "Elizabethan stage." The theatrical profession underwent revolutionary change during Shakespeare's lifetime, developing from forms that were largely based in households of the aristocracy and gentry, academic institutions and royal palaces. Some troupes toured locally and then further afield, advertising the status of their patrons but also becoming increasingly professional. Theatrical venues specifically for them (and also for boy companies from some of the leading choir schools) were built in and around London from the 1570s. Around 1590 companies began to take up residence in these playhouses on a more-or-less permanent basis, as London developed a population capable of sustaining daily playing, setting the conditions for the career of a man like Shakespeare.

Acting thus passed from being a largely localized activity, much of it amateur, within a patronage culture; and it became a professionalized business, a proto-capitalist enterprise within which men (and boys, and even a few women) could build a living for themselves, and a very few become extremely wealthy. But the new never entirely threw off the old. The companies with which we can associate Shakespeare were called the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the King's Men – they had (and had to have) patrons of high, and ultimately the highest, status to succeed as they did. And aspects of this dual nature were visible in virtually every playing space.

Moreover these changes did not happen without resistance. The players had constantly to adapt to live within attempts to limit, control – or even try to eradicate – their activities. This history is largely the story of those adaptations. Like all histories it was never as straightfowarwardly linear as the writing process makes it seem: change happened erratically and at different speeds in

different contexts. I shall, therefore, frequently cross-reference you to other parts of the book, especially to pick up where a minor development in one context became a larger phenomenon in another. Another distinctive feature of my story-telling is what I have called the Box features. Each of these recounts a story in itself, a significant anecdote within the larger tale – but one with which I did not want to interrupt the narrative flow. So, for example, you will find Box items on Philip Henslowe and on the Masters of the Revels. Henslowe and those Masters of the Revels who censored Shakespeare's plays (Edmund Tilney and Sir George Buc) figure repeatedly in the through-narrative and I trust their roles are comprehensible there: you do not *need* to read the Box items, certainly when you first encounter them. But I hope that your interest will be sufficiently picqued that you will want to read them, at your own time and pace. I think you will find the effort rewarding, giving depth and perspective to the wider tale.

No one writes a book of this nature alone. I have written in the company of many scholars who have scouted the territory before me, and to whom I owe an enormous debt of gratitude. These include giants of the past, like E. K. Chambers and G. E. Bentley, who compiled and analyzed vast compendia of information on early modern playing – *The Elizabethan Stage* and *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* respectively – on which all subsequent scholarship has been built, even as some of those foundations have begun to show their age. But most of my companions have been people I have been privileged to know and work with in the field of Shakespearean-era scholarship over the last quarter of a century. Some I have been lucky enough to communicate with in person about this book; others have just inspired me with their writing. Let me mention John Astington, Peter Greenfield, Andrew Gurr, William Ingram, David Kathman, Roslyn Lander Knutson, Sally-Beth MacLean, Lawrence Manley, Alan Nelson, Tom Postlewait, Tiffany Stern, and William Streitberger. I also owe particular thanks to all other members of the theatre history seminar that miraculously reinvents itself annually at the meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America; I have attended more often than not since 1992 and profited enormously from it. Lastly I must acknowledge a different kind of debt to Emma Bennett, who first gave me the green light to work on this book, longer ago than I care to remember.

Quotations in the book from Shakespeare are normally taken from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* edited by David Bevington, 6th edn (New York and London: Pearson Longman, 2009), though I have occasionally needed to draw in unmediated form on the quartos and the First Folio in which they were originally printed. You will find in the Bibliography details of all the editions on which I have drawn for the works of other authors of his era. A word of explanation: wherever a quotation comes from, if it is not already modernized, I have made it so. Most of us know Shakespeare in modernized texts. I do not want to obfuscate the wider picture of his times for the general reader by

leaving his contemporaries four hundred years behind. Some terms associated with the playhouses, however, may well still be unfamiliar – "sharer," "book-keeper," "tireman," etc.; most of them are explained in Chapter 4, "The Chamberlain's/King's Men and their Organization."

The Bibliography is arranged by author and date, allowing you to find full details from a brief citation. Several texts, however, will be quoted so commonly that I have cited them parenthetically in quite distinctive forms. E. K. Chambers' *The Elizabethan Stage* is cited simply as *ES*; *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660*, ed. Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry and William Ingram as *EPF*; *Henslowe's Diary*, edited by R. A. Foakes (2nd edn, 2002) as *Henslowe*; and Sir Henry Herbert's office-book, from *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama*, ed. N. W. Bawcutt, as *Herbert*.

RICHARD DUTTON
January 2017, Croston, Lancashire

Introduction

Palamon and Arcite was Performed with the Queen Herself Present on the Stage

The following passages all relate to theatrical events staged during Queen Elizabeth's visit to the university city of Oxford in September of 1566, when William Shakespeare was only two years old. They provide some of the most detailed accounts of any theatricals in the entire era. Although the experiences they record are very different from the Elizabethan theatre with which we are most familiar, as epitomized by the reconstructed "Shakespeare's Globe" on the south bank of the River Thames, they probably give us an indication of the kind of staging that Shakespeare would have encountered when his plays were performed at the royal court, and indeed (albeit on a less lavish scale) at other grand indoor venues, such as the Inns of Court, the great houses of the nobility and eventually the Blackfriars theatre.

And it will be my contention that some of the social and ideological assumptions that underlie this staging did in fact carry over into the public playhouses, even though the practicalities of outdoor playing made for very different conventions.

Several people left accounts of the royal visit to Oxford and I quote from three of them. The first passage comes from a full but rather solemn Latin commentary by John Bereblock, a Fellow of Exeter College, who first describes how the hall of Christ Church was set up on September 1 to accommodate the Queen and other worthies.[1] This was the site of all theatricals on the visit, and it tells us a good deal about the place of theatre in Elizabethan England (and not just at court or in the university colleges) that so much of her entertainment should have been planned in the form of stage shows. Elizabeth did not in fact attend the first play, a Roman history of *Marcus Geminus* in Latin, being so weary with the day's business. But, as entries for September 2 and 4 show, Elizabeth did attend Richard Edwardes's two-part play, *Palamon and Arcite*, based on Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*. These come from a Latin manuscript "Of

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the Acts Done at Oxford," compiled by Nicholas Robinson, Bishop of Bangor. Edwardes, the Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal, and author *Damon and Pythias*, which had pleased the Queen at court, staged the show with students of the university. Later passages are from a rather livelier, but less organized, set of recollections by one of those students, Miles Windsor, of Corpus Christi College.

> (1 September, Bereblock) As night was approaching the most elaborate shows were given, which for many, who being at leisure were anticipating them the whole day, were the pinnacle of reward in their distinction. And nothing indeed more precious or more magnificent could be devised than their provision and construction. First there was an elaborate approach (to the hall) by means of a doorway that was open in a large, solid wall and from it, a raised wooden platform placed on posts runs forward by a small [i.e. narrow] and skilful track across transverse steps toward the great hall of the college. It is equipped with a festive garland and an engraved and painted canopy so that by it, without the bustle and disturbance of the pressing crowd, the queen could make her way to the prepared shows with, as it were, an even step. There was the hall with a gilded panelled ceiling, a ceiling both painted and arched within, and you might say that it imitates the size of the ancient Roman palace in its grandeur and pride, and the image of antiquity in its magnificence. In its upper end, which faces west, a great and raised stage is built up, one also elevated by many steps. Along every wall raised steps and platforms have been constructed, benches were atop the same (raised steps and platforms) of many (different) heights, from which distinguished men and ladies might be admired, and the people all around were able to observe on all sides of the plays. Burning lamps, hanging lamps, and candles made a very bright light there. With so many lights arranged in branches and circles and so many torches (or chandeliers) providing flickering light here and there with unequal brightness, the place shone, so that like daylight, (the lights) seemed to sparkle and help the splendor of the shows with the greatest radiance. On either side of the stage, magnificent palaces and most sumptuous houses are constructed for the comedies and masques. A seat had been fixed on high, provided with pillows and tapestries and covered with a golden canopy: (this) place was appointed for the queen, but she, in fact, was not present on this night. [2]
>
> (2 September, Robinson) As on the previous night, on this one also this stage was decorated splendidly so that *The Knights Tale*, as Chaucer calls it, translated from Latin into English speech by Mr Edwardes and other students of the same college, was set forth to the public … After her royal majesty had entered onto the stage and all the entrances were

> closed, part of a wall by which one goes into the hall – by what chance or for what reason I do not know – fell down and crushed a scholar of St Mary's Hall and a townsman by the name of Penny. They died there and also another scholar's leg was broken. And both of a cook's legs were shattered and his face was cut up, as if by blows, by the fall of stones. Nevertheless, the show was not interrupted but continued to midnight.
>
> (4 September, Robinson) On this night what had remained of the story or tale of Palamon and Arcite was performed with the queen herself present on the stage.[3]

Much could be said from Bereblock's account about the magnificence bestowed on Christ Church hall for these events; about the importance attached to them such that they were not suspended despite multiple deaths and injuries on September 2; about the elaborate arrangements to seat the spectators; about the blaze of lights which lasted until midnight, about the "magnificent palaces and most sumptuous houses" on either side of the stage. And I shall address them all in the course of the book. But what I particularly want to draw attention to here is the striking assertion that Edwardes's play "was performed with the queen herself present on the stage." Elizabeth was not only a spectator, she was also a performer. And, as Miles Windsor's account shows, she was not just a passive one.[4]

Bereblock and others commented on the realism and spectacle of several scenes in *Palamon and Arcite*, including sound effects to evoke Theseus hunting, when hounds were released in the courtyard outside the hall and students blew horns and hallooed.[5] According to Windsor Elizabeth cried out "O excellent … those boys are ready to leap out of [the] window to the hounds." He also tells of John Dalaper, playing Lord Trevatio, "being out of his part and missing his cue, and offering his service to the ladies, swearing 'by the mass' or 'Got blutt, I am out.' And like to Master Secretary [William Cecil], whistling up a hornpipe in very good measure. 'Cod's pitty,' saith the Queen, 'what a knave it 'tis.' And likewise Master Secretary: 'Go thy ways, thou art wider out; thou mayst be 'llowed to play the knave in any ground in England.'"[6] The scene resembles nothing so much as the bantering with which Theseus and his courtiers respond to "Pyramus and Thisbe" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The original plan was that the two parts of *Palamon and Arcite* should be staged on successive nights. But, as on the first day of her visit, Elizabeth was so exhausted by the schedule the university had set for her that she could not face the second night; she graciously accepted, however, that it be deferred a further day. So she was present for some of the most spectacular scenes in the second part; the play climaxed with a subterranean fire by which Saturn struck down Arcite in his moment of triumph; and there was a magnificent pyre for his funeral. The latter was so realistic that a spectator tried to stop one of the actors from placing a cloak on it, crying "God's wounds … what mean ye?

Will ye burn the *King Edward* cloak in the fire?" Edwardes had to intervene to allow the play to resume. But in all important respects the show was a great success.

Elizabeth complimented Edwardes and promised him reward ("she said it did surpass *Damon & Pythias*, than the which nothing could be better"). She also bantered with him about his principal actors, saying (according to Windsor) of Marbeck, who played Palamon, "I warrant him he dallyeth not in love when he was in love indeed"; and of Banes, playing Arcite, "he was a right martial knight, who had indeed a swarse & manly countenance."[7] She also singled out the boy playing Emilia: "The lady Emilia for gathering her flowers prettily in the garden & singing sweetly in the prime of May received 8 angels for a gracious reward by her Majesty's commandment." In similar vein "afterward her Majesty gave unto one John Rainolds, a scholar of Corpus College which was a player in the same play 8 old angels, in reward." With hindsight this moment can be seen as extremely ironic.That scholar of Corpus Christi would later be Dr John Rainolds, President of his college, one of the translators of the King James Bible – and author of *Th'Overthrow of Stage Plays* (1599). The book is one of the most famous of the Puritan attacks on the Elizabethan stage and the one that argues in greatest detail for the evils of cross-dressing boys as girls. Rainolds played Hippolyta in *Palamon and Arcite*, and we might not unreasonably conclude that the experience had scarred him for life (see p. XXX).

I have dwelled at some length on one of the less familiar scenes of Elizabethan theatre. The universities were privileged, establishment institutions which had strong traditions of academic theatre, encouraged by the humanist conviction that dramatic performance was an ideal practice for honing rhetorical and musical skills. The first great generation of Elizabethan dramatists – Lyly, Marlowe, Greene, Nashe, Peele – were all "university wits," attending either Oxford or Cambridge. Robert Greene's infamous death-bed gibe at Shakespeare as "an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers," addressed to his "fellow scholars about this city," specifically scorns him as someone who did *not* have a gentleman's university education but in writing plays usurps the role that properly belongs to those who do.[8]

Shakespeare's skills as a dramatist, however, allowed him to transcend such distinctions. These doubtless derived in part from the classical and humanistic education he would have derived from the King Edward VI School in Stratford-upon-Avon, and in part from observing the example of his predecessors. And while he wrote initially for the public stages he came increasingly to cater also for privileged audiences, including the most privileged audiences of all, those at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I. Wherever his plays were performed, however, I suggest that the figure of the monarch *on the stage* was always figuratively present.

Those audiences at *Palamon and Arcite* saw her through the action of the play, something facilitated by the fact that the audience was situated virtually in the round (as they later would be at amphitheaters like the Theatre and the

Globe). Every member of the audience would, in effect, see other members of the audience through the action of the play; they were all participants in the same event. But for the great majority of those present what they saw was an elite and privileged audience, presided over by majesty itself (note Bereblock's "benches were atop the same … from which distinguished men and ladies might be admired"). Although the Queen was clearly demarcated in a space of her own, she was not alone: leading members of her court, like her Principal Secretary of State, William Cecil, were clearly nearby and "the ladies" were evidently close enough to the stage for the embarrassed John Dalaper, "out" of his role, to bluster his apologies to them. So the upper echelons of the society were defined by their proximity to the stage, something most spectators absorbed even as they absorbed the play. As John H. Astington puts it, "Protocol demanded that the monarch be in a central position, a rival with the entertainers as a focus for the gaze of the assembly" (1999, 88–119, 90).

(See also the seating diagram for the Great Chamber at Whitehall in 1601, Figure 3.4, p. 120.)

Staging of precisely this nature was never used for plays staged in commercial playhouses during Shakespeare's lifetime. But Shakespeare's company performed their own works at court from 1594 onwards and provided the speaking roles for court masques – while the aristocrats in them danced and posed in outrageously expensive costumes, but did not "act." The players understood the literal and symbolic centrality of the monarch, wherever they performed. In a famous and influential essay on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – a play dogged by the supposition that it was written for a wedding attended by the Queen – Louis Montrose argued that it was an unnecessary conjecture: "For whether or not Queen Elizabeth was physically present at the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, her pervasive *cultural presence* was a condition of the play's imaginative possibility" (Montrose, 1983, 62). What I am suggesting is that this "pervasive *cultural presence*" was a condition of *all* the drama of the era.

I am not the first to point out that much Elizabethan theatre placed the Queen (or her representatives) literally on the stage. In *Shakespeare's Wooden O* Leslie Hotson presents a wealth of evidence that it was a *normal* feature of Elizabethan staging – both in England and on the Continent – for the most senior persons present at private theatricals (at court, colleges, the Inns of Court [the law schools in London] and elsewhere) to be seated in this way on the stage: to be objects of observation as much as the play. Unfortunately this led him into some unwise conjectures about the implications of such staging for public theatres like the Globe, which I discuss in the Box Item, "Contentions about the Globe: size, audience, seating on the stage" (p. 240). Probably as a result of this all that evidence has been largely ignored by scholars since, though theatre historians like Alan H. Nelson and John H. Astington have unearthed further evidence in the universities and at court (Nelson 1989, 1992, 1994,

1999, esp. pp. 59–60; Astington, 1999, 88–119). As we shall shortly reflect, there is an awful lot about Shakespeare's theatre that we simply do not know and can only guess at. And, ironically, a good deal of what we *do* know is commonly passed over, often because it seems not to square with what we expect or want of Shakespeare.

Reminders of the monarch's "cultural presence" in the theatre took many forms. One of the most immediate was the requirement throughout Shakespeare's professional career that all major acting companies be under the patronage of an aristocrat, a baron or an earl, next in rank to royalty itself. When James I came to the throne all the most successful companies were taken into direct royal patronage. A practical manifestation of the royal "presence" was the oversight of plays and players in this time by the Master of the Revels, an officer of the court who censored their plays and licensed their playhouses (and made a healthy income from doing so: see Box Item, "The Masters of the Revels," p. 84). Perhaps more surprising to modern sensibilities was the recitation of prayers at the end of plays, seeking blessings on the Queen and her ministers, and sometimes on the lord who patronized the acting company. These prayers appeared commonly in play texts early in Elizabeth's reign. *Apius and Virginia* (circa 1567–8), for example, contains an epilogue with a prayer for the queen, nobles and commons; *New Custom*, an interlude printed in 1573, ends with a prayer for Elizabeth.[9] *Horestes* (circa 1567) offers prayers for the Queen and the Lord Mayor of London, while *Cambyses* (circa 1570) ends with one for the Queen and her Privy Council.

E. K. Chambers suggests that "A practice of offering up a prayer for the lord's well-being at the end of a performance was probably of ancient *derivation*, although whether it survived in the public theatres may perhaps be doubted" (*ES*, 1: 311). Nevertheless, as late as 1596, the witty Sir John Harington could write: "I will neither end with sermon nor with prayer, lest some wags liken me to my L[ord —] players, who when they have ended a bawdy comedy, as though that were a preparative to devotion, kneel down solemnly, and pray all the company to pray for them with their good Lord and master" (Harington, 1960, 185). And Thomas Middleton evidently expected the practice still to be familiar in 1606 when he has a boy player at Paul's playhouse say "This shows like kneeling after the play; I praying for my Lord Owemuch and his good countess, our honourable lady and mistress" (*A Mad World, My Masters*, 5.2.208–10; 2007*c*).

The practice of praying for individual lord patrons may have phased out by James I's reign (started 1603). But prayers for the monarch remained a consistent element at the end of performances. *A Knack to Know a Knave* (pub. 1594), *A Looking Glass for London and* England (pub. 1594), and *Locrine* (pub. 1595) all appeared with prayers for Elizabeth. *Two Wise Men And All The Rest Fools* (pub. 1619) concludes thus: "It resteth that we render you very humble and hearty thanks, and that all our hearts pray for the king and his family's

enduring happiness, and our country's perpetual welfare. *Si placet, plaudite*" (Chapman, 1874–5, 2: 427). And we know that William Shakespeare was familiar with the convention because he followed it in *2 Henry IV*, where the epilogue is spoken by a dancer: "My tongue is weary; when my legs are too, I will bid you good night; and so I kneel down before you, but, indeed, to pray for the Queen" (30–3).[10] Prologues and epilogues were often composed for particular performances, such as those at court, and not necessarily regarded as a permanent element of the text (Stern, 2009*a*, 81–119). This one may have been preserved because it contains Shakespeare's disingenuous denial that the character of Falstaff was based on the historical Sir John Oldcastle ("for Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man," 29–30: see p. 194). But others that invoked prayers for Elizabeth and later James surely once existed.

So a performance of *2 Henry IV*, a play that ends with Henry V's cold-hearted renunciation of Falstaff ("I know thee not, old man," 5.5.47), actually concluded with a lively dance or jig – an entertainment we shall discuss later (see p. 218) – followed by prayers for the Queen. These are alien conventions to us, hard evidence that the past really was a foreign country and they did things differently there. But they were conventions that shaped William Shakespeare as a dramatist and the theatrical landscape within which he operated. As I shall argue, the authority of the Queen (and later the King) prescribed many of those conventions, determining the kinds of stage on which he would work.

The Upstart Crow

We do not know how William Shakespeare became involved with the world of the stage. Nor do we know how or when he moved from the small market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, in the south midlands of England, to London, by far the biggest city in the country. We can first trace him in the capital in 1592, when his success seems to have generated enthusiasm and resentment in equal measure from more established playwrights there. But by then he was already twenty-eight years old: more than half of the fifty-two years he was to live had passed. And we know virtually nothing about how he spent them.

We know that he obtained a licence to marry Anne Hathaway in late November 1582, though we do not know when the wedding took place; we do know that their first daughter, Susanna was christened on May 26, 1583 and their twins, Hamnet and Judith, were christened on February 2, 1585; in both cases baptisms took place in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford. Whether this means that Shakespeare was tied to Stratford until that last date, perhaps following in his father's trade as a glove-maker; or that he might have worked elsewhere – possibly as a traveling player – and only returned home for occasional visits, we have no way of knowing.

Nor do we know nearly as much about the profession in which he was to make his mark as we would like. We look back to his time as a golden age of theatre, in which not only his own plays but also those of Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, John Webster, John Marston, and many others were staged for the first time. Their contemporaries did not quite see it like that. We hear most often about what they did *not* like about the players and their playhouses (to use the terms most current at the time). They were noisy; they attracted pick-pockets, prostitutes, and other criminals; they lured people away from divine service; they were a breeding ground for the plague. Even though the London playhouses were some of the most original and striking buildings of their time, Londoners left little comment about them, except to complain about their inconveniences. It was left to foreigners, who were genuinely impressed, to record some really useful information – like the Swiss physician, Thomas Platter, who saw an early performance of *Julius Caesar* at the newly-opened Globe in 1599, one of very few eyewitness accounts of a Shakespeare play as it was originally performed.

Or like the Dutchman, Johannes De Witt, who left a sketch of the Swan theatre, the only visual impression we have of the interior of one of the great outdoor auditoria like the Theatre and the Globe (see Frontispiece). This in itself is an object lesson in the limits of our knowledge. Those primarily interested in Shakespeare would prefer the sketch to be of one of the theatres he is known to have used; and we would all prefer to have the original. But that is lost, and only a copy by his friend, Arendt van Buchell survives; we have no way of knowing what was omitted, added or distorted in van Buchell's copying.

Box I.1 Swan Drawing

Around 1596 a Dutchman named Johannes De Witt visited London and recorded his impressions, including those arising from going to the Swan playhouse on the Bankside, at that time the newest of the great outdoor auditoria. They also included a sketch of the interior of the theatre. Unfortunately what De Witt wrote and drew has not survived, but by great good luck his picture and some of his observations (such as an estimate that the playhouse could hold 3,000 people) were copied by his friend, Arendt van Buchell. That copy is the only visual impression we have of the interior of one of the great Elizabethan amphitheaters.

We cannot know, however, how accurate De Witt's original drawing was, or how much van Buchell may have distorted it in making his copy. So we have to treat it with great caution. A particularly forceful critic of relying too heavily on the drawing for an understanding of Elizabethan theatre practice has been R. A. Foakes: "It seems to me … that we have little reason to be sanguine about the accuracy of the van Buchell/De Witt drawing, and should treat all of its features

with skepticism" (Foakes, 1993, 351; see also Foakes 2004; Postlewait 2009). To take one small example: a performance is evidently in progress, with three figures on stage (two, apparently female, one of whom is seated, while a man approaches them, staff in hand) and the playhouse's flag is flying, as we know it did during performances. But a trumpeter is in an upper turret, apparently blowing one of the three "soundings" which advertised as broadly as possible that a performance was *about* to begin (see p. 267). The picture obviously contains composite impressions and does not attempt to capture a single moment. Moreover it is apparent that De Witt had been struck by the likeness of features of the playhouse to those of ancient Rome (see p. 234), and this may have colored what he drew (and what van Buchell made of it).

Nevertheless, the drawing seems very clearly to show two large doorways at the rear of the stage platform (marked *proscenium*), in the wall of a structure marked *mimorum ædes* (the buildings of the actors), which most theatre historians designate as the tiring house. Above the doors is a row of six windows or openings, from each of which one or two persons look out; it could be a single gallery or possibly a row of boxes. This was evidently what was known as the lords" room or rooms (see p. 95).[11]

The rear half of the stage is covered by a canopy (usually known as the "heavens" from the habit of decorating the underside of such covers with celestial images), and this is held up by two very substantial pillars. (Some have supposed that the Swan had a removable stage so that it could double as an arena for bear-baiting, as was the case with the later Hope. But those pillars seem to preclude that.) The stage itself is held up by stout legs, which seem to suggest that it was possible to see underneath, though this is contradicted by practice elsewhere. The area before the stage is labeled "*planetres sive arena*" ("level spaces [?] or arena" – the latter being what the Romans called the performance spaces in amphitheaters like the Colosseum), apparently what the Elizabethans knew as the pit, where the lowest-paying members of the audience stood, without protection from the elements.

To the left and right of the stage are what might be steps up to a higher level, one marked "*ingressus*" ("entrance"). This might well square with what we know about paying progressively to reach the better accommodations in the playhouses (see p. 160). Above this are what we might interpret as three levels of enclosed audience space. One is marked "*orchestra*," apparently from the Roman *orchestra*, the seating in theatres reserved for the senatorial class (and so perhaps denoting what are elsewhere referred to as "gentlemen's rooms": see p. XXX). Above that "*sedilia*" – seating. And above that "*porticus*" – gallery. (In other contexts a gallery might suggest a place to walk, rather than sit. The levels apparently offered different comforts.) Top right is marked, "*tectum*" – roof, suggesting that all of these accommodations, as opposed to the "arena," were secured from the weather.

There is much the picture does *not* tell us. For example, we do not know how the items marked *ingressus* related to initial entry into the building, or indeed how many entry-ways there were. Perhaps most contentiously there is no sign of a discovery space between the two doors, which appear to be the only means of access to the playing area (see p. 96). Discovery spaces are deduced by scholars from stage directions such as that in *The Tempest*, where "*Prospero discovers Ferdinand and Miranda, playing at chess*" (5.1.172.1–2). Such actions *might* take place in one of the doorways, with the door folded back and the opening covered with a curtain. But for some scholars the culmulative evidence points to a third point of access to the stage, located between the two doors. Normally speaking, however, the discovery space would be covered with an arras or tapestry, so the fact that nothing is visible in the Swan drawing is far from conclusive (see p. 200). Indeed, that wall of the tiring house would normally have been covered with such tapestries, discovery space or no. The picture is no help in this regard.

Moreover, we must bear in mind that although the broad design of the Elizabethan amphitheaters remained settled from the time of the Theatre onwards, there were minor amendments and refinements throughout the period. The earliest playhouses apparently did not have "heavens"; and the comforts offered in the "gentlemen's rooms" seem to have improved in the later ones (becoming correspondingly more expensive). Discovery spaces may similarly have been an innovation part-way through the period or simply not a feature of all playhouses.

Only a single extant play is known to have been written specifically for the Swan, Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, and it has two stage directions which *might* imply a discovery space: it opens with "*Enter Maudlin and Moll, a shops being discovered*" and 3.2 begins with "*A bed thrust out upon the stage, Allwit's wife in it*." But the play was not staged until circa 1613 and not printed until 1630; the text we have may not reflect performance at the playhouse De Witt drew.

Another example of information that gets us close to Shakespeare and his playhouses, but not as close as we would like, is Philip Henslowe's so-called *Diary*.[12] Henslowe was a multi-faceted businessman, with interests in (among other things) dyeing, pawn-broking, money-lending, trading in goat skins and renting out property, mainly in Southwark, a borough on the south shore of the Thames. There he purchased what became the Rose theatre, and his *Diary* records his business dealings with the companies who used it from 1592 to 1603. Only very briefly, in June 1594, was one of these a company with whom Shakespeare performed (and then it was at a more obscure playhouse at

Newington Butts, not the Rose: see p. 76–7). Moreover there is much about the information which Henslowe recorded which is baffling or incomplete. It was once common to belittle him as illiterate and only concerned with profit (by supposed contrast with Shakespeare and his fellows), but today we recognize that he was a typical businessman of his day and quite shrewd about theatrical affairs; from 1592 his stepdaughter was married to the great actor, Edward Alleyn (see Figure I.1). His *Diary*, for all its shortcomings, is the single most revealing document we have about theatrical practices at the beginning of Shakespeare's London career, in the 1590s.

Figure I.1 Portrait of Edward Alleyn. *Source*: akg-images.

Box I.2 Philip Henslowe

Philip Henslowe's[13] career and practices tell us a good deal about the place of theatre in early modern London, in relation to the circulation of money, power, and prestige at that time. Born around 1555, he was the son of Edmond Henslowe of Lindfield, Sussex, a family with links to the court and the Sussex nobility. Edmond's son-in-law, Ralph Hogge, was an English iron-master and gun founder to the queen. Philip's older brother, another Edmond, was in the service of the Lord Chamberlain. Drawing on such connections, Philip was appointed a Groom of the Chamber in 1593, not a high post but one that crucially made him a member of the court circle, a position from which to promote his interests for the rest of his life. Prior to this he secured his standing in the City of London by gaining his freedom in the Dyers' Company; this was one of the livery companies, who were responsible for the regulation of their trades, controlling, for instance, wages and labor conditions. Freedom (i.e. membership) in such a company was an essential first step to becoming a freeman of the City, a necessary status for anyone wishing to conduct business there.

Henslowe had been an assistant to Henry Woodward in the Dyers, and when Woodward died Henslowe promptly married his widow, Agnes (February 14, 1580). They had no children of their own, but the marriage made him stepfather to two daughters, Joan and Elizabeth. From 1577 they lived in a house located between the Clink prison and the Bell inn, in the Liberty of Clink in Southwark, just south and west of London Bridge. This was a location of considerable importance in the history of Elizabethan theatre, the site eventually of the Rose and later the Globe playhouses (see p. 197–8). Henslowe seems to have had an entrepreneurial spirit from the start, investing – almost indiscriminately, it seems – in property (in Buxted, Sussex, for instance, but mainly in Southwark), starch making and pawn-broking. Between 1576 and 1586 he negotiated the sale of wood in Ashdown Forest; in June 1584 he was involved in buying and dressing goatskins.

In March 1585 Henslowe acquired a property called "the little Rose" (because of its distinctive rose gardens). Plans for a playhouse on that property – also in the Liberty of Clink – were drawn up in 1587 by Henslowe, in partnership with one John Cholmley, a grocer. These specified a garden plot, 94 feet (28.7 metres) square, on the Bankside in the parish of St Saviour's, Southwark, and "a play house now in framing [was] shortly to be erected and set up upon the same" (*ES*, 2: 406). This was to be the Rose, the first successful theatre on the Bankside.[14] Employing a carpenter, John Griggs, Henslowe undertook to erect "the said playhouse with all furniture thereunto belonging … with as much expedition as may be" (ibid.). Chomley was to pay Henslowe £816 (his portion, apparently the lion's share, of the construction costs) in quarterly instalments, for which he was to receive half of all profits as "shall arise, grow to be collected, gathered, or

become due for the said parcel of ground and playhouse when and after it shall be erected and set up by reason of any play or plays that shall be shown or played there or otherwise howsoever" (ibid.). The partners were jointly to appoint "players to use, exercise and play in the said playhouse" and collect payment from audiences (though their friends could be let in free). Chomley was also to have the exclusive right to sell food and drink in the playhouse, together with use of a small property nearby from which to run those operations. Then as now, playing was not the only way income could derive from a theatre; concession stands could be highly profitable with a captive audience. In 1614, when Henslowe built the Hope theatre, he did it in conjunction with Jacob Meade, a waterman; ferrying affluent members of the audience across the Thames to the Southwark playhouses was also a significant ancillary business.

Henslowe's *Diary*, written abstemiously on the reverse of some of Ralph Hogge's old ironworks accounts, records his dealings with the companies which used the Rose (and later the Fortune theatre) from 1592 to 1603. They are not always easy to follow and used to be mocked as semi-illiterate, but it is increasingly clear that Henslowe was a shrewd businessman; he was certainly most successful. Chomley had by then disappeared, and was perhaps dead – in which case Henslowe was taking a full share of the profits, but also carrying all the debt. I write elsewhere about Strange's Men and the Admiral's Men and the details of their repertoires recorded in the early parts of the *Diary*; these were the companies which used the Rose most extensively (see p. 62ff; 170ff). Henslowe was their landlord and later financier, taking their rents but also lending them money to buy playbooks from the dramatists and properties (most notably costumes) for their performances, which would be stored in the tiring house section of the theatre. In the early years, business decisions about playing remained in the hands of the players – every loan was advanced on the word of one or more of the sharers, who were held strictly to its terms.

Over time, however, Henslowe's relations with the actors appear more in the light of a controlling business manager than a landlord. The fact that he owned one (and later more) of the few officially sanctioned playhouses around London, together with the capital to allow the actors who used them to indebt themselves to him, made him a commanding figure. And this was compounded by his relationship with the leading actor in Strange's and subsequently the Admiral's Men, Edward Alleyn, who married his stepdaughter Joan in October 1592. Henslowe and Alleyn seem to have been close personally and were certainly a very effective business partnership, controlling not only several theatres but also the bear-baiting arena in Paris Garden, yet another section of the Bankside.

In 1599 the building of the Globe by the Chamberlain's Men apparently created serious competition for the Rose, and Henslowe and Alleyn jointly decided to construct a new playhouse, the Fortune, north of London Wall in the parish of St Giles Cripplegate. They engaged Peter Street, the carpenter who had built the

Globe playhouse, in a contract dated January 8 1600; the contract makes it plain that they intended to imitate the Globe in many particulars, except that the outer walls were to be square rather than quasi-circular and the roof was to be tiled rather than thatched (see p. 230). The Fortune cost £520 in addition to the lease for the property on which the playhouse was constructed (*ES*, 2:436–9). It opened that autumn and the Admiral's Men immediately transferred there (*Henslowe*, 306–10). Whether Alleyn was still playing at this date is a moot point; he certainly retired around 1598 but seems to have come out of retirement on occasion between then and 1604. Possibly he felt that his proven popularity would help draw audiences to the new playhouse. Henslowe and Alleyn owned the Fortune jointly until Henslowe's death in 1616; Alleyn somehow acquired complete control and by 1618 was leasing it to the players (by then the Palsgrave's Men) for £200 a year (*ES*, 2: 442).

Several acting companies continued to rent the Rose for a time after it was vacated by the Admiral's Men; these included Worcester's Men. But Henslowe and Alleyn's interests on the Bankside now focused on bear-baiting. They particularly wanted the lucrative court office of Master of the Royal Game of Bears, Bulls and Mastiff Dogs. After several years of hoping to acquire it by patronage they decided to buy it in 1604. It proved profitable enough that by 1613 they planned, in conjunction with Jacob Meade, to build a dual-purpose playhouse/bear-baiting pit even further west on the Bankside, called the Hope. By October 1614 it was being used by Lady Elizabeth's Men who performed Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* there. According to the play's "Induction" the place was "as dirty as Smithfield, and as stinking every whit" (2012*b*, lines 119–20) – that is, it smelled every bit as bad as the site of the real Bartholomew Fair, near the great meat-market.

In addition to his business interests Henslowe was assiduous in his civic and church duties. He served as a collector for the lay subsidy taxes in the Clink liberty, paying himself substantial tax of £10 per collection. He similarly served as vestryman (1607), churchwarden (1608), and overseer of the poor of St Saviour's parish. He was a governor of the free grammar school there (1612) and one of five to purchase the rectory of St Saviour's in 1613 "for the general good of posterity as good cheap as they might" (Warner, 30–1, 139, 266). He died on January 6, 1616 and was buried in the chancel of St Saviour's Church (now Southwark Cathedral) "with an afternoon knell of the great bell." In touches of piety typical of the age his will required that forty poor men should receive mourning gowns to accompany his body to the burial, and a bequest was left to the poor of the parish. He could afford it. Henslowe left a sizeable estate, by one estimate including £1,700 in property alone (see p. 16 on the value of money).

His aged widow, Agnes, inherited his estate but died a year later, in 1617. Edward Alleyn retained his interests in the Fortune and the Mastership of the

Royal Game. Rich and pious in his later years, in 1619 he founded the College of God's Gift (popularly known as Dulwich College) as a "hospital" for orphans and homeless pensioners. He endowed it with the manor of Dulwich in Surrey. The College is where many of Henslowe's and Alleyn's business and personal papers were left, and are primarily housed in its Wodehouse Library. Many of them can now be accessed online.[15]

Another area in which we see darkly is in the licensing and censorship of plays in the period. As mentioned above, we know that a court official, the Master of the Revels, was responsible for these matters. This was Edmund Tilney from 1579 until his death in 1610, when he was succeeded by Sir George Buc. But almost nothing has survived of the business records of these two men, which might have given us some sense of their daily dealings with the players. We occasionally hear of them when they are involved in policy matters dictated by the Privy Council – effectively the national government of the day – but otherwise we have to look to the office-book of the man who succeeded Buc, Sir Henry Herbert, who was in office from 1623 to the closing of the theatres in 1642 (*Herbert*). We have to take it on trust that his working methods and standards were similar to those of his predecessors.

Other frustratingly limited information derives from the records of the courts of Queen Elizabeth and King James, and from a great store of legal cases in which the actors were involved. The court records tell us which companies appeared there each season, how often, how much they were paid, and at which palace (even within which room) they performed. They sometimes tell us the precise date on which they played but rarely (never, in Elizabeth's reign) the name of the plays put on – much less anything about costumes, properties, numbers or names of actors. In respect of the law: it was a litigious age and the records are full of claims over contracts broken, money not paid and outbreaks of violence involving players.[16] Without these we would lack, for example, a record of the great actor Richard Burbage shooing off his father's creditors with a broom; or details of the Theatre being dismantled at Christmas 1598 and its main timbers being shipped over the Thames to form the skeleton of the Globe; or knowledge of John Heminge, the business-manager of Shakespeare's company being sued by his own daughter, Thomasine Ostler, over his seizure of her deceased husband's estate, including his shares in the Globe and Blackfriars theatres. We shall encounter all these anon and many others besides. But the last is typical in being frustratingly incomplete: we have contradictory depositions from various parties, but no final ruling. Similarly, after the Blackfriars boys company was wound up in 1608, opening the way for Shakespeare's company to take over their playhouse, no less than six lawsuits were filed by former members of its management, leaving us with a bewildering array of bills of complaint, answers, replications and rejoinders (Smith, 512–46).

Let me make one final point about the difficulty of putting together a history of the Shakespearean stage. The business of playing – the terms and conditions under which it was allowed – changed considerably in the course of Shakespeare's lifetime. None of those theatres I have already discussed, for example, existed when Shakespeare was born. People used to speak of *the* Elizabethan stage, as if theatre was essentially the same phenomenon from 1576 (the building of the Theatre) to 1642 (the closing of the theatres at the outbreak of the Civil War). We now see much more clearly that it was constantly evolving, as individuals and troupes sought to exploit new niche positions opened up by the rapid growth of London, the proliferation of royal households after the death of Elizabeth, the opening and closing of opportunities to perform within the City limits, and so on. Hence my title, *Shakespeare's Theatre*: *A History*; he wrote for multiple acting spaces, multiple (and sometimes very different) audiences, as his career unfolded.

* * *

I conclude here with some details of procedures I have followed, and some basic information about early modern England, which I hope will make it easier to read what follows. I have already mentioned, for example, that I have silently modernized all quotations, even from texts. The dates used in the book have similarly been brought into line with modern usage. Especially in legal and court circles, England clung to a start of the year on Lady Day (March 25), one of the four quarter days of the year, on which servants were hired and rents were due. So, for example, Elizabeth I technically died on the last day (March 24) of 1602, though we now call it 1603. For many purposes, however, January 1 was recognized as New Year's Day. Dates between January 1 and March 24 therefore fell ambiguously between the two years and Henslowe (for example) sometimes gets muddled himself or leaves the ambiguity unresolved. Wherever it is clear I use the modern version; wherever it is unclear I draw attention to the fact.

Finally, some basic information about one of the essential threads running though this narrative: money. Comparisons between values then and now are all but impossible. But some indications of wages and costs may help readers to appreciate the relative values in play; it is helpful to bear in mind that there was rampant inflation in the early Jacobean period and most wages did not keep up with costs. (Jacobus is Latin for James, king after Elizabeth's death, hence Jacobean: 1603–25). The unit of currency was the pound (£), which was divided into 20 shillings (expressed 20s.) and that in turn was divided into 12 pence (12d.) Pennies could be further divided into half-pence or quarters (farthings). One penny in Elizabethan England could buy you a 24oz loaf of wheat bread, a pound of beef or mutton, or 2–3 gallons of beer (depending on its quality – "small beer," with very low potency, was usually a healthier option than water, having been boiled). 1d. was also the cost of entry to the early open-air playhouses like the Theatre or Globe, entitling a person to standing room in

the "pit"; an extra penny bought admission to the galleries; 3d. (later 6d.) paid for an upgrade to the seated "gentlemen's rooms," while it would cost a whole shilling to get into the exclusive lords' rooms, where they existed (see p. 95).

These costs need to be compared with salaries. Those for most regular tradesmen, members of guilds, were set by statute, varying by trade and skill-level within prescribed limits. According to William Ingram: "In a world of annual wages where the bottom range was £3 to £4, a worker earning £8 to £10 a year should have been able to live adequately, perhaps even comfortably. We might therefore use £10 a year as our benchmark annual wage" (Ingram, 1999, 314–15). That would give the recipient a little more than $6^{1}/_{2}$ pence per day to live on: a penny to stand in the pit, even 2d. for a gallery, would certainly have been affordable to such a relatively well-recompensed worker (though hardly to someone earning only £3 a year). Compare that with the schoolmaster in Stratford-upon-Avon, who received £20 a year plus board and lodging. At the top end of the scale those with money to invest could make a lot more. Philip Henslowe seems to have spent about £800 on building the Rose in 1587, and a further £100 or so to improve it in 1592 (Ingram, 1999, 323). The returns, however, were equally impressive: "For the 1594–5 playing season, for example, Henslowe recorded some 275 performances of plays. His share of the paid admissions came to an average of thirty-three shillings on each of these days, for an annual total of some £450. At that level of profit it would have taken only two years to recoup the whole cost of his playhouse" (Ingram, 325).

Ingram does also note, however, that not all years were as profitable; and plague or fire constantly threatened to suspend playing for long periods, if not forever. As G. E. Bentley reminds us: "In plague years of 1593, 1594, 1603, 1604, 1625, 1630, 1631, 1636–37 and 1640 there were no London gate receipts for significant periods" (1984, 53). 1608–10 was little better, delaying the opportunity of the King's Men to use the Blackfriars playhouse when they had finally acquired it. But the first Globe burned down in 1613 and the first Fortune suffered the same fate in 1622. Yet both were rebuilt, some measure of the faith people had that theatre was a worthwhile investment. London playhouses were always a high-risk investment, but one that offered substantial returns – if you were lucky. And Shakespeare was.

Notes

1 Readers may well be familiar with the normal state of the interior of the Great Hall of Christ Church, since Hogwarts Hall in the *Harry Potter* movies was closely based on it.

2 Bereblock's *Commentary* is taken from *REED Oxford* (2004), ed. J. R. Elliott, Alan H. Nelson *et al.*, 1: 136–41. Translation from Latin is by Patrick Gregory, 2: 979.

3 Robinson's "Of the Acts Done at Oxford" is from *REED Oxford*, 1: 135–6; translation from Latin is by Patrick Gregory, 2: 978.

4 For an account of *Palamon and Arcite* in broader context, see Edwards, 2001, 84–6.

5 On the realism and spectacle of mid-century court theatre, see Streitberger, 2016, 73–88.

6 Miles Windsor's *Narrative* appears in *REED Oxford*, 1: 126–35. The passages quoted: 129, 133.

7 *The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED)* does not recognize "swarse." Possibly "swart" = "swarthy"?

8 Robert Greene, *A Groatsworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance* (1592), cited in Schoenbaum, 1987, 151. Thomas Kyd was another exception to those who went to university, but he did receive a fine education (like Shakespeare) from his grammar school, in his case Merchant Taylors' School.

9 E. K. Chambers lists twelve such instances in *ES*, 3: 180, n. 1.

10 In the 1600 quarto of *2 Henry IV* the call for a prayer occurs, oddly, mid-way through the epilogue; in the 1623 folio text, cited here, it is at the end.

11 Early modern punctuation does not make clear whether the lords are singular or plural, while different references mention both "room" and "rooms." For consistency I shall stick with lords' rooms.

12 See *Henslowe*; also the Henslowe–Alleyn Digitization Project, which aims to put all the Henslowe–Alleyn papers, preserved at Dulwich College, online.

13 This section is particularly indebted to Cerasano 2004*b*, Warner 1881 and Foakes 2002.

14 Newington Butts, the first theatre south of the river, never seems to have been a success, possibly being situated too far from the city; Henslowe may eventually have owned it. The Globe would eventually be built only slightly south-east of the Rose and perhaps drive it out of business.

15 See the Henslowe–Alleyn Digitization Project; http://www.henslowe-alleyn.org.uk/index.html.

16 To get an impression of the extent to which our knowledge of theatrical affairs is built upon the litigation they generated, I suggest that readers glance through "Part Three: playhouses, 1560–1660" in *EPF*, 285–674.

1

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 2004*a*). 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.

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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 p. 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 p. 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 dias, 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