Shakespeare’s Company, Theaters and Rivals

Charlotte Scott   
University of London  
Department of English

[Charlotte Scott is the author of three monographs for Oxford University Press – S*hakespeare and the Idea of the Book,* (2007): *Shakespeare’s Nature: from Cultivation to Culture* (20014) and *Shakespeare’s* *Children* (2017). She has written a number of essays and journal articles about Shakespeare’s drama and poetry. She is the reviewer for *Shakespeare Survey*, the associate editor of the *Royal Shakespeare Company’s Complete Works*, pedagogic advisor for the *New Oxford Shakespeare* and a frequent contributor to public and literary festivals. AUTHOR BIO]

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[This essay explores the beginnings of early modern theatre and the development of Shakespeare’s drama. Following a chronological narrative the essay explains how the public theaters emerged in this period and how Shakespeare, and his contemporaries, supported and developed that space. The essays focuses on how the historical context in which the drama was being produced, including collaboration, religion, patronage, textual production and performance history. Focusing on certain recurrent themes and ideas in Shakespeare’s work, the essay makes sense of how drama developed in this complex and lively period of change and how Shakespeare capitalized on this new media to explore some of the most pressing and powerful issues of his days. Beginning with the creation of the first purpose built playing space and ending with the production of Shakespeare’s first folio, some 7 years after his death, the essay tells the story of a playwright and a moment in which the book and the stage would change English culture forever. ]

[INTRODUCTION]

LONDON AND THE THEATER

Until the sixteenth century there were no public theaters in England. Before drama moved into the province of public entertainment and spectacle it was exclusively didactic, emerging out of religious teachings to form morality plays and the staging of conversions or miracles. Biblical stories were retold in performance and the church community provided a space for the celebration and circulation of socio-religious values. Before the inception of the first operational theater, the Red Lion Inn, in 1567, dramatic productions were limited to the inns and the yards of court or private houses. In 1576, however, James Burbage commissioned the Theatre, which was the first structure expressly built for the purpose of playing. James Burbage would be an important figure in Shakespeare’s life: his son, Richard Burbage, was to become one of the leading actors in Shakespeare’s company and central to ways in which the playwright wrote his roles. By the beginning of the seventeenth century at least seven playhouses were operational, including the open-air amphitheaters, like the Theatre, the Curtain, the Swan, the Rose and The Globe, and the indoor theatres, like Blackfriars and the Cockpit. The indoor theatres were typically smaller than the open-air spaces, they were usually rectangle in shape and lit by candle light. The often richly decorated theatres attracted a mixed social group but the difference in price, one penny to attend a play in the yard of the Globe, for example, and six pennies to attend a performance at Blackfriars, meant that the indoor theatres tended to cater for the more elite audience members.

The nature of the outdoor theater and the company of actors had a significant impact on the ways in which plays were written. The construction of the space, for example, meant that there were particular facilities any play could make use of: the gallery, trap door, or “discovery space,” for example, where actors could declaim, hide, or reveal. Shakespeare’s plays are full of references to the art of playing and the nature of the theater.. Two early plays, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, are deeply concerned with performance and pretending. Where *The Shrew* is a play within a play, beginning with the duping of a drunkard into believing he is a lord set before his own private entertainment, *Dream* ritualizes the illusion of representation and the art of believing. But where *The Shrew* begins with the staging of its own performance, *Dream* ends with an allusion to the play itself:

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended,  
That you have but slumbered here  
While these visions did appear.  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream …  
 (Epilogue, 1–6, p. 411)

Shakespeare returns again and again to the art of playing and the nature of theater, compelled, as he seemed to be, by the vagaries of representation and the implications of illusion. As media developed throughout the sixteenth century—the printed book, broadsides, and pamphlets—the theater became a particularly vibrant place for the mixing of spectacle and entertainment, knowledge and commentary. To its supporters the theater offered an extraordinary and unique synthesis of ribaldry, story, morality, amusement, diversion, and learning. Words, new or fantastic, flew across the stage as gifts to the audience; people could attend a play in order to hear language being used in new ways, to appropriate whole sentences, and to explore ways of communicating in a developing climate of expression. This was the age when the printed word became available to more than the university educated, the Bible had been translated into English for the first time, and the classical theater was being rewritten in the tongues of many. The theater became a trading place for the commodification of language and the celebration of style: it was also a valuable resource for those who could not read. When the theaters closed during the Civil War it was for the state of language that people feared:

*The Stage … having much conferd and contributed to the inrichment of [language], it being the Mintthat daily coyns new words, which are presently received and admitted as currant, … the plucking downe of which will I feare, not only retard the perfectioning of our Language towards which it was advancing amain, but even quite hinder and recoyle it, and make it return to its former Barbarisme.*

*(Richard Flecknoe, Miscellania, 1653, pp. 103–104)*

But although the theater was intensely popular, and populist, it was also a place of controversy. The very nature of the public space brought people together to mix in close proximity and socialize in excitement, and antitheatricalists seized on such circumstances as license for sin. In 1579 the Puritan and writer Stephen Gosson explained, in *The Schoole of Abuse:*

*In our assemblies at plays in London, you shall see such heaving, and shoving, such itching and shouldering, to sit by women; Such care for their garments, that they be not trod on: Such eyes to their laps, that no chips light in them: Such pillows to their backs, that they take no hurt: Such masking in their ears, I know not what: Such giving the Pippins to pass the time: Such playing at foot Saunt without Cards: Such tickling, such toying, such smiling, such winking, and such manning them home, when the sports are ended, that it is a right Comedy, to mark their behavior, to watch their conceits, as the Cat for the Mouse,*

*(p. 17)*

For Gosson, the physical space encouraged a mingling and vanity that was both antisocial and ungodly; for others, however, the plays themselves fostered profanity. As John Northbrooke put it, in *A Treatise Wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Plaies* … *Are Reproved* … (1579):

*I am persuaded that Satan hath not a more speedy way and fitter school to work and teach his desire to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthy lusts of wicked whoredom, than those places and plays, and theaters are.*

*(pp. 59–60)*

For Shakespeare, the relationship between sin and representation was more complex and certainly subtler. His exploration of playing and performing became central to the ways in which he examined the moral and political fabrics of the play worlds. Hamlet’s great invocation of the art of theater is rooted in an obsession with truth, and what that comes to mean in a “seeming” world. When Hamlet stages his play *The Mousetrap* to entrap his murderous uncle, he insists on a heightened realism that will resonate from the play to its audience. Instructing the players, he declares:

*Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance: that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.*

*(3.2.16–22, p. 1960)*

Invoking the theater as a reflective glass, showing us who we are and how we live, exposes it as a powerful tool in the discussion—and understanding—of a society in crisis. The power of theater is nowhere more apparent than in *Hamlet*, where it is precisely constructed for revelation and disclosure. Confronted by his deeds, especially the administering of poison into his brother’s ear, in Hamlet’s play, Claudius cannot help but reveal his anxiety; he cries out and attempts to leave the play.. In 1612 Thomas Heywood, a fellow playwright and great supporter of the stage, wrote a treatise titled *An Apology for Actors*, which discusses the role and significance of the theater. In support of his argument he describes in some detail an incident that took place involving a widow, a murder, a play, and a conviction: during a performance with “a company of our *English* Comedians,” a woman, watching the dramatization of a murder, became “with great gravity strangely amazed,” and “with a distracted and troubled brain oft sighed these words: Oh my husband, my husband!” A few days later, the sexton, having discovered the skull of a man whose murder was similar to that of the man in the play, makes it known to the churchwarden, and “the woman, out of the trouble of her afflicted conscience discovered a former murder” (Heywood, G2v, G2r). As Hamlet says, “the play’s The thing/Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king” (2. 2.581–2, p. 1956)—or in this case, an ordinary woman.

Shakespeare’s use of the play-within-a-play is not unique, and Elizabethan and Jacobean theater is full of this conceit as a way of exploring the arts of representation and the psychologies of guilt and exposure. But Shakespeare is unique in his sophisticated explorations of what is and what seems; in other words, the complex interrelations between subjective and objective truths. *Hamlet*, perhaps Shakespeare’s greatest creation, and certainly his most famous, was composed about halfway through his dramatic career and marked a turning point for the dramatist. As Shakespeare moved through his early career he shifted through different registers of performance, starting, probably, with *The Comedy of Errors* and the three parts of *Henry VI*; he then turned to *The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Romeo and Juliet, Richard II*, and *Titus Andronicus.* As he was moving between classical comedy, history, and tragedy, Shakespeare was exploring the nature of theater (entertainment and spectacle) as well as the limits of representation (the structure of the space, the role of the imagination, and the contexts of illusion).

Toward the end of the sixteenth century Shakespeare began to write the plays that have become celebrated for their sophisticated understanding of the social and political worlds, through which multiple voices emerge. As the theater itself developed and jostled for public attention with organized executions, bear-baiting, endorsed misrule, royal processions, and pageants, so too did Shakespeare’s exploration of the relations between the self and the state, institution and emotion, surveillance and authority. *Richard II*, written in about 1596, is a play that has become inextricably, although perhaps erroneously, linked with the historical moment in which it was performed. An extraordinary play that interrogates the limits of representation, *Richard II* charts the downfall of a king who is single-minded and insincere, brilliant and untrustworthy, emotional and bloody-minded. Alongside the creation of this fragmented king runs the history of fraud and deposition, of rebellion and dishonor. The play dramatizes the deposing of a monarch, something unacceptable on the Elizabethan stage. Legend has it—along with many scholarly editions—that Elizabeth I identified herself with Richard II, and the Earl of Essex, her onetime ally turned detractor, wanted the play performed the night before his planned rebellion. In the event, the rebellion was quashed and the performance aborted, but the radical scene in which Richard is deposed by Bolingbroke (the future Henry IV) was not published in Elizabeth’s lifetime. Censorship was a serious business, and all plays were subject to approval by the Master of the Revels, a position appointed by and accountable to the queen, before they could legally be performed. Although plays were to some extent at the whim of the monarch and depended financially on her patronage, their popularity, and the dynamic between the public and political worlds were all testaments to the power of theater in public life. Shakespeare was surprisingly canny in avoiding the censors; unlike his fellow playwrights Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and John Marston, Shakespeare was never directly or specifically censored. Censorship reminds us, however, that plays are always in conversation with their worlds, and that those conversations are not necessarily straightforward or transparent. We can see traces of self-censorship in buried or oblique references to political anxieties: setting plays in foreign countries or distant time periods allowed Shakespeare and other writers to explore contemporary political concerns in an apparently distant register.

Shakespeare’s interest in performance reflects not only the medium in which he worked but also a predominantly illiterate society that was deeply rooted in a visual culture and a demonstrative religious and political establishment. Power and authority had emerged from a long history of iconography that needed to speak—with immediacy—through the image to a society largely unschooled in the written word. Teaching, whether the word of God or the monarch, had to be done through the image, and although the Protestant Reformation worked hard to make this shift from the icon to the word, the eye to the intellect, much of Elizabethan state culture remained deeply invested in spectacle. Shakespeare would have walked through a city that displayed the decapitated heads of traitors, preserved in tar, on London Bridge; that supported the scaffolds for public hangings, the spaces for floggings, blocks for the stocks, and ritualized public punishments for brawling, domestic disturbance, and disorderly behavior. This was a city and a society that celebrated both its punishments and rewards in public. Royal progresses, processions, and state funerals were all intended as a visual embodiment of authority, and the theater grew up in a society that recognized the performance of image as didactic. But with the rise and development of Protestantism the image was to undergo a dramatic change, and the trust in a visual culture would become more ambivalent. In his plays Shakespeare repeatedly explores what we see and how we see it, and as his career moved forward into the more intense period of the tragedies he returned again and again to questions of representation and the psychologies of appearance. With a developing awareness of the art of theater in the dynamic between the collective and the individual, Shakespeare became more self-reflexive in his treatment of the stage.

When Shakespeare turned his hand to a history of Henry V, a popular subject for plays in this period, he used the stage as a platform to incite the imagination well beyond the confines of its structure and temporality. As the play opens, the Chorus enters to speak the Prologue:

O, for a muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heaven of invention.  
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!  
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,  
Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels,  
Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword, and fire  
Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,  
The flat unraisèd spirits that hath dared  
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram  
Within this wooden O, the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt?  
 (Prologue, 1–14.1–14; pp. 1032–1033)

The Chorus wonderfully describes what any play must be able to do—create a kingdom on a stage, princes from players, and history in a heartbeat. But referring back to the structure—“this unworthy scaffold,” “this wooden O”—we must imagine that the theater (cockpit) holds “the vasty fields of France” and the armor (“casques”) of the soldiers. The Chorus returns at crucial moments within the drama to urge us to travel, geographically or temporally, beyond the remit of the stage:

*There is the playhouse now, there must you sit,*

*And thence to France shall we convey you safe,*

*And bring you back, charming the narrow seas*

*To give you gentle pass, for if we may,*

*We’ll not offend one stomach with our play.*

*(2.0.36–40; p. 1043)*

As Shakespeare became more conscious of the limits of drama, he also became more aware of how to manipulate those limits and develop the imagination beyond the requisites of seeing.

Around the time *Henry V* was being composed, James Burbage was running into trouble with the lease on his Theatre in Shoreditch. The lease ran out in April 1598 and it was not renewed. In the winter of that year Burbage and the Theatre’s loyal troop, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, which included Shakespeare, dismantled the structure—the “wooden O”—and carried it, piece by piece, over the river to the Liberties, where it could be established with a new license and without such strict regulations. The men erected the theater in the Clink in Southwark, where it became the Globe playhouse, not far from where the current Globe Theatre stands today. The new theater now belonged to five shareholders as well as the Burbages, which included William Shakespeare and John Heminge, the latter of whom would go on to publish Shakespeare’s complete works with Henry Condell in 1623. The Globe playhouse was polygonal with a thatched roof, which, in 1613, during a performance of *Henry VIII*, caught fire from the sparks of burning wadding that had been ignited by ceremonial guns and burned down. Looking on at the remnants of the destroyed theater Ben Jonson exclaimed, “See the world’s ruins …!” The Globe had been an extremely popular theater and marked a turning point in Shakespeare’s career as he moved from actor to playwright to shareholder, staging some of his best-loved plays at the theater. Jonson’s comment draws on the metaphor of the world as a stage and the stage as a world, and is symptomatic of the space the theater had come to occupy in the language of representation.

Alongside the intense popularity of public theatre, drama continued to be played at private houses and at court. James I was a great supporter of drama and The Chamberlain’s Men, for whom Shakespeare wrote under Elizabeth I, became the King’s Men under James’ patronage. We have few records of court performances but what remains suggests that plays at Whitehall, Hampton Court, Richmond or Greenwich tended to coincide with a period of festival. With the creation of indoor theatres, Queen Anne’s love of the masque and an increasingly elaborate and contrived development of theatrical technique, we begin to see new forms of theater emerging. Inigo Jones, an English architect, responsible for bringing classical Italian architectural designs to England, and under the patronage of Queen Anne developed movable scenery and elaborate and wonderful stage designs which would revolutionize the productions of plays. Collaborating with Ben Jonson and producing masques for court performances, Jones pioneered forms of theatre that were intensely visually impressive. Predominantly elitist, however, courtly masques and private performances supported a humanist a long held tradition of the value and role of amateur drama in public life.

John Manningham, a law student at the Middle Temple, records his observations on a performance of Twelfth Night, at the inns of court, in 1602. Manningham’s entry in his notebook reflects the play’s structured of festivity, recording the date of candlemas, and specifically mentions his pleasure at the ‘gulling’ (mockery) of Malvolio, the play’s resident kill-joy. During the latter part of Elizabeth’s reign there were probably only three performances at year at court, whereas under James, that figure increased to eleven. The rhythms of the theatrical year were defined not only by the Christian calendar and traditional festivals but they were also subject to the constraints of censorship and outbreaks of plague. Between 1592-4, for example, the public theatres were in enforced closure due to a particularly virulent outbreak of the plague. It was during this time that Shakespeare turned his hand to the narrative poems, and produced two of the most widely published pieces of work in his life time, Venus and Adonis (1593) The Rape of Lucrece (1594).

END OF THE BEGINNING

When Elizabeth I died in 1603 the Tudor dynasty that defined so much of the achievement of the sixteenth century came to an end. Since her grandfather, Henry VII, came to the throne in 1485, the Tudors had reigned over England and witnessed—and even encouraged—the great changes that were to take place under the auspices of what we would later call the English Renaissance: humanism, trade, exploration, nationalism, Protestantism, and vernacular literature. Although there was much that was variable in Elizabethan politics, she inspired a nation, supported the theater, exploited the power of the arts, and enabled a city to grow through the ceremony of her presence. Elizabeth steadily influenced and supported the leading theatrical companies, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men and the Lord Admiral’s Men. Under James I, however, royal patronage was granted to the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, further cementing the place of this theater company in London life. James I’s endorsement of the Chamberlain’s Men, of which Shakespeare was a member, had a number of implications for the playwright and players. King James and Queen Anne’s interest in theater and the stage enabled its development through the other forms of spectacle that became popular in this period, including the masque and pageant, and also reflected a growing fascination with interior spaces as they became a more pronounced feature of the Jacobean court. James I, often described as the monarch of the bedchamber, ruled in a way that was far more internalized, distant, and absolutist than Elizabeth, and as a result the interior space—its intrigue, authority, surveillance, and iconography—became a place of fascination for dramatists. Under James I, Shakespeare’s great tragedies emerged with a growing sense of agitation about this absolutist power, the nature of sovereignty, and a complex organization of the psychology of space.

*Othello* traces the anxiety of identity, of the relationship between power and the self, and *Coriolanus* explores the confrontation between ruler and the state as both the public and the private spaces turn in on the hero. However, it is not only the tragedies that explore this territory. The dream-like romance *Cymbeline*, enlists the supernatural in a quest to distinguish right and wrong through the private space and an awkward hero. *Measure for Measure*, a problem play, explores a profoundly complex dynamic between power and fulfillment, abuse and authority, manipulation and morality. Most famously, it is *Macbeth* that reveals the anxieties—and desires—of the Stuart king. As with most of his histories, Shakespeare looked to Raphael Holinshed’s first volume of the *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, first published in 1577, for a version of his plot, and, in this case, the foundations for an account of the reigns of Duncan and Macbeth. But *Macbeth* is particularly immersed in interests at the heart of the king—Scotland, witches, Stuart ancestry, and absolutism. It is commonly held that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, with the help of Thomas Middleton, for James I, and that the Porter’s references to equivocation and treason refer to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605–1606.

When the text of Macbeth was prepared for its first publication in the First Folio in1623, it was probably adapted by Middleton, who inserted the scenes with Hecate and two songs from his own play, The Witch (c. 1613). Collaboration and adaptation was not unusual for working playwrights: texts were often adapted in performance and again for publication. The emphasis here was both originality and opportunity, with playwrights writing for specific actors, spaces or occasions, as well as ‘for all time’. Many of Shakespeare’s greatest plays involved some form of collaboration, including Titus Andronicus (with George Peele); Measure for Measure (with Middleton); The Two Noble Kinsmen (with Fletcher); Henry VI parts 1, and possibly 2, (with Nashe); and Pericles (with George Wilkins). Recent scholarship has worked hard to identify the range of texts on which playwrights collaborated and it may welcome to light that many more Shakespeare plays include the input of other playwrights. Most revealing, in this respect, is the idiosyncratic ways in which we may identify certain authorial traits (Middleton’s stage directions, for example) but also the ways in which collaborators may have tried to imitate the language and style of the dominant playwright. What much of this research points to, however, is the deeply co-operative nature of the theatre and the frequent reworking of plays to appeal to an ever-growing appetite for the ‘new’ and ‘revised’.

The shift in drama that took place under James’s reign was not just a question of personal taste. Although the Jacobean period would become famous for its luxury, corruption, and focus on the court, including those secretive, inward spaces of the rich and powerful, it also willfully adopted more continental approaches to architecture, fashion, and drama. The growing affinity with more intimate, exclusive even, theater and the development of set design meant that more spectacular effects could be achieved on the stage. A building called the Blackfriars, which was bought by James Burbage in 1596 with the intention of making it the Chamberlain’s Men’s theater after the lease expired on the Theatre in 1597, eventually became the stage it was destined to be some thirteen years later. The project had suffered a number of obstacles, including objections from the local residents about the noise and disruption a theater would bring to their area; James Burbage’s death in 1597; the pouring of most of the Chamberlain’s Men’s resources and time into the Globe; an interloping company showing a performance that offended the king; and then the plague, which closed the building until the late autumn 1609. Although the newly renamed King’s Men company would continue to perform at the Globe in the summer, it would play at Blackfriars in the winter. When it reopened, Blackfriars proved to be something of a new theater: performances were now divided into five acts (partly perhaps based on the classical models but also to provide breaks for candle trimming and musical intervals); the audience was entirely seated, unlike theaters such as the Globe, which had a proportion of standing tickets; and it had the capacity to finesse special effects—quieter descents in a flying machine and subtler ascents through the trap door, for example.

Writing for an indoor theater such as Blackfriars meant that Shakespeare’s plays could reflect something of the changing space, the lighting, the intimacy (spectators could pay to sit on the stage), and the scene breaks. Although previous plays, such as *Measure for Measure*, could be adjusted to play in the space of Blackfriars, either *The Winter’s Tale* or *Cymbeline* were probably the first of Shakespeare’s plays to be written specifically with the new performance place in mind. Although both romances would have played at the Globe too, they reflect something of the magical quality that a smaller, seated, candlelit space could give.

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