

## Shakespeare's Theatrical Scene

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One day in 1600 or 1601, boys ran around London sticking up bills announcing that if you went to the Globe playhouse on the south bank of the River Thames you could see a new play called *Hamlet* <sup>1</sup>. They pasted the bills on the doors of taverns and houses, and on pissing-posts provided for the convenience of those who walked the streets. The lads pulled down out-of-date bills announcing earlier performances and chucked them away. These hastily printed pieces of paper were of the moment. They brought profit to printers such as William Jaggard, later to be one of the publishers of the Shakespeare First Folio, who from 1602 held a monopoly on their production; but not a single one survives. <sup>2</sup> They would name the play, probably with a few words of description and commendation such as “the right excellent conceited tragedy of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*”. They would tell you that it was to be acted by the Lord Chamberlain’s company at the Globe. They might or might not say who wrote it: the company’s reputation was high, whatever it played. It frequently performed before the Queen and her courtiers, as it was proud of boasting on the title pages of those plays that got into print – many did not.

By this time Shakespeare’s name, too, was becoming an attraction. Thirty-seven years old in 1601, the author by now of two immensely successful poems and more than twenty plays, and a founding member as both actor and shareholder of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, established in 1594, he was a prosperous and admired member of his profession. Several of his plays had

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on a chapter of a work in progress about Shakespeare’s professional relationships with his fellow playwrights and actors due to be published by Penguin Books in 2006. A version was given as a lecture at the University of Urbino on 27 October 2004.

<sup>2</sup> There is however a record of one displayed by travelling players in Norwich in 1624: it read “Here within this place at one of the clock shall be acted an excellent new comedy called *The Spanish Contract* by the Princess’ servants; *vivat rex*”. (Wickham *et al.*, eds 2000:146).

appeared in print, at first anonymously, as was usual enough, but since 1598 with his name on some of their title pages, which in appearance and wording were like some of the playbills must have been. So those who decided what the advertisement for performance should say may well have included its author's name among its attractions.

But although Shakespeare is now seen as a dramatist “for all time”, in Ben Jonson's words, he was also “of an” – that is, of one – “age” in that he worked within the same intellectual and theatrical environment as his contemporaries, was subject to the same commercial and social pressures, and interacted with his fellows throughout his career. Here I want to sketch the workings of the theatrical profession during his working years. I shall concentrate on the public, or arena, playhouses because these were far more important to Shakespeare than the so-called, private, indoor buildings.

Because the authorities of the City of London frowned on dramatic performances, public theatres were normally built outside the boundaries of the City itself. The Globe had stood since 1599 not far from the southern river bank in the parish of Southwark. Close by were the Rose, built in 1587, the Swan, of 1596, and other places of entertainment such as taverns, bull- and bear-baiting rings – some of which doubled as theatres – and brothels. Easily visible from the City, the Globe, along with the tower of the church of Saint Mary's (now Southwark Cathedral) reared over its neighbours. A three-tiered, thatched structure, it was topped by a little hut. Here the raising of a flag indicated that a performance was in the offing, and as the time for its start approached closer a trumpeter blew once, then again, and then for the third and last time. (Shakespeare echoes this in Edgar's challenges within *The Tragedy of King Lear*, 5.3)<sup>3</sup>. It was early afternoon: as the theatres were open to the air, they could operate only in daylight hours.

Thus informed and summoned, men, women, and young persons streamed into the theatre from all quarters. Although then, as now, theatre audience numbers fluctuated, they could be large. There is evidence that the Globe could hold as many as three thousand spectators at once. This is around twice as many as can be accommodated in the reconstruction – even though some people believe this has an inauthentically large ground area – partly because of safety regulations, but also because in it allowance has been made for the generally larger frames of the well-fed, sometimes over-fed playgoers of today. Many theatregoers came across the river over London Bridge,

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<sup>3</sup> Quotations from Shakespeare are from the Complete Works, General Eds Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986; Compact edition, 1988, etc).

some walking, some riding on horseback, a few travelling with servants in their carriages. Others arrived by boat, ferried across the busy river in one of the small wherry boats that plied their trade there. Best remembered of the water men is John Taylor, a colourful character who wrote and published reams of doggerel verse recounting his exploits and venting his complaints against, among others, theatre owners and proprietors of hackney carriages which threatened his trade. As he ferried theatregoers across the river he may well have regaled them with the aphorism often ascribed to him:

The woman, spaniel, the walnut tree.  
The more you beat them the better they be.

Or he might have challenged them to match his (not quite perfect) palindrome “Lewd did I live, & evil I did dwell”, of which he writes “This line is the same backward, as it is forward, and I will give any man five shillings apiece for as many as they can make in English.” (Taylor 1630: sig. Ddd3v) Taylor might even, like his representative in the film *Shakespeare in Love*, have boasted that his former passengers included the notorious Christopher Marlowe, now dead.

Theatregoers included foreigners as well as Londoners and other visitors to the city. The English theatre was literally something to write home about, and we are lucky enough to have an account of a visit to the Globe by a Swiss physician, Thomas Platter, only a month or two after it opened its doors. The places, he writes, are built in such a way that they act on a

raised scaffold, and everyone can well see everything. However, there are separate galleries and places, where one sits more pleasantly and better, therefore also pays more. For he who remains standing below pays only one English penny, but if he wants to sit he is let in at another door, where he gives a further penny; but if he desires to sit on cushions in the pleasantest place, where he not only sees everything well but can also be seen, then he pays at a further door another English penny. (in Schanzer 1956:466)

Platter says little about the stage on which the action took place, but his statement that everyone could see well – even though he qualifies it by admitting that some places were better than others – is interesting in relation to the reconstructed Globe, in which I have several times found that I could not see well, especially from the side seats and those immediately above the stage which are dignified by the name of lords’ rooms.

Platter notes that some spectators stood, while others paid more to sit. Those who stood paid a single penny for standing in the yard. Notoriously

Hamlet refers to them as groundlings. It would be interesting to know how they reacted when he first spoke of and to them:

O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious, periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. (III.2.8-13)

The word “groundlings” could have caused amusement but might also have offended. Though we know it, entirely from its use in *Hamlet*, as a theatre term, it would either have been unfamiliar or have had quite different connotations to the play’s first audiences. The first datable use of the word in print is in 1601, very close to the time at which Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, in Philemon Holland’s wonderful translation of Pliny’s *Natural History*. It originally meant a small fish that lived in mud at the bottom of the water. Hamlet’s term is a metaphor, chosen presumably because the groundlings gaped up at the actors on the platform above them like fish from the bottom of stream. Did they take offence at it? Or did they take his remarks as part of the satirical characterization of a lofty aristocrat? Or was there a genial rapport between stage and yard which enabled them to enjoy his comments as good-natured banter? Did those in the galleries pat themselves on the back in a complacent sense of superiority? Or is it even possible that Shakespeare dodged confrontation by omitting or altering this passage in performance? In the first printed text of the play, the so-called “bad”, or ‘short’, quarto of 1603, which may be closer to performance than other texts, the less explicit word “ignorant” appears instead of “groundlings” (Irace, ed. (1998):Sc. 9, 6).

Who were the people who made up these audiences, and how did they behave? Evidence is conflicting. The social composition of audiences was broad, and probably varied from theatre to theatre. Puritan opponents of theatre and other polemicists liked to suggest that the yard, at least, teemed with prostitutes and pickpockets, and that playgoing was an inevitable prelude to whoring. Certainly audiences included miscreants. Pickpockets operated in the yard: their technique was vividly described by the playwright Robert Greene:

the standeth there leaning like some mannerly gentleman against the door as men go in, and there finding talk with some of his companions, spyeth what every man hath in his purse, and where, in what place, and in which sleeve or pocket he puts his bung [purse], and according to that so he worketh either where the thrust is great within, or else as they come out at the doors. (Gurr 2004:250)

Some thieves were summarily dealt with – in 1600 the actor Will Kemp wrote

of “a noted cutpurse, such a one as we tie to a post on our stage for all people to wonder at, when at a play they are taken pilfering” (Gurr 2004:258). And in an anonymous play of around 1606, it is said that ‘somebody once picked a pocket in this playhouse yard, was hoisted on the stage and shamed about it’ (Gurr 2004:265).

There can be no doubt too that prostitutes solicited in the theatres – as they notoriously went on doing into the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries – but strong efforts were made to control their activities. Platter notes that “Good order is also kept in the city in the matter of prostitution” and that a woman’s clients were punished “with imprisonment and fine”, while the woman herself was taken to Bridewell – the “house of correction” for vagabonds and whores, lying between Fleet Street and the Thames – “where the executioner scourges her naked before the populace.” Nevertheless, Platter admits that “great swarms of these women haunt the town in the taverns and playhouses” (Platter 1937:175).

The reputation of theatre audiences for rowdiness even in their own time may have been unjust. When, in 1602, the Privy Council required that idle and disorderly persons frequenting public places should be press-ganged for the army, it was said that in the playhouses, which the Council’s officers searched even before the brothels and taverns, they were surprised to find among the playgoers not only “gentlemen and servingmen but lawyers, clerks, country men that had law causes, ay the Queen’s men, knights, and as it was credibly reported one Earl”<sup>4</sup>.

Queen Elizabeth, and later King James, never attended public playing spaces – the theatre went to them, not they to it. One of the semi-official ways of circumventing the opposition of the puritanical city fathers was to claim that performances in public playhouses were essentially rehearsals for those given, especially during the Christmas season, at court. The players were well rewarded in both cash and prestige for these events. Nevertheless, the theatres were attended by high-ranking aristocrats and princely foreign visitors. The Earls of Rutland and Southampton – Shakespeare’s patron – were reported to spend all their time “merely [i.e purely] in going to plays every day” during the summer of 1599, as they awaited the Earl of Essex’s return from Ireland (Gurr 2004:246). Playwrights of the time must have attended performances even of plays they had not written themselves, and many other writers were theatregoers. It is intriguing to speculate that Thomas Lodge, the learned physician, formerly a writer of plays, poems, and prose fiction, may have been

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Gawdy, *Letters*, in Gurr 1996:225.

among the audience for the first performance of *As You Like It*, the play which Shakespeare based quite closely – with or without permission – on Lodge’s romance *Rosalynde*; and we have undisputable records of attendances by poets, including John Donne and John Milton, who saw plays at the Fortune when he was only twelve years old, great ladies, ambassadors of foreign countries, and foreign noblemen such as Prince Frederick of Württemberg, who saw *Othello* at the Globe in 1610 (Gurr 2004:236). Admittedly, neither intellectual capacity nor high rank is a guarantee of decorous behaviour. And in at least one playgoer inattentiveness took the form of studious withdrawal rather than extrovert brawling: it was said of the swottish Father Augustine Baker that as a law student in the late 1590s he would go to see plays but “never went without a pocket book of the law, which he read when the play or any sort of it pleased him not” (Gurr 2004:224; Baker’s other way of relaxing was to read Latin comedies and Erasmus). Some writers complained of unappreciative audiences, even for plays that are now regarded as classics. John Webster wrote in the preface to *The White Devil* (1612) that his play had been

presented in so open and black a theatre, that it wanted (that which is the only grace and setting out of a tragedy) a full and understanding auditory; and that since that time I have noted, most of the people that come to that playhouse resemble those ignorant asses (who visiting stationers’ shops, their use is not to inquire for good books, but new books. (Webster 1996:4)

This gives at least a hint that the play might have done better at a different theatre and at a different time of year – it was played, probably in mid-winter, at the Red Bull, Clerkenwell, where audiences were accustomed to more populist fare. Ben Jonson, too, complained of unresponsive audiences; of his *Sejanus*, performed by the King’s Men in 1603 with Shakespeare in the cast, he wrote that it ‘suffered no less violence from our people here than the subject of it’ – who was dismembered and torn limb from limb – “did from the rage of the people of Rome” (Jonson 1990:49). Jonson’s comedy *Epicene; or The Silent Woman* was no better received when acted by a boys’ company in 1609, but there the audience seem to have voted with their feet; the comedy is said to have been nicknamed *The Silent Audience*. It is only fair to say that, for all the critical respect these plays have commanded in recent times, modern audiences have been no more enthusiastic about them in performance than those that gave them the thumbs down when they were first acted. And certainly audiences of Shakespeare’s time could be deeply absorbed in the plays they most enjoyed: in preliminary verses to the Shakespeare First Folio, Leonard Digges says he has seen

when Caesar would appear,  
And on the stage at half-sword parley were  
Brutus and Cassius: O, how the audience  
Were ravished, with what wonder went they hence.

On the other hand, these audiences, says Digges (who admittedly is concerned to boost Shakespeare's reputation) were less responsive to Ben Jonson's heavier-going classical tragedies *Sejanus* and *Catiline*:

When some new day they would not brook a line  
Of tedious (though well-laboured) *Catiline*'s:  
*Sejanus* too was irksome, they prized more  
Honest *Iago*, or the jealous *Moor*. (Digges 1988:xlviiii)

Perhaps the most eloquent tribute to the quality of attention that even the least well educated members of an audience could yield comes in the Prologue to Thomas Dekker's *If this be not a Good Play, the Devil is in it* (1611), where he writes of poets

Who [. . .]  
Can call the banished auditor home and tie  
His ear with golden chains to his melody;  
Can draw with adamant pen even creatures  
Forged out of th'hammer on tiptoe to reach up  
And from rare silence clap their brawny hands  
T'applaud what their charmed soul scarce understands. (Dekker 1958:121-2)

Here Dekker praises the power of dramatic verse to draw even the most unlikely listeners out of themselves, working a spell that enforces attention and compels an understanding that transcends the powers of reason. "Much", as the Duke says in Shakespeare's early play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, "is the force of heaven-bred poesy" (III.2.71).

But the best evidence that audiences of the period were, in spite of occasional exceptions, not unworthy of the plays they were offered is surely provided by the plays themselves. Popular successes of the time, such as *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Dr Faustus*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Volpone*, make heavier demands on the intellects, the emotions, the imaginations, and the sheer stamina of playgoers than almost any works written since their time for the popular theatre. In the earlier part of the period especially, references to classical mythology and literature abound, often (as in immensely popular works such as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*) accompanied by pas-

sages in Latin, and occasionally (as in the French scenes in Shakespeare's *Henry V*) using dialogue in foreign tongues. Plays such as these presuppose in their auditors the level of education that their authors would have received in the grammar schools and, some of them, in the universities of the realm. They are far more ambitious and demanding than most of the plays written for the West End, not to say Broadway, of today. Audiences that made popular successes out of these plays must surely have been as deserving of respect, as responsive and responsible in their behaviour, as any of later ages. Preconceptions, in my view misconceived, about the way in which Elizabethan audiences behaved have had a regrettable effect on the behaviour of audiences at the reconstructed Globe, who have been all too willing to hiss, for example, the French in *Henry V*, and to cheer on the English, and have even been encouraged by the actors to do so. Such behaviour is more likely to derive from an unjustly condescending attitude to audiences of the past, along with exhibitionistic self-indulgence, than to reflect the truth about early audiences.

Platter notes that “during the play food and drink is carried around among the people” – a practice that is not followed in the reconstructed Globe – “so that one can also refresh oneself for one’s money” (in Schanzer 1956:466). This last phrase suggests, improbably, that perhaps the refreshments were included in the price of admission. And Platter’s remark reminds us that, at least until around 1609, performances in the public theatres were given without a break. Modern readers, accustomed to reading the plays in editions into which editors have introduced act and scene divisions, may not find it easy to realize that playwrights of the period – though they may have been influenced by the five-act structure of classical drama, as Shakespeare certainly was in, for instance, *Henry V*, with its Chorus before and after each act – nevertheless generally conceived their plays as continuous units. Every edition of a Shakespeare play printed during his lifetime, and most of those by his contemporaries is undivided; clearly they expected these plays to be acted without interruption. So if people wanted to eat and drink, they had to do so while the play was being performed. This practice had happy consequences when the Globe burnt down in 1613; the only damage, we learn from a report by Sir Henry Wotton, was to a man whose breeches caught fire: he was able to quench the conflagration with bottled ale snatched, perhaps, from one of the fleeing vendors. (Wickham ed. 2000:499) In modern theatres, intervals in performance permit spectators both to drink and to relieve themselves of what they have drunk. Whether any provision was made for Elizabethan spectators to do the latter, and if so where it was, is one of the unsolved mysteries of theatre history. The new Globe provides toilet facilities with, happily, no claims to authenticity, and most performances



there have at least one break, though it has occasionally been possible to see a play without interruption.

Platter says little about the actors, but has an interesting comment about how they were costumed.

The play-actors are dressed most exquisitely and elegantly, because of the custom in England that when men of rank or knights die they give and bequeath almost their finest apparel to their servants, who, since it does not befit them, do not wear such garments, but afterwards let the play-actors buy them for a few pence. (in Schanzer 1956:466)

The idea that it did not “befit” servants to wear fine garments relates to a series of sumptuary laws enacted during the later part of the sixteenth century which attempted, with limited success, to impose a class system of dress. So for example it was decreed that none might wear

Any silk of the colour of purple, cloth of gold tissued, nor fur of sables, but only the King, Queen, King's mother, children, brethren, and sisters, uncles and aunts; and except dukes, marquises, and earls, who may wear the same in doublets, jerkins, linings of cloaks, gowns, and hose; and those of the Garter, purple in mantles only. (Hughes and Larkin 1969:383)

The laws were hard to enforce and were repealed in 1604, but relics of the system linger on even today in the costumes of, for instance, school children, the medical profession, members of the armed forces, and (on special occasions) academics and peers of the realm.

Platter's note, even though he may have based it on the kind of gossip to which tourists were and are susceptible, reinforces the fact that the actors would, where appropriate, be handsomely dressed, and also reminds us that so far as we can tell they would largely have worn contemporary costume, whatever the period in which the play was set.

Availability of cast-offs from noblemen was not the only reason the actors were finely arrayed. One of the richest sources of information about the theatre of Shakespeare's time is the cache of papers left by the theatre owner and financier Philip Henslowe, known loosely as his diary. Henslowe often records the expenditure of far more than “a few pence” on costumes for particular performances, and on material for the company's sempstresses and tailors to make up. On 9 May 1598, for instance, Henslowe lent £7 “to buy a doublet and a pair of hose laid thick with gold laces” (Foakes ed. 2002:89); on 21 August he lent £10 for “a suit and a gown for the play of *Vayvode*” (Foakes ed. 2002:97); later that month he laid out £2.16. 6d “to pay the lace man's bill”

along with 23 shillings for the tailor's bill (Foakes ed. 2002:97) – the lace man received frequent payments; in November he lent £7 “to buy women's gown [sic] and other things for [appropriately] *The Fountain of New Fashions*” (Foakes ed. 2002:101), and in January following “taffeta for two women's gowns for *The Two Angry Women of Abingdon*” cost him £9 (Foakes ed. 2002:104). Sometimes he operated a hire purchase system: a player named Richard Jones paid him five shillings a week (except for one week when he couldn't manage it) over a period of twelve weeks for “a man's gown of peach colour in grain” in the latter part of 1594 (Foakes ed. 2002:35. It's not clear whether this for the actor's personal use, or for wearing on stage, or possibly for both). These were large sums at a time when a teacher or clergyman might think himself lucky to be paid £20 a year. Clearly the company laid great importance on appearing in fresh and, when appropriate, fine, array.

Theatre companies worked on a co-operative system. They were required by law to have aristocratic, or even royal patronage, otherwise they would have been classed as rogues and vagabonds, and when they were on duty but off stage they would wear the livery of their patron. During the high period they needed around fifteen to twenty regular performers. Although some of Shakespeare's plays have more than fifty speaking parts, most of them can be acted by a group of fifteen or so, with most of the actors taking two or more parts. There would be a number – fluctuating perhaps from eight to a dozen – of stakeholders (sharers) who normally would also be active as actors and possibly writers. At least one of them would take on the responsibilities of company manager, looking after financial matters. The company would need professional boy actors, often apprenticed to leading actors, to play women's roles; three or four are enough for most plays of the period, but some of these roles – such as Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the Duchess of Malfi in Webster's tragedy, and Joanna/Beatrice in Middleton's *The Changeling* – are immensely demanding. In addition the company would take on hired men, paid by the week, according to the varying requirements of their scripts. In 1597 Henslowe contracted a number of new actors for the Rose, including one William Kendall who agreed to work for him for a period of two years at the rate of ten shillings for each week he played in London, and five shillings a week on tour, with the condition that he should be “ready at all times to play in the house of the said Philip, and in no other during the said term” (Foakes ed. 2002:268). Some actors' contracts were more detailed and stringent. An agreement between Robert Dawes and Henslowe of 1614 is marvellously illuminating about theatre practice. Dawes had to agree to a sliding scale of penalties for a variety of foreseeable misdemeanours. If he was

late for a rehearsal “which shall the night before the rehearsal be given publicly out”, he would forfeit twelve pence; if he failed to turn up for the rehearsal at all, it would cost him two shillings; if he was not “ready apparelled ... to begin the play by three of the clock in the afternoon” he would pay three shillings; and if he “should happen to be overcome with drink at the time when he [ought to] play, by the judgement of four of the said company” it would cost him ten shillings. If the actor failed to turn up at all, with no reasonable excuse, the penalty was a pound. And if he left the playhouse with any of the proprietors’ apparel on his body, or took away any of their property, or even connived at any other persons’ doing so, he would suffer the crippling penalty of £40 (Bentley 1984:48-50).

The company also needed support staff – musicians, one or more scribes, property men, wardrobe keepers, doormen (or women), and stage keepers who did anything from sweeping the stage, clearing up refuse in the auditorium, posting playbills, and appearing as extras in crowd scenes (Bentley 1984:102). Running a company was an expensive business, subject to unforeseeable hazards such as riots, bad weather and outbreaks of sickness, especially plague, which could close theatres for long periods of time. Closure of the London theatres sent the companies touring in the provinces, which was in any case a regular activity. We know of very few purpose-built playhouses out of London during the entire period; performances were given in guild-halls, great and not-so-great houses, schoolrooms, and even in churches. This required flexibility of staging, and must also have resulted in adjustments to the texts to suit the circumstances.

Hazardous though the business was, the rewards could be great. Shakespeare was a rich man, able to buy a fine house in Stratford, by the time he was in his mid-thirties; Edward Alleyn, the leading actor of the Lord Admiral’s Men who was also an astute business man, became one of the leading educational philanthropists of his time; we still benefit from his founding of Dulwich College. His first wife was Joan, Henslowe’s step-daughter. Among his father-in-law’s papers are affectionate letters much concerned with domestic matters that passed by carrier, and through the good offices of players travelling between the provinces and London, between Henslowe, Alleyn and Joan when the players were on tour during the plague of 1593. On 1 August Edward was with the Lord Strange’s Men in Bristol. As he waited to go on stage in a play called *Harry of Cornwall*, now lost, he took the opportunity to write home, advising his wife on precautions she might take against the plague:

keep your house fair and clean, which I know you will, and every evening throw

water before your door and in our backside [backyard], and have in your windows good store of rue and herb of grace and withal the grace of God which must be obtained by prayers, and so doing no doubt but the Lord will mercifully defend you. (Foakes ed. 2002:276)

Alleyn had been married for only ten months, and was homesick; in a post-script he gently chides his wife for letting him have no news “of your domestic matters, such things as happens at home as how your distilled water proves or this or that or anything, what you will.” He wants to know how his garden is doing, and tells his wife (whom he calls his “mouse”) that in September she should turn the parsley bed over to spinach “for then is the time”; he would do it himself “but we shall not come home till AllHolland tide, and so sweet mouse farewell and brook our long journey with peace”. He is sending back his white waistcoat “because it is a trouble to me to carry it”, and asks Joan to have his orange-tawny stockings dyed “very good black” for him to wear in the winter. Henslowe replied on Joan’s behalf – probably she could not write – with a mixture of good and sombre news – “we are all at this time in good health in our house”, the stockings are duly dyed, the spinach bed is “not forgotten”, “your poor mouse hath not been sick since you went”; but the sickness “hath been almost in every house about us and whole households died”, including the wife of a fellow actor, Robert Browne, who was at that time in Germany, along with “all her children and household”; during that week 1603 Londoners had died (Foakes ed. 2002:277-8).

As well as actors and support staff, the companies had a desperate need of a stream of new plays to satisfy the demands of a voracious public. It was usual for a different play to be given every weekday afternoon. On successive days in January 1593 Henslowe recorded performances of plays called *The Comedy of Cosmo* and *Sir John Mandeville* (both of unknown authorship and now lost), *A Knack to Know a Knave* (anon.), *Titus Andronicus*, by Shakespeare, *Harry the Sixth* (probably *Henry the Sixth Part One*, by Shakespeare), *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, by Robert Greene, *The Jew of Malta*, by Marlowe, one of the two parts of the anonymous *Tamar Cham*, and *Mulomuloc* (probably an alternative title for George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar*, which the company had acted thirteen times during the previous year; Foakes ed. 2002:19). Rehearsal time must have been minimal, and actors had to have fast-working and phenomenally capacious memories. Although a few writers were contracted to write for a single company for a few years, most of them worked free-lance. Shakespeare is exceptional in having written solely for the Lord Chamberlain’s (later the King’s) Men from the establishment of the company in 1594. Rewards for free-lance playwrights were not great, and some of them kept up a phenomenal output. Before the end of his

long career, Thomas Heywood claimed to have had an entire hand, or at least a “main finger” in some two hundred and twenty plays (Heywood 1996:108); and he wrote in many other literary forms. A standard fee during the 1590s for one single-authored play was £6 – less than the cost of some of the more expensive individual costumes. And there was no royalty system.

It was customary for writers to receive part payment in advance, and some of them desperately needed it. At the beginning of December 1597 Henslowe advanced Ben Jonson a pound for a play that was to be completed before Christmas. Jonson had already shown the plot – that is, an outline of the play – to the company. (Foakes ed. 2002:85) And towards the end of the same month Henslowe paid £3 to Anthony Munday and Michael Drayton for “a book” – playscript – called *Mother Redcap*; six days later Munday received an additional five shillings “toward his book”, and on 5 January a final payment of fifty-five shillings (Foakes ed. 2002:856). Later in the period fees had gone up. A happily surviving correspondence between Philip Henslowe and the playwright Robert Daborne (Greg ed. 1907:68-85) shows something of the hectic conditions of the theatre world. On 17 April 1613 Henslowe agreed to pay Daborne £20 in all for a tragedy to be called *Machiavel and the Devil*; after an initial advance of £6 Daborne was to receive a further £4 on handing in the play’s first three acts, and a final £10 “upon delivery of the last scene perfected”. This was to be by 31 May, allowing six weeks for the entire task. But eleven days later Daborne, finding himself in urgent need because his servant (interesting all the same that he had a servant) had been “committed to Newgate” prison, implored Henslowe for a further advance of £2. Five days after this he begged for another £1, promising to deliver the first three acts “fair written” within four days; he managed some papers “though not so fair written all as I could wish”, and though he acknowledged that he could not deliver the whole by the due date, still it would arrive “upon the neck of this new play they are now studying”, and if Henslowe will cough up the final instalment he will read what he has written to Alleyn and will not “lose any time till it be concluded”. But he is “unwilling to read to the general company till all be finished”. This was on 16 May. On the 19<sup>th</sup> Daborne signed a receipt for his final payment, noting “This play to be delivered in to Mr Henslowe with all speed”. We know no more of it.

Reading a newly written play to the company was – and continued to be at least until the twentieth century (Holland 1991 *passim*) – a regular practice, and could be an occasion for conviviality; in 1598 Henslowe lent the company five shillings to spend at the Sun in New Fish Street on the occasion of the reading of “the book called *The Famous Wars of Henry the First and The Prince of Wales*.” The writers were Drayton, Dekker, and Chettle. Whether Henslowe

got his money back we know not (Foakes ed. 2002:88).

Between four and six weeks seems to have been a pretty standard time scale for writing a play. Lent, during which performances were prohibited, would have provided a convenient opportunity for an actor-dramatist such as Shakespeare, who may have ridden home for the purpose. But Drayton promised to complete a play in a fortnight, and as we have seen, Jonson hoped to work up a plot within the same period of time.

Partly no doubt to keep up with the demand, collaboration was the rule rather than the norm. Its prevalence as a working method is disguised from us since most of the greatest plays of the period, the ones that survive, are single-authored. A play is, we may feel, more likely to achieve artistic coherence and unity of vision if it is the product of a single imagination. Nevertheless some great plays are collaborative: the composition of *The Changeling*, for instance, was the joint product of Thomas Middleton and the far less famous William Rowley; the comedy of *Eastward Ho* – an uproarious success when performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2002 – came from the joint pens of George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston; and the names of Beaumont and Fletcher are as inseparable as Gilbert and Sullivan or ham and eggs, even though many of the plays collected in 1647 under their joint names were written either by one of them working independently, or by someone entirely other.

The full extent of Shakespeare's collaboration during the early and late periods of his career is still under a process of re-definition. His output, which averages around two plays a year, with an attempt to alternate tragedy and comedy, is relatively modest by comparison with some of his contemporaries, partly no doubt because his standards were high, but also because he had other duties as both actor and shareholder. Ben Jonson collaborated in a number of plays, now lost, early in his career. He worked with Henry Chettle and Henry Porter on *Hot Anger Soon Cold* in 1598, with Thomas Dekker on *Page of Plymouth* the following year, and with Chettle, Dekker, "and other gentleman" [sic] in 1599 (Foakes ed. 2002:96, 123, 124). But all we know of Jonson's personality suggests that he would not have been an easy bedfellow. Later he took pride in his independence, even when he was working speedily. In the prologue to *Volpone*, of 1606, he claims that

Five weeks fully penned it  
From his own hand, without a coadjutor,  
Novice, journeyman, or tutor. (Jonson 1983:86)

Those four nouns define a range of the roles that a collaborator might enact. A coadjutor would be an equal collaborator, a novice a kind of apprentice, a

journeyman a hack brought in perhaps to supply a comic subplot, and a tutor a master craftsman guiding a novice. So for example Shakespeare may have started as tutor to John Fletcher, who collaborated on several of Shakespeare's late plays, but they ended up as coadjutors – equal collaborators. Divisions of labour varied. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, it seems clear that Shakespeare wrote the whole of the first and last acts, some intervening scenes and speeches, and perhaps added touches here and there. Presumably Fletcher and he had discussed the overall design of the play in relation to its principal source, Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Sometimes new writers were brought in to revise an existing manuscript, as Shakespeare and others appear to have been called upon to rework the play of *Sir Thomas More* after it had fallen foul of the censor. It was not uncommon for plays to be adapted after their initial composition. In 1601 Henslowe "lent" Edward Alleyn £4 to "lend" to Ben Jonson for writing additional scenes for Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, dating from around 1587 (Foakes ed. 2002:182), and the surviving version of *Macbeth* is almost certainly Middleton's revision of Shakespeare's play. Middleton also collaborated with Shakespeare on *Timon of Athens*, and appears to have tinkered with *Measure for Measure*.

The conditions in which the greatest plays of the English drama were produced may seem not to have been propitious. Actors worked under scarcely imaginable pressures of time in learning and rehearsing a wide range of roles, subject to the whims of audiences and to the hazards attendant on performing in theatres that were open to the elements. They were harried by government regulations, liable to have to cancel performances sometimes for long periods of time during outbreaks of plague, to take to the road with inadequate preparation, and to travel in discomfort with no assurance of a warm welcome and good working conditions when they offered to perform. Those who wrote for the theatres were often required to do so fast, and for what must have seemed inadequate rewards in terms both of money and of appreciation.

Yet it was a system that worked, perhaps because rather than in spite of its improvisatory and tumultuous nature. Though theatre design was simple, it was flexible and effective. Speed of production seems to have acted as an inspiration rather than a deterrent to ambition and achievement. Rapid advances in Humanistic education created responsive audiences. English actors responded to the demands made on them with a brilliance that gave them an international reputation. The intellectual excitement and rapid development of the expressive qualities of the English language was as apparent in the drama as in all other literary forms: there is no other period in which so much of the finest writing, in both verse and prose, is to be found in plays written for the popular theatre. This is the environment in which Shakespeare and his fellows

flourished, and which produced the greatest body of dramatic work so far composed.

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