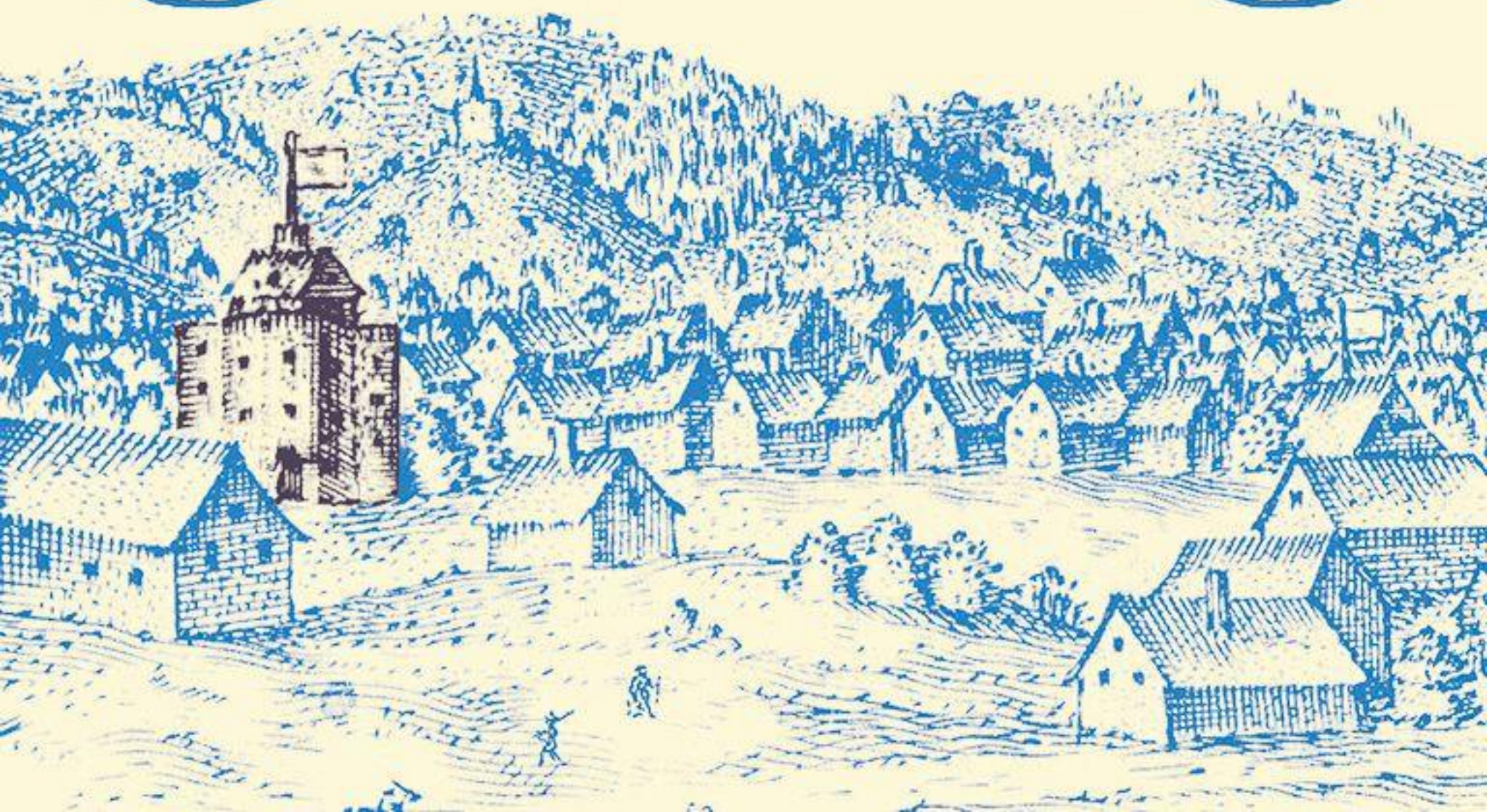


• D A N I E L • S W I F T •

★ 'A thrilling story, well told.' James Shapiro ★

The  
DREAM  
FACTORY

*London's First Playhouse  
and the Making of  
William Shakespeare*





# THE DREAM FACTORY



# THE DREAM FACTORY

LONDON'S FIRST PLAYHOUSE  
AND THE MAKING OF  
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

DANIEL SWIFT

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON



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*For James Shapiro*



If we forget the economic motive altogether and overlook the material conditions on which the production of wealth depends, we become mere sentimentalists and dreamers.

R.H. Tawney, in a comment on a student's exam, 1908

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## Author's Note: The Theatre, 1576–98

The Globe, on Bankside in London, is Shakespeare's famous playhouse, but before it there was another. This had the simpler name of 'The Theatre' and it stood in Shoreditch, to the north-east of the City, from 1576 until 1598, when it was secretly pulled down.

The Globe tells one story of Shakespeare: inevitable and triumphant, a prolific and assured genius. But in 1599, when the Globe opened, Shakespeare was thirty-five years old. He was two-thirds of the way through his lifetime and already famous as a playwright and poet. Behind him was a handful of the plays we most celebrate today, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The Theatre tells a very different story. In his years there, the young Shakespeare was inexperienced, experimental and uncertain. The Theatre was Shakespeare's workshop. Here he was apprenticed to older masters and learned his craft.

Everything has a back-story. The Theatre was not built on empty ground. Constructed in – and partly from – the ruins of a medieval priory, the Theatre grew out of the collapse of the traditional Catholic Church in the violent historical episode we know by the gentle name of the dissolution of the monasteries. This is best seen as a land grab. Beginning in 1536, the Crown seized the vast estates held by the

Church and sold them on. Out of this grew not only the layout of modern London but also the shape of the modern economic world. Late Elizabethan London was the nursery of capitalism, and capitalism was a disruptive, opportunistic child.

Shakespeare's career grew in this world. Key to the changes of this turbulent time was the decline of the traditional structures of work, in which tradesmen and craftsmen were regulated by bodies known as livery companies. This model of a working life gave its shape to Shakespeare's own development. We may take a single example: the masterpiece. We nowadays use this to mean a work created by an established artist at the height of his or her powers. This is not how Shakespeare's contemporaries understood the word. For them, the masterpiece was the work created at the end of a period of training, and whose creation was the sign that the apprentice was ready to become a master. The masterpiece is not a culmination but a transition. Shakespeare's apprenticeship took place at the Theatre. Here he wrote his masterpiece.

Placing Shakespeare at the Theatre is a useful reminder that once, he needed to learn his craft, and he did so at a disrupted, shifting time. We want to see him as exceptional and he certainly was, in one way: nobody else wrote like him, and likely never will. But this difference has partly blinded us. If we begin by seeing him as exceptional we can only end with an enigma, and he can only be an isolated figure. But at the Theatre Shakespeare was surrounded by those from whom he learned and those with whom he developed.

Only traces of the Theatre's foundations remain. These were discovered by archaeologists in 2008. To recover the foundations of Shakespeare's career requires further digging. This is what I have attempted, in the following pages, and drawing upon two sets of archives.

The first set of archives is the records kept by the livery companies. These detail the working lives of the men of Shakespeare's time.

What survives of these is scrupulous, rich and evocative, although many are lost or incomplete. I have particularly drawn from the records of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters. The originals are held by the Carpenters' Company and the London Archives (formerly the London Metropolitan Archives) and many of them have been reproduced in seven handsome volumes: *Records of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters* (Oxford University Press and Phillimore, 1913–68), edited by Bower Marsh and others.

The second set of archives is the vast trove of legal records generated by the ongoing lawsuits that surrounded and at times threatened to engulf the Theatre, as its owners and creditors – those who built it, who paid for it, who believed they owned it, or believed it had no right to stand at all – sued and counter-sued one another. The originals of these are scattered, and the majority are held in the National Archives at Kew and the London Archives. Many of the key records that touch directly upon the Theatre have been transcribed by Charles William Wallace in his *The First London Theatre: Materials for a History* (University of Nebraska, 1913). I draw also upon legal records not included in Wallace, and which have not been transcribed or analysed before.

Historians of the playhouses of this period have mined these rich archives, but only narrowly. Shakespeare's biographers have preferred to find the genesis of his works and his worldview in novelistic places: in his relationship with his failing father, his marriage to an older woman or his possible Catholicism. But Shakespeare, like almost all Elizabethans of his social class, was a worker, too, which means that he sought to earn a living and was apprenticed to his craft. This was not easy. Money and the law and violence and struggle are not just subjects for his plays but were the conditions for their existence as he and others fought to keep the dream factory open.

What this book will seek is his commonness: the moments where his career touched those of others and where it was formed by the conditions of his age. He was not in those years a minor deity but a

labouring writer. At the Theatre, he worked alongside not only the playwrights with whom he collaborated but also the actors who first brought to life his roles. And he was surrounded by working men whose lives are almost lost to us. They are the carpenters, joiners, bricklayers and others who built the home within which his plays could take form. Without their work we could not have his. What these men shared was that they were working for a living.

Putting Shakespeare back into his moment makes him newly visible in ours. Here is a common enough news story of recent years: cuts to funding for the arts, collapsing audience numbers, closing opera houses. ‘As of 2013, American symphony orchestras earned more of their money from philanthropic contributions than they did ticket sales,’ reports William Deresiewicz in his gloom-filled book *The Death of the Artist*, ‘effectively making them charities.’ Those technologies that promised to democratise music – to make it available, and cheaply, to all – turn out to benefit the few. A decent living wage in the arts is a vanishing dream. In December 2022, the Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society reported on the tumbling state of the earnings of writers in the United Kingdom. The median annual income for a professional author was £7,000, having dropped by 43 per cent in the past fifteen years. In 2007, 40 per cent of authors earned all their income from writing. By 2022, it was 19 per cent.

Shakespeare and the Theatre, 1576 to 1598: a very specific time and place in so many ways lost to us and yet, at moments, so close. At the Theatre one thing could be another. This was its charm and its danger. The Theatre was a structure within which some of the greatest stories of all time were first performed. It was also, from the start, a story of its own.







*Prologue*





## The Dreamers and the Dream

Years later, long after its timbers had been torn down, built up again and then burned to ash, an elderly man named Cuthbert Burbage remembered the beginning of a remarkable building. ‘The father of us’, he wrote, ‘was the first builder of Playhouses.’ Cuthbert was seventy years old, the biblical three score and ten, and a lifetime of hustle had honed his storytelling instinct. Perhaps he was remembering the old prayer – ‘Our father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name’ – but this would be blasphemy, for Cuthbert’s tale was of the joys and tribulations of this world, not the next. His father James had been ‘in his younger years a Player’, Cuthbert recounted, using an old word for actor, and ‘The players that lived in those first times had only the profit arising from the doors.’ They performed in inns, on makeshift stages. The players were poor, their lives chancy, the takings scarce and unreliable. And so James built them a home. This was the first purpose-built commercial playhouse in London and it had an evocative but slightly literal name: the Theatre.



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Cuthbert's account appears in what is known as a rejoinder, which was one of the documents created during a lawsuit that sparked off in 1635. It is largely technical, a tale of financial instruments and arrangements, contracts and numbers and debt. 'The Theatre he built with many hundred pounds taken up at interest,' Cuthbert recounted, and 'He built this house upon leased ground, by which means the Landlord & he had a great suit in law & by his death the like troubles fell upon us, his sons.' But it has a fairy-tale aspect to it. Cuthbert's younger brother Richard was long dead but Cuthbert writes in both their names for this is a family story. The two of them grew up at the Theatre; this was their childhood, as it was for a generation of playwrights and actors and craftsmen who made their lives here. It was the setting, too, for the childhood of English drama more broadly, for the Theatre inaugurated a golden age of plays and playing. The Theatre is a story of opportunity, promise, possibility: of an unlikely door which might open the world and let art and fame and riches flow in.

In the course of Cuthbert's rejoinder, he lists half a dozen of his business associates, those he calls 'deserving men'. The first name on the list is the one we know, but it is still a surprise to find it here: 'Shakspere', or William Shakespeare. There is no indication that there is anything special about him. Cuthbert does not mention that Shakespeare worked for the Burbages at the Theatre when he first arrived in London as a young man, nor that here he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and the other dozen extraordinary plays of the 1590s. These plays made Shakespeare's name, and not only his. Cuthbert also does not mention that he and his brother knew Shakespeare well, and perhaps – in the case of Richard – as deeply as anyone would ever know him. Shakespeare wrote the lead roles in all his major plays for Richard. He was the first Romeo, Richard III, Hamlet, Othello, Lear.

Cuthbert was telling a dry story but at its heart flickers something quick, tantalising, irresistible: a dream. This gives it life; and this was also why Cuthbert was being sued. The legal suit that prompted

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Cuthbert's cool rejoinder had been brought by a trio of actors, who were suing for the right to purchase a share in the profits of the play-houses controlled by the Burbage family. The actors were middle-aged and perhaps not as successful as they thought they should be. They were asking why they had not been made rich by their long years of acting while others had done so well. The suit, then, was a fight over who stands to profit from art: in this case, the creation and first performance of some of the greatest works of literature in history. But nothing in the suit suggests that anyone involved in it believed that plays and their staging were different from any other kind of property or job. One of the three actors who brought the suit was known for playing roles that had first been made famous by Richard Burbage a generation or two earlier, and this prompted Cuthbert into irritation. 'Richard Burbage,' he snapped, 'for 35 years pains, cost, and Labour made means to leave his wife and Children some estate.' This is his work, not yours, says Cuthbert. He was speaking of acting, of playing, but he called it 'Labour'.

Here are the constituents of the dream: a mad idea, hard work, a quarrel over money, and the chance of great, transporting literature. The history of the Theatre is a parable and a love song of litigation and art. First of all, and written into its foundations, it is the story of a family and a place, each tightly bound to the other. When Cuthbert died, a year after writing this rejoinder, his body was brought back to Shoreditch and buried in the local parish church of St Leonard's, close by the old site of the Theatre.

In late 1575 the former joiner and part-time actor James Burbage moved his growing family – his wife Ellen, their two sons, ten and eight, and a young daughter – to the north-eastern suburbs of London. For the past decade or so the Burbages had been living in the parish of St Stephen Coleman Street, in the tight furl of the City. Then as now, the capitalised 'City' referred to the financial and administrative core of London, largely late medieval and ringed by a

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Roman wall. Here, James had trained as a joiner but soon abandoned this respectable trade to become a travelling player. He was restless, improvisatory, and he knew that in the suburbs new industries were springing up, and new houses being built for the growing population. This was a fresh start for him and his family. Shoreditch was not far but it was beyond the City walls, and to reach it you took the old Roman road of Bishopsgate until it became Holywell Street, until paving stones gave way to mud. There were wooden two-storey houses fronting the high street and behind them open fields stretched away. The family leased a small house here and in March 1576 their newborn daughter Alice was baptised at St Leonard's.

The following month, Burbage signed a lease on a muddy half-acre patch of ground. It was a loose rectangle bounded on one side by a low stone wall and on another by a brick wall above a ditch running along the open space of Finsbury Fields. The other two sides were marked by semi-derelict buildings. These had once belonged to the priory of Holywell, which had stood in Shoreditch until the dissolution of the monasteries forty years before. Now the workshops, mill-house and storehouses of the old priory were tenements, one occupied by a widow, another by a weaver, and the whole was owned by a man named Giles Allen. Allen lived out in the greener fields of Essex and had, like many speculators and developers, profited from the dissolution: picking up the monastic lands surrounding London on the cheap, knocking together tenements, renting them on. He was Burbage's landlord. At the south edge stood a barn. This was the largest structure on the site and is referred to in the lease as 'the Great Barn', but those who knew it tended not to call it great. It was partly used as a slaughterhouse by a local butcher and partly as a storeroom for an innkeeper and was so rickety that a great wind might have taken it. Later testimonies all agree: this was a lowly sort of setting, a refuge for rogues and beggars. Burbage put down £20 and promised to pay £14 a year for twenty-one years. It was not cheap but it was available. Most usefully, Shoreditch stood outside

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the City walls, and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor and the City lawmakers.

Burbage did not move his family into one of these properties. They were too run-down, as yet; and he had other plans. As soon as he took possession, however, he moved a new tenant into the Barn. Oliver Tylte was twenty-four years old and of no particular trade. As with so many who fell into Burbage's orbit, Tylte soon found himself tied to the older man. Later, he would do a little work for Burbage as a security guard, and later still, he would testify on Burbage's behalf. He was young and strong and useful: the kind of man who leaves bare traces in the historical record; one amongst the tide of cheap labour washing into London, looking for quick work and a place to live. The lease Burbage signed stipulated that he would develop the tenements on the site, but being a landlord was only the lesser part of his ambitions here. His true scheme – and that which makes this something more than another housing development in a growing suburb – required substantial capital investment. Burbage had dreams and the lease on a promising site but he did not have capital. For this he needed an investor.

He did not have to look far. Burbage's wife Ellen had a brother who was a prosperous grocer in the City. John Brayne was widely rumoured to be worth £1,000. He was married and childless and owned a house and shop on Bucklersbury, a City street lined with grocers and apothecaries. Brayne was settled in a stable trade while Burbage was not, but the two men shared what we might see as the spirit of the age: acquisitive, creative, flexible and profit-hungry. Later we would name this capitalism, but it was only just being born here in late Elizabethan London and it was making its energies known in small encounters and novel financial arrangements. One day in the late spring or early summer of 1576 Burbage invited his rich brother-in-law to come up from the City to Shoreditch, to look round the site, to look into the new world. There was the smell of blood from the slaughterhouse, and the ground was soft underfoot.

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Burbage's plan was simple and bold. He dreamed, he explained to his brother-in-law, of a playhouse here in Shoreditch. Because the promises that passed between the two men became a key question in a series of lawsuits which ran long after the deaths of either of them, and because this was a literate, litigious age, we have several accounts of their conversation. One carpenter later recalled 'such promises and speech as passed from the said James Burbage to the said Brayne of the great wealth and profit that should rise unto them by building A theatre or play house'. Another testimony comes from a goldsmith. Burbage, he deposed, 'did earnestly insinuate his brother in law' to help him build a playhouse, 'earnestly informing him that it would grow to their continually great profit & commodity through the Plays that should be used there every week'. Brayne was reluctant, 'very loath', for he was already a rich man, but Burbage pressed on with his 'sweet and continual persuasions'. Soon promises turned to numbers. It would cost no more than £200 to build a playhouse, Burbage insisted, and Brayne was known to be worth many times this, and once it was built then Brayne would receive a moiety, which is 'one half of the profits that should Rise by the said Plays there to be used'.

These depositions conjure the slippery magic of Burbage's promises. He sang a sweet song of money coming in, and he sang it well. Although this is a story of worldly motives – what another deposition, from a grocer's apprentice, calls 'hope of great wealth & profit' – it is also an enchanted scene. The phrase 'profit that should rise' appears in two separate testimonies. This is not a wholly idiomatic expression, so we can assume that it captures a trace of authentic speech, a phrase plucked from a conversation that took place 450 years ago. It is a promise and a dream vision: of a building rising and of the money that would flow upwards through it as if out of the ground upon which they stood.

James Burbage was a creature of his age but his dream was of ancient things. This is what made him so seductive. He was not a



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great actor. He did not write plays. But he understood hunger: what people wanted, what thrilled them, deep in the blood. Man's instinct to play is older than civilisation, said Johan Huizinga in his 1938 essay *Homo Ludens*. Play can take many forms. It may be a child's game or a classical concert, playing or watching sport, a joke or a poem. It appears at the card table and in the temple, on the tennis court and on the screen, and all, writes Huizinga, involve 'stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own'. Play moves within an enchanted zone. 'In fair Verona', insists the opening of *Romeo and Juliet*, 'we lay our Scene.' And we are in a glittering, fictional Italy. 'Now, fair Hippolyta,' begins *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as a duke addresses his bride-to-be. And we are in a crystalline world of myths and warrior queens. In the streets of London the players summoned their audience with a soar of trumpets and a roar of drums. This is addictive. 'The feeling of being "apart-together" in an exceptional situation,' writes Huizinga, 'of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.' This is worth paying for, and worth fighting for. The wish to make money and the wish to create art; the hunger to play and the willingness to pay for it: all were tangled up in Burbage's pitch. His genius lay in his ability to see that one dream may prey upon another.

In April 1576, as Burbage was settling the lease, a boy just shy of his twelfth birthday in the Midlands market town of Stratford-upon-Avon was dreaming of something more than his raftered upstairs schoolroom and his exercises in Latin imitation and his father's trade of glove-making. We must suppose that William Shakespeare was a brilliant and occasionally diffident student. At this moment there was not an obvious future for him, or at least not one that he wished. His talent was inevitable; what might not be so easy was to find an opportunity for it to lead to a living. There was not yet in the English language a word for what he would become: a playwright.

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Seeing Shakespeare among the Burbages is to see him less as the aloof genius celebrated by romantic poets since the nineteenth century and instead as a cannier figure who belonged within and emerged from the restlessness of his age. His life and career were structured by the regulations and expectations of late Elizabethan London and yet freed by its energies. This was his dream: a life spent creating literature which can be both transportingly, timelessly great and yet also profitable, not as a sideline or a hobby, but as a job. The Burbages remind us to put money at the heart of art, and if this seems disenchanted, even hollow, it might usefully return us to some characteristics of Shakespeare's thinking which otherwise are lost.

Shakespeare knew this: that one strand of the struggle to make art is the hustle to earn a living. A small scene catches it. It is the morning of Juliet's wedding to Paris, the young man her parents wish her to marry, and the young bride-to-be is discovered dead in her bed. The audience are aware, from previous scenes, that she is already married to Romeo and that she has taken a potion which has caused her to fall into a sleep so deep that it looks like death. But the other characters on stage, her parents, her nurse, are not, and their grief is reaching a holy pitch when a troupe of minor characters enter. They are musicians, here to entertain the guests at the wedding, and while they have been asked to come it is the perfectly wrong moment for them. "Tis no time to play now," the first musician says, but they do not leave. Instead, they start to josh a little, some back and forth with the household servants.

What follows is pure Shakespeare: a simple, humane insight, tightly packaged. Juliet's is not their tragedy for these are working men, caught by chance in the roil of the plot, and they linger because they have been paid to be here. While they are reluctant to strike up with their instruments Peter, one of the Capulet servants, teases them by launching into a popular song. As he reaches the phrase 'the music with her silver sound' he breaks off. 'Why silver sound?' he taunts them: 'what say you?' The first musician replies feebly –

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‘because silver hath a sweet sound’ – but the banter has begun. The second musician jumps in with the punchline that has been waiting. ‘I say “silver sound” because musicians sound for silver’, he retorts, and this in turn sparks another comeback from Peter: ‘Because musicians have no gold for sounding.’

This little knockabout was probably designed as an opportunity for some improvisation by the skilled clown Will Kemp, who first played the role of Peter. It lands badly in the hands of actors who take Shakespeare more seriously, and modern productions tend to cut this scene. But there is a point to it. For these musicians, their work is to perform. They may create beauty and bring consolation, may mark a festivity, but they do so as a job. Sometimes it is hard to keep this balance in mind. Sometimes it is easier to treat art made for money as a category error or a joke.

The promise of a fee paid for playing, and then the fear of its disappearance, stands behind a matching scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Another group of entertainers gather for a performance: the ‘rude mechanicals’, a troupe of working men who wish to be actors and whom we watch rehearse a play which they plan to perform at the wedding of the Duke. In a panic just before their big day one of their number, a bellows-mender named Francis Flute, worries that if their show is not a success they will have ‘lost sixpence a day during his life’. He repeats: ‘sixpence a day for playing’. The sum is not princely but it is honest. Two sixpences made a shilling in Elizabethan London, and a 1576 statute set the wage for a London craftsman – a carpenter, a skinner – at three shillings and four pence a week, with food and drink included. This was just over sixpence a day. Flute dreams of being paid at the rate of a working man.

*Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Shakespearean scholars have long observed that these plays are twins. Each tells of young lovers who run away from forbidding parents; each features a potion, a wall, a suicide and a dream of fairies. Written in 1594 and 1595, and drawing from Shakespeare’s early, learning years at the

## PROLOGUE

Theatre in Shoreditch, they are also the two plays that most directly address the conjoined questions of how to make art and how to make money. This is no surprise, for in the years immediately before writing these plays Shakespeare was hard at work at learning how to write and how to earn his living from it. These were not the only two plays he wrote at the Theatre. But they were the perfect products of its dream factory, arising directly from and expressing still its deep contradictions and its rich promise. The story that follows will therefore turn upon, and culminate in, these two plays.

A dream can animate our greatest endeavours and drive men to change the world. It can be so flimsy. Shakespeare's plays still give us the best vocabulary in which to describe them. 'Dreams', says Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*,

are the children of an idle brain,  
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,  
Which is as thin of substance as the air.

'These things seem small and undistinguishable,' says the bewildered Demetrius close to the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as he stirs from the state of drugged confusion in which he has spent much of the play: 'Like far-off mountains turned into clouds.' But he cannot quite shake its traces. 'It seems to me,' he adds, 'That yet we sleep, we dream.'

The dream is tenacious. Prompted or swayed by Burbage's vision, Brayne soon went all in. As another grocer's apprentice later deposed, Brayne had once been a solid man but 'After he had Joined with the said Burbage in the matter of building of the said Theatre he began to slack his own trade and gave him self to the building thereof.' He sold his house on Bucklersbury for £100 and what the grocer's apprentice described as 'all such wares as he had left' – the tools of his trade, his scales and weights, any remaining

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supplies – for £146. He poured all this gold like water into the new playhouse.

In return for his capital investment Brayne received nothing tangible. The lease on the Holywell site included only the names of the landlord Giles Allen and the new tenant James Burbage. And while Burbage promised to make him a full partner his name was never added. Burbage later explained why. He had pawned the lease, he claimed to Brayne, so could not amend it. This was a common Elizabethan financial instrument: a local moneylender would offer a small sum in exchange for a lease and a promise of future repayment. Perhaps this is true, but the name of this moneylender who held the lease does not appear anywhere in the surviving legal records, so it seems as likely this was only a convenient ruse.

It may seem naive on the part of Brayne to have entered a complex financial arrangement without a clear contract. But this was how the age understood business. It mattered that the two men were tied by family: that they were brothers, almost. We might nowadays draw a distinction between our domestic life and our place of work, or between our families and our co-workers. This separation – both spatial and emotional – was not true for sixteenth-century England. People working together, notes the economic and social historian Keith Wrightson, used an ‘idiom of kinship invoking the affective bonds of family’ to describe and understand their professional relationships. He goes on: ‘Forms of economic association thus overlapped conceptually with those of kinship.’ Burbage approached Brayne because he was both rich and related to him, which is equally why Brayne trusted him.

But this old world, and these old ways, are changing under new pressures. In this moment a new world of business is arising out of the old language of the feelings. Trust; interest; a bond: each of these words describes affectionate and emotional ties between men, and each will soon enough assume new and more coldly financial associations. Credit is an old word for a deceptively modern thing – one’s



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credit history, or credit score, necessary to take out a mortgage or to take up a bank loan – and, as Craig Muldrew details in his book *The Economy of Obligation*, the concept was undergoing transformation in sixteenth-century London. From about 1530, there was a sharp rise in consumption and, Muldrew explains, ‘With limited amounts of gold and silver in circulation, this economic expansion was based on the increasing use of credit, much of which was informal, as might be expected in a society with high levels of illiteracy.’ There were no pay cheques, or detailed tax returns, to establish a borrowing history and from it to predict a financial future. Put simply, this was a society that had not as yet invented impersonal instruments to measure the credit upon which it increasingly depended. Instead, Muldrew explains: ‘Most credit was extended between individual emotional agents, and it meant you were willing to trust someone to pay you back in the future. Similarly, to have credit in a community meant that you could be trusted to pay back your debts.’ In this age a man’s credit was bound up with an estimation of his character. Instead of a cool fiscal reckoning, it was a warm personal one. Credit in this period therefore retained what Muldrew calls ‘a strong social and ethical meaning’, and the word held onto an older set of associations tied to its origin in the Latin ‘credo’, meaning to believe or to trust.

Credit is an old word, and it conjures an old world. But not for long. As economic historians agree, sixteenth-century London saw the rapid – and terrifying – emergence of a new economic system in which the old personal relationships and bonds between men began to crumble. We call this modernity, or capitalism, but at the time it felt like all the sands were shifting. In 1577 a London priest named William Harrison published his ‘Description of England’ in which he noted with dismay the signs of the newly mutable world. England was, he wrote, ‘pestered with purveyors, who take up eggs, butter, cheese, pigs, capons, hens’ in one market, and then sell them at profit in another. He worried about rising rents and flash new houses, filled with rich plate, tapestry, silk hangings. He was particularly concerned

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that silver spoons had replaced the old wooden ones in people's homes.

The change was felt most keenly in places such as Shoreditch. Here, records the sixteenth-century chronicler John Stow in his *Survey of London*, the medieval city was being washed away by the tide of the new. The old priory leased by James Burbage was named for an ancient well known as 'Holy Well' but this, Stow recounts, 'is much decayed and marred with filthiness purposely laid there, for the heightening of the ground for garden plots'. It is a perfect image of that which has been lost: the old holy waters are mud, and where once men went to worship is now only business. Commerce means agreements but it also brings disagreement. During the 1560s, the central Westminster courts of King's Bench and Common Pleas heard about 5,000 cases each year concerning the failure to pay a debt or to honour a contract. Twenty years later, in the 1580s, about 13,000 cases were begun each year. By 1606, the figure had risen to more than 23,000. 'There was one attorney for every 20,000 people in England in 1560,' notes Wrightson, and 'one for every 2,500 in a much-increased population by 1640.' Wrightson goes on to describe this new London as 'a society which was interconnected by commercial transactions as never before' but we might see it equally as one that was divided, as never before, by quarrels over the collapse or failure of those same transactions.

Because the Theatre was the setting for the creation of timeless, miraculous art, its story is worth telling. But because the Theatre's story is of knotted litigation – of suits and counter-suits, of claims and fights and endless depositions – it can be told. Litigation leaves traces, and we can follow these, and in them find voices, speaking from another age. The book that follows takes as its structure a series of quarrels which took place at, or about, the Theatre. These were over who owned it and who stood to profit from it; about the ways that it promised to change the world, and about whether it should exist at all. What they share is that each was as much a quarrel over

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the idea of the playhouse as it was about the building itself. All were fighting over a dream, or a far-off mountain turned to clouds.

The playhouse is long gone. Its foundations sit beneath a property agent's office and a clothing designer's workshop in Shoreditch, two metres below street level, preserved under a sandwich of geotextile and iron-free sand. Its timbers were long ago transported elsewhere and their fate will be part of the story. The actors have vanished. It is sometimes said that great art is permanent but the beauty of stage performance is that it is lost to the wind and to the air. We have thousands of Shakespeare's words but none in his own voice. But the Burbages were garrulous and they were litigious. We have their claims, boasts, depositions, complaints. Because they were dreamers, what they said can never be easily separated from what they did. The stories they told were sometimes as true and powerful as the buildings they built. And inside all the stories they told was an idea about firstness and the rights that come from being there at the very beginning.



## The Carpenters

In the first week of June 1576 a carpenter brought a complaint against one of his brothers in the trade. Robert Burbage had paid Henry Lugg to finish the windows of a house on Whitecross Street in Cripplegate, just outside the City walls. But Henry had failed to do so. Robert came to the grand hall of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters, in All Hallows by London Wall, to ask for help in resolving the trouble. Henry Lugg was from a good carpenter family. His father had been a warden of the company and retired with a company pension; he had bound his own son George as an apprentice. While Henry was a year or two older than Robert, the two men had both completed their training only a few months earlier, and each had bound their first apprentice on the same day, 10 April 1576. These were busy years for London's carpenters, and there was plenty of work. A small trade-off such as this, when one carpenter paid another on the side to cover the last days of a job, was commonplace. But Robert's complaint was recorded in the minutes books kept by

the company, and Lugg promptly promised to complete the work within three weeks.

This small irritation was scarcely worth the complaint but Robert was, it seems, quick to take offence. A year later, in the heat of the summer of 1577, Robert would get into trouble again. That July he and another carpenter, named Thomas Arthur, came to blows. Both were summoned to company hall and ordered to keep the peace. This was not the end of it. The following month, Robert was disciplined again, this time for insulting the other man's wife, and fined six shillings and eight pence – two weeks' wages – to be paid within a month. 'It was ordered for final end to be had between them,' runs the slightly weary minute in the court ledger. Robert paid the fine.

In Elizabethan England the trades were regulated by institutions known as livery companies, and the men of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters worked on large wooden structures. London's population was doubling every fifty years, driven by poor harvests in the countryside and the promise of employment in the city. This in turn caused a housing boom, and this is the main work of the carpenters: building timber-frame tenements, extending older dwellings. These were good years to be a carpenter. By the end of the century the company had 300 freemen, who had completed their apprenticeships and were on their way to becoming masters of the trade. The carpenters loved to feast. At the company hall in All Hallows by London Wall they celebrated the election of a new Lord Mayor, a saint's day, each quarter of the year. These are itemised in the company ledgers under the heading 'dinner days'. Here are payments for twenty rabbits, a dozen geese, plenty of beef, a swan. There are sauces – eggs, sugar, gallons of cream – and spices: cloves, saffron, ginger. This is men's food: richly spiced, served with mustard and claret and ale and sack from the King's Head. There are payments for a preacher, a butler and someone to carve the roast meat; the butler is paid double the preacher. At the feast of the Purification of St Mary, on 2 February 1575 – also known as Candlemas – there are orders for thirteen joints

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of mutton, one and a half lambs, twenty-four hens, three capons; butter, candles, salt, parsley, pepper, oranges; vinegar and verjuice, the bitter juice of crab apples, a condiment; and twelve pence to the cooks, and twelve pence for the washing up.

Sometimes they fought and sometimes they feasted and all this is recorded in the ledgers of the company. Here each step in a carpenter's career is noted. He is bound to his apprenticeship; he is made free upon its completion; he binds an apprentice of his own. In this way the company ledgers give the pattern of a working life. At Candlemas 1566 one 'Robert Burbiges' was bound as apprentice for seven years to the master Robert Child. The ledger does not note this, but he was younger brother to James Burbage.

We often imagine apprentices as thin boys of fifteen or sixteen but according to statute a man could not complete his apprenticeship before he was twenty-four, and an apprenticeship tended to run seven years. Carpentry was unusual as the work, involving heavy timbers, demanded a man's broad shoulders, so apprentice carpenters often began later than those in other trades. Perhaps Robert was eighteen or nineteen when he was bound. On 20 January 1573 he completed his apprenticeship under Agnes Child, widow to the master carpenter. The Childs were a company family. They went on putting their sons into the trade long into the seventeenth century, and it was common for a widow to take over her husband's apprentices. It was common, too, for a rising apprentice to marry his master's widow, but this was not what happened to Robert. Instead, he finished out the proper term of his apprenticeship and earned what is termed his 'freedom'. He could now call himself citizen and vote in elections for the Lord Mayor. Soon he would have the right to set up a shop and to bind apprentices of his own. But first, Agnes had to pay a small fee to enrol him in the Worshipful Company, and she did so in the early summer.

In June 1573 Robert attended a celebratory breakfast at Carpenters' Hall. This had been the home of the carpenters since the fifteenth century but in the previous year – in another sign of the company's

rising fortunes – it had been redecorated. There were new bay windows in the main hall and a new frieze of wide wall paintings to celebrate the holy trade of carpentry. Here is Noah building his ark, and here is Joseph at his carpenter's bench, and between the saints are portraits of bearded men in the black caps and fur-trimmed gowns of ceremonial livery. With the old masters looking down upon them Robert and six other newly made men feasted upon 'chickens boiled in White broth Roasted beef geese capon and custard'.

Now Robert vanishes from the records for almost three years. This need not alarm us. The regulations of the company were made official only in 1607, but before this there were unwritten conventions and one of these held that upon completing his apprenticeship a carpenter should wait three years before binding an apprentice of his own. This was a sensible precaution, for without it an apprentice might be bound to a master only a year or two older. For those three years, the junior carpenter worked as a journeyman, often within the shop of the family with whom he had apprenticed. Perhaps Robert returned to the Childs, or perhaps he left London to work as what was known as a 'foreigner', a craftsman who practised outside the City. Carpenters who had earned their freedom had to enrol with the company at the Guildhall within a year and a day of being made free, and if Robert was in this time working as a foreigner this explains the slight delay between his freedom and the celebratory breakfast.

Perhaps: once we step away from the confidence of the company records we tumble into a chain of maybes, a narrative whose rhythm is conditional and whose methods are speculation. This is simply the cost of telling a story of 400 years ago. But some guesswork is more informed than other. The name Burbage is scattered through the company ledgers. On the same day that Robert was bound as an apprentice another young man, Lawrence Burbage, began an apprenticeship of his own. Lawrence was sixteen and from the parish of St Stephen's Coleman Street, just to the east of the Guildhall. This is the same parish in which James and Robert grew up: they must have



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been cousins, and they make up the London branch of the Burbage family. There were other branches of the family in Kent and, possibly, Hertfordshire, and another branch of the family remained in Northamptonshire. Perhaps Robert, newly trained, went to work with them there. This would, again, be common: a journeyman honing his skills and earning some money outside the capital. When he returned to London he brought a young cousin or nephew with him. On 10 April 1576 Robert resurfaces in the company records. On this day, the ledger records, he bound one Henry Burbage as his first apprentice. Henry was twenty-three years old and the son of a carpenter from the parish of St Katherine in Northamptonshire.

The Burbage brothers, James and Robert, were not native Londoners. We do not know exactly when they were born, or where, or when they arrived in the City. James was married there in April 1559; Robert, perhaps a decade younger than him, was there by 1566, when he began to train as a carpenter. We have no records of James's early years. In later legal depositions, and when he wishes to appear an honest hardworking man, James sometimes introduced himself as 'a joiner'. Joinery shares with carpentry its raw material – wood – but joiners tended to work on smaller, decorative wooden objects and fittings. It was common for the sons of joiners to become carpenters, and vice versa. James Burbage, son of a family of carpenters, might well have begun by training as a joiner. But he quitted it soon. No trace of his apprenticeship has ever been found, and he never describes himself as 'citizen'. This means that he never completed his apprenticeship. Instead of arduous years of service, he ran away with the players, for his name appears in the accounts of a touring company under the patronage of the Earl of Leicester in the mid-1560s. While one Burbage brother was finishing out the slow years of a London apprenticeship, the other joined a touring troupe, in the livery of an aristocratic patron, playing grand houses and makeshift town hall stages. By the middle of the 1570s this was beginning to feel like the old world, and James Burbage was restless. The world was turning towards London.

In the second week of April 1576, just as Robert was newly free to set up his own shop as a carpenter and to take on apprentices, his brother James signed the lease on a patch of land in Shoreditch. James had a dream; Robert had the training to build it and access to a pool of cheap and willing labour. This suggests a longer scheme. The Burbage brothers, the carpenter and the travelling player, realised the value of a permanent playhouse. Their realisation was a decade in the making, and it grew out of the combination of their experiences. Perhaps one brother prompted the other; perhaps each saw the chance. A young man from a family of carpenters became a player but his thoughts soon returned to wooden structures, and to his brother. Deep inside this history is a simple wish to return to the family business.

We have the building of a playhouse and the holy quarrelling brotherhood of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters. Beneath each are the ties of family. The Burbage brothers were of a common character. They were hard-working, quick-tempered. Robert was a company man sometimes at odds with the company; a family man whose ties to the trade sometimes drew him to and sometimes drew him from his fraternity of carpenters. This is why, in 1576 and early 1577, he kept getting into trouble. He was hard at work but that work was not wholly orthodox company business. This year Robert was distracted enough with a sideline that he sub-contracted his regular carpentry jobs to others to finish. He kept this other project off the company books, but it is perhaps not too much of a step to conclude that the Burbage brothers were at work together on building their playhouse.

Cuthbert claimed that the Burbages were first: he boasted that his father James was the first builder of playhouses. But they did not create the idea of professional playing in London. From the late 1560s, fencing matches known as 'prizes' were played at a handful of inns in the city, and from about 1575 their open stages, standing in the inn yards, were used for commercial dramatic performances. There were interludes at the Bel Savage close to Ludgate in 1575,

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and at the Bell on Gracious or Gracechurch Street a year or two later. By late 1576 a room in the old friary of Blackfriars had been converted for stage performances and that year work was underway on the construction of another playhouse at Newington Butts, a street by the Elephant and Castle. Each of these was a temporary structure, or the conversion of an older building – inns, an old friars' hall – but what they shared was a new sense of opportunity. Over the past fifteen years, historians have uncovered many traces of early theatrical activity. The records of these other early playing spaces are fragments and shards: single mentions in a sermon or legal minute; an ambiguous phrase in the prefatory poem of a polemic; a joke in an Italian–English phrasebook. But they testify to the communal dream of a new industry, emerging in London.

One specific early playhouse stands before the history of the Theatre. This playhouse ties together our protagonists James Burbage and John Brayne, and it suggests both the Theatre's particularity and its innovation. In 1567 Brayne paid for the construction of a stage and scaffolds to seat spectators in the yard next to a farmhouse called the Red Lion in Stepney, a mile east of the City walls. We know this because Brayne soon fell into trouble. On 15 July 1567, Brayne made a formal complaint to the wardens of the Carpenters' Company. He had hired a carpenter named William Sylvester to build him a set of scaffolds, but the workmanship, he complained, had been no good. The company sent four carpenters to inspect the work, and ordered that Sylvester should make repairs, and that Brayne should pay for them. Brayne then followed with a second suit, against another carpenter, this one named John Reynolds, complaining of the same faulty scaffolds. When summoned to the company court, Reynolds objected that he had completed exactly the work that Brayne had hired him to do.

The Red Lion has a tantalising, almost invisible history: we do not know whether a performance ever took place here. It suggests that Brayne was, like James Burbage, a long-time speculator, and saw the same wave of opportunity. But Brayne was in the wrong trade: he

was a member of the Company of Grocers. Burbage, by contrast, was connected to the Carpenters' Company through his brother and his cousins. He knew therefore that the way to build a lasting playhouse was not to sue the carpenters and their company, or berate them for their labours, but instead to keep them close.

The first step was the foundations. London sits on clay deposits, overlaid here in the north-east with brickearth, which is good for making bricks, and gravel. Like the clay, brickearth does not make for a sure footing as it shifts and collapses when wet and Shoreditch was marshy; the site that Burbage had leased was ringed with ditches and named after an old well. To begin, a small team of day labourers dug wide trenches. Perhaps Oliver Tylte, the twenty-four-year-old tenant in the Great Barn, worked among them. The trenches traced a loose circle, and into them the labourers threw scraps of stone and rubble. There was old stuff lying on the site, and they used what was to hand. Later, archaeologists would find fragments of decorative tiles from the abandoned priory in these trenches, and chips of Roman brick. The rubble layer was compacted into a solid base, and wooden piles were secured into it, forming a polygon of fourteen sides. The piles are solid elm, a little over a foot wide, and onto these were built brick plinths. A low brick wall in turn connected the piles and on top were laid groundsills, horizontal sleeper beams. The bricks were made locally, either in a kiln on the site or in the open fields immediately to the east. Out of the mud a clear outline emerged: a circle about as wide as a tennis court is long. This was filled with a single layer of bricks, mortared together, to protect the timbers from rotting.

By signing the lease in the middle of April, Burbage had committed himself to begin almost immediately. As he and his brother would have known, digging is easier when the ground is wet but a stretch of warmer, drier weather was needed to set the mortar. So they must have begun the foundations soon after the lease was signed and tried

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to complete them by August 1576. Only then did they turn to the next – and much more complex – task. The preparation and assembly of the frame of the playhouse would take about six months. It was a project of several discrete phases, each with a setting, skills and workers of its own. This was specialist work, with a specialist vocabulary, and it too followed a seasonal logic.

A playhouse is like a house but bigger, and in Elizabethan London houses were built upon a timber frame. The timber came from trees growing to the west of the city: the thick woods around Reading, and the good oak forest at Sonning. Green, unseasoned timber is easier to work with and a playhouse requires unusually shaped timbers, which would need to be cut specially. The time to fell the timber is the winter. In the spring, when Burbage signed the lease, the sap was rising, so he had to wait until November. In the woods, sawyers worked in teams of two, first felling then squaring the timbers over saw-pits. They earned twenty-two pence per day for the pair. This was a good wage, for skilled work.

Teams of donkeys brought the timbers to a saw yard close to the river. The timbers come from the west of London because both the woods are here and so is the river: the Thames, which runs right into the City. Elizabethan carpenters apprenticed and feasted in the City but did much of their work out in the west. Peter Street, who would later be the most celebrated of playhouse builders, grew up in London but was based near Windsor. Thomas Osborne, who would later work for the Burbages, was from a family of Berkshire carpenters. His cousins and uncles were in White Waltham, just west of Maidenhead, and Risborough, a little to the north of the Chilterns. The family sent their sons into London to train up with the company and then they return. The timbers and the carpenters came from the same place and made the same journey, upstream and down.

At the saw yard a bigger gang took over: perhaps thirty men for this is precise work, needing many hands. This phase was known as ‘making’ or ‘framing’. The rough squared timbers arrived in slightly

uneven sizes, and were cut to shape: planed, then dressed, and jointed at each end. The standard joint was the mortise and tenon. A hole or mortise was cut into the end of one timber, which matched a tenon at the tip of a second. A small and slightly offset hole was cut into both mortise and tenon, so that the two might be secured with a round oak peg which drew them tightly together.

Each timber was necessarily unique, for each had a specific place in the final plan, and therefore what was constructed in the saw yard was both a set of timbers and the web of their relationships. The instructions for the whole were marked, piece by piece, onto the individual timbers. A carpenter marked each beam with a small gouge or chisel. There was some variety in the marks, but they conformed to a general set of rules, precisely so that a mark gouged into a timber by one carpenter was then legible to another carpenter working elsewhere. As the historian Irwin Smith explains, 'The numbering system was based upon Roman numerals, because straight lines are easier to incise in wood than the curved lines of Arabic digits,' and in addition there was a further set of embellishments: a curve, or little loop, which Smith calls a 'non-numerical device'. He gives ten standard examples of this carpenters' language:



Smith speculates that these might specify the section of the final building to which each timber would belong. One carpenter spoke to another in this secret language carved into wood, and in these simple lines each timber might find its twin.

The framing took two months. Next, the timbers were sent by barge downriver to the wharf belonging to the Carpenters' Company in the City. These oak timbers were vast and heavy. Their size made

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them distinctive. In August 1577, the company records note a fine of four shillings and four pence owed by Robert Burbage 'at the Waterside for stuff not keeping scantling'. This curious phrase refers to timbers cut outside the regulation sizes, or 'scantling'. We cannot know the exact date of the fine, for the accounts are kept only each August, at the end of the financial year: perhaps it was from March 1577. But the delivery was clearly a substantial one. Thirty-one other carpenters were fined for the same thing in the year up to August 1577, but their fines were two shillings or twenty pence, while Robert's – more than twice this – was the largest of the year. This unusually large fine, for a delivery of unusually shaped timbers, records the arrival of the skeleton of the playhouse in London.

It is tempting to imagine a single master builder: one man who oversees all, whose labour orchestrates the playhouse into being. The construction contracts for later playhouses do specify a master carpenter, but these are later, and nowhere in the vast litigation spawned by the Theatre is there any mention of such a heroic individual. Rather, this was the work of many hands, men working in close teams. In 2022, a new playhouse – called Shakespeare North – opened in Prescot, near Liverpool. It was modelled upon an early seventeenth-century theatre and followed the traditional methods of Elizabethan timber-frame construction. Like its forefathers, it was framed in a saw yard near Reading and the timbers were then transported to the site for assembly. It cost £30 million to build and 185 men worked on it in temporary construction jobs. We might suppose that a hundred men worked on Burbage's playhouse in one role or another. And if we can name only a handful – mainly those who later deposed either on behalf of or against the Burbages – we can nonetheless feel their ties to one another and to the unnamed others. The men who worked for Burbage were close like a family and often were literally family members. In the Company of Carpenters fathers bound their sons as apprentices, and uncles bound their nephews. Brothers worked



alongside brothers and cousins by cousins and in the company ledgers the same names recur. Company work was collective, repetitive, patterned.

In the spring of 1577 the oversized timbers arrived in the City. These were loaded onto carts and taken up Bishopsgate to Shoreditch where a new pool of men was needed to fit the pieces together and to raise the frame. This spring, Burbage and Brayne hired a carpenter named Brian Ellam. Ellam was a quiet figure, who has left for us a cluster of brief appearances in the records of the Carpenters' Company, a largely formulaic will and a taciturn deposition on behalf of the Burbages. The traces are few but enough to suggest his character. At Candlemas 1561 he was bound as apprentice to a master carpenter. He was a little old to do this, at twenty-six, but not impossibly so, and eight years later he completed his apprenticeship and was made free. Soon, he married – a widow, Katherine, who had a son by a previous marriage – and they had another son. Plague would take his wife and son but not yet, and in November 1572 Ellam bound an apprentice of his own. In proper time he freed this apprentice and bound another and these were the rhythms of a carpenter's life in the late decades of sixteenth-century London. Ellam paid his dues and with his company brothers contributed towards the summertime musters of troops at Mile End and Greenwich. He attended feast days and funerals. He never rose high in the company.

Ellam knew the Burbages well and he knew them long. Although Robert was two or three years his senior at the company the two men were likely the same age and they were close enough that when Robert died in 1583 Ellam was named as executor of his will alongside James Burbage. Here is one small knot of men: the Burbage brothers and Brian Ellam. In February 1592 Ellam was called to depose on behalf of the Burbages. It is worth quoting him at some length and in an unmodernised transcription partly because he is so direct and partly because he is so specific. 'He Remembreth,' he said, and the clerk wrote it down:

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that the said Braine being partener (as he tooke him) with James Burbage now one of the defendantes of & in the same premisses payd this deponent for some work which this deponent did upon the same premisses before he dyed the some of xl s, ~~at sondry tymes~~ at the least xiiij yeres passed.

The key detail is simple: Brayne paid Ellam forty shillings ('xl s') for some work. First Ellam cannot remember when – at sundry times, he suggests – but then, pressed by the transcribing clerk, he offers a date. This was at least fourteen years ago, so in 1577.

A date, even a rough one, and a payment; a record of work properly done: this is valuable, but the words that he uses and the ways he pauses each enrich the story he is telling. This is how Ellam describes Brayne: 'Partner (as he took him).' The parentheses indicate some doubt in the voice, as even while Brayne is doling out payments the workmen on the site have reservations about him. He is not one of them. He is a grocer among carpenters, a man from a selling trade amongst men who work with their hands. And Ellam is speaking specifically as a carpenter. It first appears, from his deposition, that he worked upon the site generally, at some undefined task. But he insists: Burbage and Brayne were partners in the same premises, and Ellam worked upon these premises. He repeats the word. 'Premises', explains the historian John Orrell in an article about the construction of a later playhouse, is a specific term 'meaning something like prefabricated parts' before the raising of the frame. The premises are the pieces of the playhouse as they await assembly, so Ellam was hired to work upon the framed, marked-up timbers once they had arrived in Shoreditch. This makes sense: you need a trained carpenter to interpret the marks upon the timber frame. And although Ellam was possibly illiterate – he signs his deposition with a mark, not his name – he could read the carpenters' code, and therefore assemble the pieces of the frame into their proper order.

The carpenters had a vocabulary of their own. The next step was to raise the frame, and this was called setting up or sometimes 'rearing', as if it were an animal or a child. The men worked quickly. Each tenon fits its mortise and is bound by an offset peg. Around the central yard was a gallery twelve feet deep for seating. Only once the first gallery was in place did the carpenters begin upon the second storey, for this allowed them to do without scaffolding: each level gave a new floor upon which to stand to build the level above, and in this way three storeys rose. These galleries ran around nine sides of the polygon. The stage was tied into the five bays on the west side. This ran a little over fifteen feet deep. The stage was three feet above the level of the yard, where the audience would stand. A network of laths was nailed to the timber frame. This in turn gave a structure to hold the plaster. The pale plaster was made from lime, sand and hair from the local tanners, and this filled in the skeleton, the flesh upon its bones. The playhouse was perhaps thirty-five feet high, a little taller than the local houses. The roof was tiled. The outside walls were black and white.

Brian Ellam and Robert Burbage, free of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters: sometimes we forget about the working men doing their jobs. 'Who built Thebes with its seven gates?' asked Bertolt Brecht in a poem written in 1935, while he was in Denmark on the run from the Nazis: 'Books say it was kings. / Did the kings hew and haul the rock?' As the philosopher Michael Sandel argues, the modern liberal world has tended to undervalue work – specifically repetitive jobs that do not require a college degree – and to assume that everyone's aspiration is to rise beyond this. Preferring tales of brilliant individuals, and celebrating meritocracy over drudgery, we consider labour to be 'no longer a source of social recognition'. This has eroded society and damaged the common good. Sandel's argument, 'that work draws citizens together in a web of contribution and mutual recognition', is an ancient one. Aristotle insists that we

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flourish when we exercise our abilities, while a long American republican tradition holds that agriculture teaches citizens self-rule.

These were the values of the old livery companies of Elizabethan London. The worshipful companies do still exist, but only as charitable and educational organisations, and mainly ceremonial, while if their political and practical elements have been preserved at all, it is only in the atrophied form of labour unions. This forgetting has a political dimension, insists Sandel, but it also has a literary one, suggests Brecht, and it is reflected in the ways in which Shakespeare represents work and workers. There are a thousand speaking characters in Shakespeare's plays. Seventy-eight are servants, the most popular profession, and the second most popular profession is duke, with fifty. If we exclude generic positions – soldier, king, priest, servant, duke – there are about eighty characters with recognisable, specific jobs. They are schoolmasters, shepherds and sex workers; gravediggers and gardeners and grooms. It is rare to have a job in Shakespeare and even rarer to have a real job, one that might have made you a living in Elizabethan London. In Shakespeare, you are almost as likely to be a duke as a servant. You are as likely to be a poet as a weaver or carpenter.

It is rarer still to have both a name and a job. Only forty-five characters do. There are Constable Fang and Constable Dull; Angelo the goldsmith and Abhorson the executioner; and even these are only halfway to real names, as they tend to approach a pun. Of these, seventeen have a first name, a last name and a job: Hugh Oatcake, of the watch; Nell Quickly, hostess. And of these seventeen, eight appear in either *Romeo and Juliet* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Three are those wedding musicians. In the first printed version of the play, likely set from Shakespeare's manuscript, Peter addresses the three as Simon Catling, Hugh Rebeck and James Soundpost, and he may well be joking. Soundpost is a comic name for a musician; a 'catling' is a lute string and a 'rebeck' is a fiddle. The remaining five all appear in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

These five are the working men gathered to rehearse and then perform before the Duke. Their full names and professions: Nick Bottom, weaver; Robin Starveling, tailor; Francis Flute the bellows-mender; Tom Snout the tinker. We are only told that the fifth, Peter Quince, is a carpenter in a stage direction. The last of the troupe is Snug the joiner, and he is the only one without a first name, but he has another distinction. He is the only joiner to appear in Shakespeare.

First name, last name, job: it looks like three parts but perhaps there are only two. Or, more precisely, perhaps the last name melts into the job. Since the nineteenth century, editors have noted that Bottom takes his name from the core upon which a weaver winds his thread, that Flute is suitable for one who mends instruments, that a Quince is a carpenter's wedge and that a tinker might well mend the snout of a kettle.

This looks like childish fooling: like the characters from children's stories, Miss Jump the Jockey, Rosie the Riveter, Postman Pat. But it returns us to the world of work in late Elizabethan London. A man's name might be his trade and both might express his identity. Brian Ellam, who built the Theatre, signed a deposition in 1591 with a careful flourish:



It looks something like an A, or a K, and a cross, but it is more precise and more common. A very similar sign-mark appears elsewhere in the records and account books of the Carpenters' Company, signed by individual carpenters against a payment or a fine. This was a signature for carpenters, and its shape was not accidental. The coat of arms of the Carpenters' Company is:

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Here are three compasses, for measuring the cut into a beam needed to keep it flush, and a chevron or rafter, which holds up the roof. Ellam handles these daily. These were the tools of his job and the materials of his trade.

It was common for working men to sign their names with a sign-mark and it does not necessarily indicate illiteracy. Other workmen on the Theatre signed in this way. Thomas Bromfield laid bricks for Burbage in the early 1580s and he signed his depositions with a simple figure:



This is a masonry tool known as a framing square: a right angle which helps to keep the corners clean. Used by carpenters as well as bricklayers, this is a familiar tool on a building site: picked up each day, often in your hand. Choosing to sign with a sign-mark instead of another signature – your initials, for example – is to choose one form of identity over another. Your first name likely came from your godparents; your family name was inherited from your father. The

tools of your trade, or the crest of your company, are a kind of craftsman's heraldry.

By May 1577, the Theatre was at last close to ready. It was more or less round, three storeys, and a single main door led into the yard for the standing audience. The stage was on the west side so that if you were before it at playtime you looked into the afternoon sun. What it needed was a performance.

The carpenters called the final phase of construction the 'finishing'. This included the last small tasks: plaster smoothed into place, woodwork made flush to its corners and any ornamental work. The final set of payments to the workers waited upon their completion. But Burbage and Brayne had spent Brayne's capital investment and were rapidly running out of money. A lively anecdote about this moment comes from the later testimony of a goldsmith named Robert Myles. 'In the latter end of the finishing,' he reported, 'the said Brayne and his wife the now complainant were driven to labour in the said works for some of the charge of ii labourers.' It is a comic scene: the grocer turned labourer, and his wife carrying bricks, fair hands hauling the heavy timbers. But it is also a story about shame, and a fall from one role to another, from investor to workman, and his wife forced to do a man's work.

It is unthinkable that Brayne and his wife should really have done any heavy labour, partly because they were not trained to. But anecdotes such as this are scenes in a longer play. Each contributes to the wider meanings of the construction, how it felt to those who built it, paid for it, watched on. What they point to is a feeling of rush and improvisation, just at the edge of a crisis. By the late spring of 1577, Burbage and Brayne had been in possession of the site for more than a year. They had been in possession of something that looks like a complete playhouse for perhaps three months. And they were going broke. The only way to make income from a playhouse is to sell tickets to a play in it. So, as soon as the stage was ready, and the galleries in



place, Burbage invited a playing company to perform. This desperate and circular act – showing plays in an unfinished playhouse in order to raise the money needed to finish the playhouse – was described in one later deposition by another carpenter. ‘It was the money and goods of the said Brayne that set up & finished the same,’ a carpenter named John Griggs deposed in 1592: ‘with the help of the profits that grew by plays used there before it was fully finished.’

It is an evocative image of the terrible circularity of money worry. Burbage had promised Brayne that the playhouse would cost £200. Griggs, in his later deposition, reported that Brayne gave Burbage ‘the sum of one thousand marks at least’ towards the building of the playhouse. A thousand marks is £666, and this sum corresponds with another later estimate given by Brayne’s widow Margaret, who claimed that she and her husband had invested £600. The historian William Ingram notes that in the 1590s it was commonly accepted that a playhouse cost a thousand marks to build. But in 1576, nobody knew this yet, so the sense of crisis and scandal may be simply explained: it cost three times the estimate.

The depositions give away more than they seem to. If they are scenes in a play it is a turbulent one, filled with deceptions, rival tellings, disguise and subterfuge. Sometimes it is a farce and sometimes a courtroom drama, and sometimes that drama lies in the details. John Griggs, who deposed in 1592, first appears in the records of the Carpenters’ Company on the feast of All Saints – 1 November – 1573. He was twenty-one years old, the son of a deceased butcher and citizen of London, and he was bound for seven years as apprentice to a master carpenter. Five years later, in 1578, he was made free. His apprenticeship was quicker than the standard term because he was the son of a citizen, so he could claim his own freedom by what was known as patrimony, the right handed down from father to son even if the son was not in the same trade.

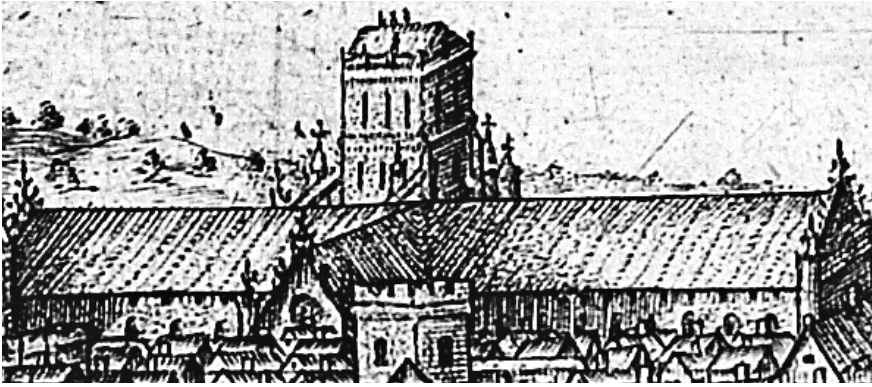
The details tell a story; the variations show a life, a character. After the brawling Burbages and steadier Ellam, Griggs was a little hasty.

He was a social climber, a true rising man. He was familiar enough with what happened on the site in Shoreditch during the building of the playhouse to be able to describe it in detail a decade and a half later. He knew the Braynes particularly well, and his depositions offer oddly intimate testimony, as if from inside John Brayne's head. Griggs knew, he deposed, of Brayne's own hopes and fears, his longing for 'the great wealth that should rise unto him', and how he 'wholly employed all he could towards the said Building and setting forth the same to his own utter undoing at last'. Griggs is a minor puzzle in this history. In 1577 he was, we may assume, a junior carpenter on the build. After 1580 he vanishes from the records of the Carpenters' Company, and indeed from all records until 1587, when his name surfaces on a document with considerable importance for theatre history. In a contract between a financial backer and a theatre owner and rival to the Burbages named Philip Henslowe, who intended to build a new playhouse called the Rose, John Griggs was master carpenter for the project. In 1587, Griggs was considered a skilled playhouse builder. He had to have learned this somewhere, and it seems almost too obvious that he must have learned it working for Burbage and Brayne, a decade earlier. But in the 1592 deposition, Griggs was asked directly what he knew of the construction of the playhouse. Griggs replied that he knew nothing. His formulaic answer, as transcribed in the deposition – 'To the 7. that he is ignorant' – implies that he did not even deign to say the words. Perhaps he simply shrugged.

A man who has made his fortune and name in the building of playhouses testifies that playhouses are a place of moral ruin. A carpenter whose greatest skill lies in the construction of playhouses claims he has no interest in the construction of the first permanent playhouse. A man tells a deeply intimate story, as if he were inside the heads of its protagonists, and yet also presents himself as coolly, morally above any such world. Stories such as these – stories about the building of the playhouse – are also part of the building of the

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playhouse. So let us tell a story of our own. The Burbage brothers know Brian Ellam, and bring him onto the job; and Brayne, the other backer, invites a carpenter of his own, someone known to him, someone loyal to him. John Griggs comes to work on the site, and here he begins to learn the skills of playhouse making, but soon he falls out with the Burbages. The fight is violent enough that Griggs will testify against them fifteen years later. The cause, we may guess, is money. Griggs is not paid, and he – like everyone else – blames Burbage. This is how the playhouse was finished: with another quarrel, a bad debt and a man walking off the job.



## The Preachers

From the raised outdoor pulpit known as Paul's Cross, on 3 November 1577, a preacher picked a fight with the playhouses. Beneath him, sitting on benches, and on foot behind them, a crowd watched. This was perhaps the most important pulpit in the kingdom: a small, elevated stage with a roof, standing outdoors and hard by the high buttresses of the medieval cathedral of St Paul's. There was space here in the wide churchyard for 4,000 Londoners to gather and listen to fiery sermons, flights of preacherly denunciation. This Sunday we might guess there was a strong but smaller crowd, perhaps 500 or fewer. Thomas White, the vicar of one of the City churches, was giving the sermon. He was a regular at Paul's Cross, and a popular preacher; but it was November, and the autumn was turning to an unusually cold winter. White's text for the day was from the book of Zephaniah, on the 'abominable, filthy, and cruel city' of Jerusalem. But this is London, he told the watching crowd, filled with luxury and riot, 'games and plays, banquetings and surfeitings'. White was

standing in the shadow of the cathedral, right in the heart of the City, but he asked his audience to cast their minds elsewhere, a little away from God. 'Behold the sumptuous Theatre houses,' he commands, 'a continual monument of London's prodigality and folly.' Here, he insists, 'the old world is matched, and Sodom overcome, for more horrible enormities', and warming up he builds to a nightmare vision. 'If thou be a father, thou lovest thy child: if thou be a master, thou lovest thy servant,' he goes on, 'and thou be what thou canst be, thou lovest thy self that hauntest those schools of vice, dens of Thieves, & Theatres of all lewdness.' The playhouse is a sink of sin where a man may vanish and society dissolve its bonds as into a dream.

For White, London is Jerusalem, and Sodom, and the playhouse is a den, a school. The sermon's quarrel is born of closeness, and the horror at how one thing may melt into another. Beneath it is an inevitable analogy. White hates the playhouses and yet he is a speaker upon a raised stage, and he invited the crowd to imagine themselves as at another spectacle. 'Look but upon the common plays,' White instructs his pious audience: 'and see the multitude that flocketh to them.' One multitude is good: those gathered for the sermon. Another multitude is bad: those gathered in a playhouse. And now, in a twist, White reveals that only one of these multitudes can be real. For, as he points out in the next breath, the playhouses are currently closed. 'I understand they are now forbidden because of the plague,' he notes, cattily: 'I like the policy if it holds still.'

There had been no playing in London all summer. In July, the Lord Mayor had forbidden performances at inns within the City. This was a customary precaution, for the beginning of the summer was also the start of plague season: both fleas and the bacteria they carry flourish in the warmth. Even without a full understanding of the epidemiology, one could observe that large crowds in confined spaces such as inn yards invited the spread of disease. Sermon audiences, however, were held to be immune: for, as White observes, 'The cause of plagues is sin, if you look to it well: and the cause of sin are

plays: therefore the cause of plagues are plays.’ The Lord Mayor’s power only reached as far as the City walls and not out into Shoreditch, but on 1 August the Privy Council – who did have authority over playing in the suburbs – followed. ‘For the avoiding of the sickness likely to happen through the heat of the weather and assemblies of people of London to plays,’ they ordered, ‘the Theatre and such like shall forbear any more to play until Michaelmas be past at the least.’

This brief note, preserved in a minute kept at a Privy Council meeting, is the first recorded mention of Burbage and Brayne’s playhouse being open for performances. It gives us a confident, if broad, date. There must have been plays on the stage here by the beginning of July 1577, and it could not have opened much before the end of June. This was an ill-advised, inauspicious time to open. The summer rising, and with it the risk of plague: that Burbage and Brayne chose to launch then is a sign of their desperation. It was short-sighted, and within a couple of weeks of launching the Privy Council ordered them to close for at least a couple of months, until Michaelmas, at the end of September. The playhouse remained dark for longer for, as the sermon notes, it was still inactive at the start of November. This must have been a terrible blow for Burbage and Brayne.

The Privy Council minute is also the first recorded mention of the name of their new playhouse: the Theatre. The name is a riddle and a boast. It is slightly overstuffed; inside it several meanings jostle. It is an ancient word. English speakers had been using ‘theatre’ to refer to a space for dramatic performance for as long as there had been a recognisable English language, and it descends from the Latin *theatrum*, and in turn from the Greek. Its etymology lies in the joining of two parts: the Greek *théā*, which means spectacle, sight or performance, and the suffix *-tron*, which is commonly used for instruments or tools. Theatre was – as it still is in modern English – both a noun for a place and an activity one does, and observes, in that place. In sixteenth-century England the word appeared occasionally on the title pages of illustrated books, such as atlases, in which something was shown.

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The lease signed by Burbage in April 1576 referred to his plan to build 'a Theater or playing place'. The capitalisation of nouns in this period was a slippery business, and it is tempting to make much of – and find little in – the word's variable ending, '-re' or '-er', the latter preserved in American usage. This overlooks the real work the word is doing. In laying claim to a whole artform, the name for this playhouse is performing what literary critics call metonymy. We take 'the Crown' to refer to the monarchy and 'Westminster' to refer to parliamentary government. Broadway, Hollywood, Silicon Valley: places that stand also for industries and aspirations. We cannot know this for sure, but it is in character for the boastful Burbage to have dreamed up the name himself. It looks so humble. It is not, and this surely was the point. Burbage chose the name because it was bold.

In 1576 and 1577, as Burbage and Brayne were dreaming of buildings rising and the preachers were worrying that they would lead us to fall, London's greatest antiquarian was thinking about what was left in the ground beneath his feet. To research his *Survey of London*, which covered nothing less than the history of the whole of the city – its rivers and myths, monuments and churches, parish by parish – John Stow read every document he could. But he also walked the streets and wrote down what he saw. His *Survey* is a strange book as it moves slightly too easily between the present and the past. In 1576, as he recounts, Stow heard of an unlikely thing. A large field to the east of Bishopsgate was being dug up for clay to make bricks to build new houses in Shoreditch. It is likely those same bricks went into the foundations of the Theatre. The field used to be called Lolesworth, noted Stow, but now it was named Spittle field after the old priory of St Mary Spital. In this London everything had a name which could change in a moment. Here in the clay and brickearth, uncovered by the workmen, 'many earthen pots called *Vrnae*, were found full of Ashes, and burnt bones of men, to wit, of the Romans that inhabited here'. The ancient Roman cemeteries tended to be built outside the



city walls, and by main roads, so Shoreditch was the perfect setting for one.

Stow's account begins soberly, with the calm poise of a historian or anthropologist, but soon this gives way. For having heard of the Roman urns he went out to see them. Stow had been born and raised within the City walls and he walked north through the City gates. He was tracing the route of the old Roman road known as Ermine Street, which lay beneath and gave its shape to Bishopsgate. He passed the inns for travellers, and weavers' workshops, and the grand house known as Fisher's Folly, and then on his right the walled artillery yard where gunners practised their drills on Thursdays. Behind this and to the east stretched Lolesworth Field. Here, poking out from the freshly turned earth, were shards of white clay pots with long necks and curved handles. He sorted through these and amongst them found others, what he later called 'diverse vials and other fashioned Glasses, some most cunningly wrought'. He admired them, how they held the light, and in some he saw traces of clear liquid. He lifted one. He opened the stopper and tasted it. It was a thousand years old and fresh as new spring water.

Even this was not enough for a man so hungry for history. He saw cups and dishes of fine red clay, with Roman letters imprinted upon the base, and he saw lamps, red and white, with figures wrought upon them. One showed Pallas, he noted, the old Greek epithet for Athena, and he measured her against the span of his own hand. She was as wide as his thumb and little finger. Now something else caught his eye. It was a white pot, no larger than a small wine glass, in the shape of a hare. The pot stood lifelike upon folded legs and at the head, between the hare's ears, was the opening. I like this, he thought. I want this. He placed it gently inside his bag.

Recent historians agree that Stow was a religious conservative, and his *Survey* notably ignores much of what we value most from Elizabethan London. He famously had nothing to say about the playhouses, for these were new, and Stow's great subject was that which had been lost, not that which was arising. The best account modern

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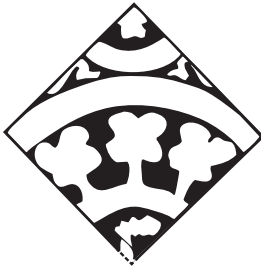
historians have of sixteenth-century London was therefore written by a man who hated and feared much of what he saw. But this misses one key strand of his sense of the past: how he was a little turned on by its thrilling closeness. Elsewhere in the overturned field were other finds. There were stone coffins, blockier than the fine Roman urns, and within their rubble skulls and bones sat loosely, and amongst these remains were huge iron nails, each the width of a man's finger and a quarter of a yard long. Soon word of these marvellous grisly finds spread and a crowd of onlookers gathered. 'Those nails were more wondered at than the rest of things there found,' Stow recounts, 'and many opinions of men were uttered of them, namely that the men there buried were murdered by driving those nails into their heads.' It is irresistible to fantasise about the violence of the past but for Stow the savagery goes on into the present and his response was pragmatic. These fantasies, offered by the scandalised onlookers, were 'a thing unlikely', he notes, for the simple reason that 'a smaller nail would more aptly serve so bad a purpose, and a more secret place would lightly [likely] be employed for their burial'. Nonetheless, it was a good trophy, and he asked one of the workmen to fetch a handful of the nails for him, as he wished to take those home with him.

London in 1576 and 1577 was digging itself up, picking up the pieces and holding them up to see how they caught the light. New creation often involves disturbing the past. In 1995, when the swirling glass skyscraper known popularly as 'the Gherkin' was being constructed in the City of London, the workmen uncovered a Roman grave. In it was the skeleton of a girl, lying on her back, with her arms crossed over her chest. Once the new skyscraper was completed, she was reburied, and she lies there still.

One founding irony of the Theatre is that it was built on holy ground. The site that Burbage leased from Giles Allen was a portion of the medieval Augustinian nunnery precinct of St John the Baptist, Holywell. It was named after a spring just to the north which was the

source of the Walbrook, one of London's lost rivers. The Romans had dammed the Walbrook to try to keep their London drier, which caused the site to be marshy. It was fitting for a nunnery dedicated to St John the Baptist to stand in the waters. Holywell Priory was founded here in the middle of the twelfth century. It was small. At the dissolution of England's old holy houses in 1539, fourteen nuns resided here. But it was wealthy. An assessment carried out that year recorded that the priory received an annual income of £300, derived largely from the rents on properties in forty-one parishes which had been bequeathed to it by pious citizens of London.

The priory comprised a cluster of buildings: a chapel, chapter house, cemetery, workshops and storehouses. Its decoration reflected its wealth. The church had a relief sculpture of red squirrels and ivy carved in stone, with gold details. On the floor were glazed yellow, green and brown tiles, imported from the Low Countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and in the nave locally made decorative tiles. These were about eight inches square and laid in a chequerboard fashion.



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Later archaeologists working on the foundations of the old priory found pieces of luxurious Venetian glass, ringed with bands of cobalt, white, turquoise. The greatest benefactor of the priory was Sir Thomas Lovell. He had been treasurer to the household of Henry VIII and built a two-storey mansion on the priory lands, along with a chapel where he was buried in May 1524. At his funeral, fifty poor men from the parish were paid to stand with torches in solemn grieving. There was an aromatic herb garden: coriander, fennel, parsley, rare peppers. There were orchards of fig, apple, plum and sloe. Willows, which like the wet, grew across the grounds.

The old priory was dissolved on 10 October 1539, and the destruction began quickly. The land was gifted to a favoured courtier, while the building materials – the stone, glass, timber and lead – were reserved for the king. By April 1541 the lead from the church roof had been stripped, melted down and used in repairs on Westminster Hall. A series of what the archaeological survey calls ‘robber cuts’ was made into the walls of the church, and stone was carted away. The wealthy landowning Rutland family, who were loosely related to Lovell through the nephew of a nephew, kept one section of the site. They took bricks from the old priory buildings and used them to construct a new storehouse. The south wall of the church itself was left standing, but only for convenience: it marked the boundary between the Rutland and Allen properties.

By 1576, the old priory precinct – its orchards and its chapels, its holy well – was a building site. What remained was broken. A spur and buttress from the priory church stood until the middle of the eighteenth century, and the great gate leading onto Holywell Lane lasted until the end of that century. Dissolution is a gentle word for a violent process. In 1883, during yet another renovation of the same site, a large fragment of an effigy of a bishop, in Purbeck marble, was found beneath a house on what is now New Inn Yard but which stood right next to the Theatre. It had spent three centuries face-down, used as a paving stone.

At the Holywell site in 1576 and 1577 the new sat amongst fragments of the recent holy past. One curious detail, mentioned in the lease between Burbage and Allen, is that a tenant in one of the properties was the Bishop of Hereford, John Scory. He was a good reforming bishop and a minor hero of the Reformation tumult of two generations before. He had been chaplain to Thomas Cranmer, had fled to the continent in a time of persecution and then returned once Elizabeth was queen, and by the 1570s he was an elderly man living a quieter life in a large house by the old priory. He died rich, in 1585, leaving £600 to charitable causes. His wife and son stayed nearby, for there is a memorial to her in the parish church of St Leonard's dating from 1592, and when their son died in 1617 he was buried in the same church. For a decade, then, one of James Burbage's tenants was a bishop.

Just across Bishopsgate, and a short stroll south of the Holywell precinct, was another former medieval priory. The Augustinian house of St Mary Spital was, like the Holywell priory, no longer a religious house, but it had continued after the Reformation as a hospital for pregnant – or 'lying-in' – women. At the north side of the priory yard was an open-air pulpit and here each year, in the week following Easter, a cycle of sermons was preached. These sermons – addressed to a crowd of the aldermen of London, the City fathers in scarlet capes, the children of Christ's Hospital school in blue cloaks, seated on benches – were intended to inspire charitable giving on behalf of the hospital. Thomas Drant preached here on Tuesday of Easter week in 1572. 'It is an hard persuasion to persuade against money,' he acknowledged, 'and it is as much to some to depart from their money to the poor, as to pull out their eyes and cast them away, or cut off their legs and give them away.' Our hearts are hard, in this rapacious and money-minded London. 'I put you in remembrance of the simplicities of the old world,' Drant continues, and returns his audience to the gospel truths. 'The possession of the kingdom of heaven remaineth to those that harbour strangers,' he administered

his hearers, splendid in their blues and reds, 'and clothe the naked, and do the like works of compassion.'

It is easy to smile at this good old thunder, so high and righteous. It sets the pleasures of this world so strictly against the pieties of the next. But as well as a popular Spital preacher, Drant was a richly literary man. He translated Horace from the Latin and the *Iliad* from the Greek; he wrote epigrams which were later praised and a handbook of the metre of English poetry. As such, he was perhaps the perfect Spital preacher, for one surprising motif of the Spital sermons is their adoption of the imagery of their close neighbour, the Theatre. Here is the perfectly named Dr Bliss, preaching at the Spital on Monday of Easter week 1588: 'Our little life is justly compared to a stage, whereon there are divers actors.' This is a decade before Shakespeare wrote the famous lines from *As You Like It*: 'All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players'. And here is Dr Powell, preaching the following day: 'Come not you my beloved to the hearing of the word, as a man would come to a play, account not the pulpit to be a stage, and the preacher to be a stage player.' The problem is that one might mix one old priory with another and as through a half-closed eye see the preacher as an actor, or the actor as a preacher, speaking the same phrases on a raised stage in the north-eastern suburbs of London.

The preachers did not simply object to playing. There was a long history of English church drama: plays that did good Christian work, and set out moral teachings, or drew upon scenes from the Bible. The famous Corpus Christi cycle was still being performed in Coventry as late as 1579. What the preachers hated was the commercialisation of playing. The specific objection to paying the players echoes through the sermons and advice manuals of the time. John Northbrook, in a treatise blasting 'Dicing, Dancing, vain Plays' of 1577, insists that giving money to players is 'right prodigality, which is opposed to liberality'. Preaching at Paul's Cross in August, a headmaster named John Stockwood was appalled at the earnings of stage players: 'How little policy it is so much money to be ill spent, which might be

employed to better uses.’ It became a cliché of sermons to quote a remark by – or commonly attributed to – St Augustine, that *pecunias histrionibus dare, vitium est immane, non virtus* (‘to give money to players is a grievous sin, and no virtue’). This was new and prompted by a particular economic relation: the penny paid, as the price of admission, to see a play. And what crystallised that change was the construction of a building whose rationale was precisely that exchange. ‘Until the building of the London theatres in 1576,’ notes the scholar Edgar Fripp, ‘there was no antagonism between players and preachers.’

That antagonism was never single-minded. That the performance of stage plays was specifically banned during the preaching of a Spital sermon only confirms their proximity: geographical, as well as thematic. The silver-tongued Thomas Playfere preached at the Spital at Easter of 1595 and he warned against the delusions that draw us away from the world before us. They can be so powerful. ‘Those which will needs play the hobgoblins or the night-walking spirits (as we call them) all the while they speak under a hollow vault, or leap forth with an ugly vizard [mask] upon their face,’ he said: ‘they are so terrible that he which thinks himself a normal man may perhaps be affrighted of them.’ But all that it takes to turn the fear to relief is for one to step in and ‘pull the vizard from his face, then every boy laughs him to scorn’. This is a perfect stage action, with a neat dramatic twist: an actor playing a hobgoblin, costumed in a terrible mask, is suddenly revealed to be no more than just another man.

To read the sermons of this age is often an uncanny experience. There is the feeling that we are glimpsing at a lightly distorted remove the words and plot of a Shakespeare play. These apparently so different artforms will not keep apart. The only hobgoblin to appear in Shakespeare is ‘that shrewd and knavish sprite / Called Robin Goodfellow’ in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He has several names: as one fairy notes, when he recognises the spirit, some “‘hobgoblin” call you, and “sweet puck””. Puck tricks and misbehaves. He puts a mask – of an ass’s head – onto a man, and such masks were



common props for the players. The Earl of Leicester's Men had a 'vizard for an ape's face'; a few years later, the Admiral's Men had amongst their props eight visors, two lions' heads and 'old Mahomet's head'. Puck is powerful, can fly around the world in forty minutes, and he orchestrates the slapstick secondary plot-line of the play, in which four young Athenians get lost in the woods and, drugged with a love potion, trade and then trade again their lovers. This plot-line is perhaps what the play is most known and celebrated for: a conjured world of moonshine, mixed love and Bottom with the head or mask of an ass.

It has long been tempting to see Playfere as a source for Shakespeare. When his Spital sermons were printed, they came with dedications to Shakespeare's patron and his wife, and it is certainly possible that Shakespeare read them. But the shared language between Shakespeare and the sermons suggests a different and deeper relation between these apparently rivalrous artforms. Playfere and the preachers at the Spital point us towards what people saw and loved at the Theatre. The stage offered a counter-world, which was part of its attraction. Another example, from a generation earlier: in the early 1570s a dour Swiss Calvinist preached a series of sermons, and their texts were subsequently translated into English in 1596. He demanded 'Whether Sorcerers or Witches, Fairies or Spirits (call them by what name you will) can raise any tempests, or bring down such hail as we oft see?' He expected the answer, no, for the only force that can bring the hail is God. This is the proper Calvinist worldview, and this is wholly orthodox; and yet behind his preaching and so close that we might glimpse it just beneath the mask are the sorcerer of *The Tempest* and the witches of *Macbeth* and most of all the fairies and spirits of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 'Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania,' says the fairy king Oberon, when he meets his queen out in the woods. Somewhere deep inside the DNA of a Shakespeare play is this gesture of recognition. We greet an otherworld, bubbling like a lost river of London, bearing along shards of the pagan, Roman, violent, holy past. This draws us still, and if we wish to see it we must first pay our penny for admission.

On 24 August 1578 John Stockwood preached at Paul's Cross. He was in a terrible mood. London, it seemed to him, was a swamp of taverns, dice games and whoredom, and even worse than all this rotten opportunity he was disgusted most with one particular house of shame. 'I know not how I might with the godly learned especially more discommend the gorgeous Playing place erected in the fields, than to term it, as they please to have it called, a Theatre,' he scorns: 'that is, even after the manner of the old heathenish Theatre at Rome, a show place of all beastly & filthy matters.' It is as if the name is what bothers him most, and he repeats: a Theatre, the Theatre.

The Theatre was, he insisted, 'after the manner of the old heathenish Theatre at Rome', and he meant that its name was a flashy foreign import, Latinate and licentious. He suggested that it had some deep association with pagan temples but referred to something entirely literal: the shape. The Theatre, that is, shares the round shape of the old stone Roman amphitheatres, most famously the Colosseum at Rome. This is obvious to us now, and perhaps it feels inevitable that a playhouse should be round. But it was not inevitable in 1577. That November, shortly after the ban on playing was lifted, a second new playhouse opened in Shoreditch. It must have been constructed during the summer closures, in expectation of the eventual reopening. It sat upon a scrap of unused pasture immediately to the south of the Theatre, close enough to be within earshot. The pasture was known as the Curtain, named for the southern – or curtain – wall of the old priory. Later, this area was called Curtain Close, and today it stands by Curtain Road, and this new playhouse took the name of its setting: the Curtain. It was first mentioned by name in a moralising treatise which was entered into the Stationers' register on 2 December 1577. While the construction of the Curtain was clearly prompted by the anticipated success of the Theatre, it took a different shape: a rectangle, not a polygon. As such, it shared the outline of the traditional inn yards where players had long performed.

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This was like mushrooms, popping up overnight: where there was one Shoreditch playhouse, almost immediately there were two. What irked the preachers most was the popularity of the playhouses, and this second playhouse was proof of precisely that: that playing would go on, attracting more and more profit and greater and greater crowds. ‘Will not a filthy play, with the blast of a Trumpet,’ Stockwood demanded, ‘sooner call thither a thousand, than an hour’s tolling of a Bell, bring to the sermon a hundred?’ Like White, he imagines the playhouses by contrasting them with churches; unlike White, Stockwood is preaching when the competition is open for business, and here is the trouble. He is standing at Paul’s Cross but he is thinking of the churches across the City. These proper houses of worship sit half empty ‘whereas, if you resort to the Theatre, the Curtain, and other places of Plays in the City, you shall on the Lord’s day have these places, with many other that I can not reckon, so full, as possible they can throng’. One playhouse turns to two and there are still more to be imagined, more than he can reckon, and sick with numbers he tallies up ‘the gain that is reaped of eight ordinary places in the City which I know, by playing but once a week (whereas many times they play twice and sometimes thrice) it amounteth to 2000 pounds by the

year, the suffering of which waste must one day be answered before God'. The purest moral scandal of all is reproduction, and the reckoning lies in the numbers of the crowds and something worse than this: all the money flowing in.

We do not know how James Burbage felt about the construction of a second playhouse in Shoreditch. On one level, here was a direct rival, to split the takings. On another, here was a vindication of his dream: of paying crowds and the income from them. What Burbage had promised and what had tempted Brayne was what the preachers feared. The sums Stockwood gives are wild. Two thousand pounds a year was a princely income, a sum of kings in an age when the annual salary for a trained carpenter might be £5 and a gentleman could live well on £40. It was a vision of excess.

For the moralising Stockwood, all was multiplication, and terrifyingly too much. In his tetchy sermon he named the Theatre and the Curtain, and added that there were eight playing places in the City. 'Ordinary' here suggests that these are places where food and drink and served: so we may assume that these are inns. We know of only four inn playhouses in the City that were active at this time: the Bel Savage, the Bull, the Cross Keys and the Bell. There are traces of others: Newington Butts, the Red Lion. But these were apparently not active in 1577 and 1578, and were not in the City. It is possible that Stockwood knew of others that are lost to us. It is equally possible that for Stockwood four may as well be eight.

Even one is too many, and more a scandal. The only playing spaces that Stockwood named were the Theatre and the Curtain, and these were the only two purpose-built playhouses. The others were temporary, adapted structures, and a new building, for only this wicked purpose, is a stronger danger. Burbage would have agreed. Even preacherly infamy is further vindication of his founding dream.

By the summer of 1578 playing in London looked like wildfire: marvellous, beautiful, shooting upwards; dangerous, seductive, spreading. For some it was a moral panic and for others a business

opportunity; either way it was one of the distinguishing marks of the city. In 1578 a Frenchman named Louis de Grenade visited London, and he kept notes on what he called the 'singularities', the unusual or remarkable things he found. He liked London. He found it orderly and welcoming, to foreigners and refugees, ringed with pleasant green spaces. 'As one leaves the city through the gate of the Moor,' he reported, giving a slightly awkward name to Moorgate: 'one comes into a fine and pleasant meadow, which on feast days is full of people of every age and gender.' There were some practising archery, and others strolling. Grenade ambled north and a little east and found 'At the end of the meadow are two very fine theatres.' He uses the same French word for both – 'theatres' – but one caught his eye: 'one of which is magnificent in comparison with the other and has an imposing appearance on the outside. This theatre can hold from 4 to 5,000 people.'

This is a huge crowd, impossibly so. The archaeologist Heather Knight has worked on the excavations of both the Theatre and the Curtain, and she estimates that where the Theatre might hold 771 people, the Curtain has perhaps twice this capacity, with space for 1,421 audience members. Grenade does not give a name, but it is tempting to assume that the larger playhouse he mentions is the Curtain. Knight suggests, however, that Grenade would have been accustomed to the rectangular inn yard playing spaces he had seen before, and therefore that this magnificent playhouse is the Theatre, not the Curtain. We cannot know; perhaps it does not matter, and what counts here is only the pleasure of this communal, repeated fantasy. 'Even their agreeable appearance pleases men and any onlookers,' marvels Grenade, and adds that on their stages are spectacles 'which comprise actions made up for pleasure rather than ones which have actually taken place'.

A pleasing appearance and a deceptive one: what Grenade also suggests is that the playhouses were decorated. The preachers agreed.

One described the Theatre as ‘gorgeous’ while another soon mocked its ‘painted stage’. Later playhouses had a covering over the stage held up by pillars painted to look like marble, and the back wall of the stage was panelled and brightly coloured. Carved figures topped the columns. But all of this was later, in the 1590s, and it seems likely that the decoration of the Theatre was limited to some brightly painted wood and plaster. We cannot know, and the preachers hated on principle: not only the paint but also the way it tricked the eye.

This looks like success. The preachers and the tourists, the lovers and the haters, all agreed: by the summer of 1578 the playhouse was flooded with crowds, and bodies in the playhouse mean admission paid. But here in the mismatch between what everyone saw and what was happening lies the second foundational irony of the Theatre. Money was pouring in and as quickly pouring out, for in 1578 Burbage and Brayne found themselves as broke as when they had begun. Perhaps the costs of the construction were simply too staggering. Perhaps they were still paying the workmen and were tied into debts they could not square. After all this rising, a hole was opening beneath the Theatre, and it could not be filled.

We can tell the story of these first years of the Theatre as a catalogue of daydreams or a narrative of loans. Its builders dreamed and borrowed; the dreams gave life to loans, and the loans crippled the dreams, but neither quite quashed the other. It went on: for each story told, a new debt; for each step forwards, a little more digging. On 29 June 1577 Burbage and Brayne signed a loan agreement with a man named Thomas Blagrave. He worked for the Office of Revels, as acting Master. For 200 years, the Revels Office had been providing costumes and arranging payments for court performances. Later, this would be an extremely powerful office, with the authority to license and censor drama, but then it still had its medieval function. Burbage and Brayne borrowed £50 each from Blagrave. This need not have been in the form of cash, for the Revels Office had costumes to loan and, in anticipation of their playhouse opening, Burbage and Brayne

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needed costumes. The two men agreed to pay a forfeit of double the sum if they failed to repay the loan.

The following week, their playhouse opened, but not for long. Three weeks later it closed, for an uncertain period, but at least two months. Nonetheless, they could still hold onto their expectation that it would reopen at Michaelmas, as decreed. At the end of September, they entered into an arrangement with a haberdasher named John Hind. Little is known of Hind: he was a citizen of the City, a man who had prospered in a respectable trade, and like so many in London he suspected that there might be easy profits to be made by a little speculation on the side in the playhouse business. In a contract signed on 10 October 1577, Hind agreed to provide actors to Burbage and Brayne.

Burbage and Brayne were now what modern financial analysts would call exposed. By increasing their investment they had in turn multiplied their risk. They were too vulnerable to the chance of change. It seems odd that they could not find actors on their own. How difficult can it be to hire an actor, particularly for James Burbage, who had spent a decade as one? But this shortfall in turn suggests a wider pattern. Burbage and Brayne were not self-sufficient. They were dependent upon others: costumes from Blagrove, actors from Hind. As the autumn turned to winter, and the Theatre opened, and the preachers took notice, they were at their highest exposure.

In the winter a frozen period fell upon London. In December the Thames was ice. The records from this time are fragments. On 1 January Burbage and Brayne are recorded as running a company of players who perform at the Bell Inn, in the City. This was presumably a mixed company, drawn from Burbage's old actor friends with their numbers made up by the new recruits provided by Hind. It is striking that they were appearing at the Bell and not at the Theatre. Perhaps the reason was simple: the frost was inhospitable to outdoor playing. A horrible thought: the builders of an outdoor playhouse failed to take into account the seasons. In March 1578, playing



resumed at the Theatre. But with the melting of the spring and the ending of the freeze, so did litigation resume. In April, Hind sued Burbage and Brayne for breach of contract and for failing to pay his players for a performance in March. Burbage and Brayne counter-sued: they claimed that the players were not available when needed; this was either breathtaking cheek or disorganisation. Then in May, another debt came due. Thomas Blagrove brought an action for debt against Burbage and Brayne at the King's Bench and the court ruled that the two men must pay £100 each plus ten shillings for legal expenses. This represented perhaps a third of the total cost of the construction.

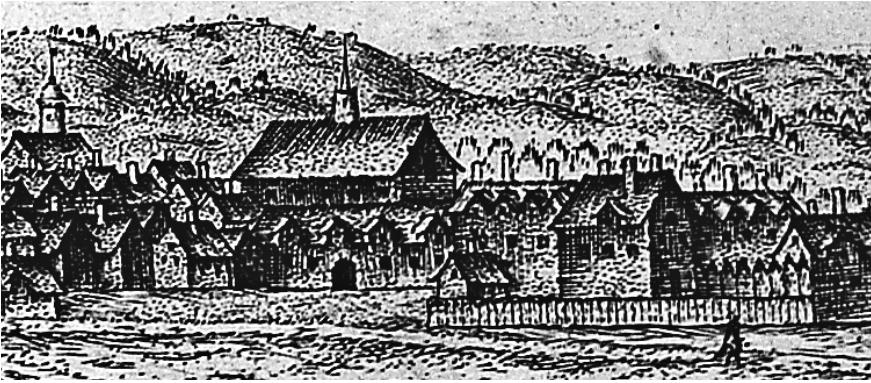
Now Burbage did what he so often did when the winds were against him. He fell back upon Brayne with yet another dream song. The two men returned to the notary, who prepared what is known as an arbitrament. This was a simple financial instrument which also represented a promised future. Burbage bound himself with a penalty of £400 due to Brayne. In return, he agreed that half the playhouse and its profits would go to Brayne. That would never happen, of course; we know that; Burbage knew that; Brayne must have known that too, somehow. But for a moment, the two men returned to their shared vision. Beneath the brawls was another, more welcoming music: the laughter of a crowd gathered in the afternoon sun to pay for the chance to laugh at a man in a mask, a fooling hobgoblin, a trickster sprite.

The preachers were right, of course. The shows and the games and the dreams were built upon a foundation of tricks and lies. For the audience this was part of the pleasure: a holiday from the rule-bound world of sincerity and consequence. But for others, Burbage's trickeries and slips had a real cost. By the end of July 1578, only a month after agreeing to the arbitrament and its new profit-sharing arrangement, Burbage had again refused or failed to include Brayne in an equal portion of the takings. In fury, Brayne summoned Burbage to

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return to the notary. Because the notary gave a lengthy deposition a decade later, we can catch this moment in unusual detail.

We have a setting: a summer's morning in a shop in the parish of St Olave in the Old Jewry, which sat half a mile, or perhaps seven minutes on foot, from Paul's Cross and the furious preachers. We have a cast of three: the notary, William Nicoll, thirty years old, and the slightly older Burbage and Brayne. And – the last element of drama – we have an interaction. I was once a rich man, Brayne is saying, but he sold his house and left his trade to invest all in Burbage's scheme. As in the sermon, it is a nightmare of dissolving, of a man losing all, his name, his trade, his place. Brayne's voice rises and it tightens as he recounts the sums he has put in and how he has seen nothing but ill dealings in return and because he will not stop talking Burbage has had enough. 'Burbage did there strike him with his fist and so they went together by the ears,' recalled the notary, and he steps in to part them but such is the heat of their brawl that he cannot. Burbage and Brayne grapple, arms around necks, and fall to the floor.



## The Servants of the Earl

The spring of 1580 came suddenly, after a long winter of rains, and in the middle of the warm afternoon of Sunday, 10 April, two actors at the Theatre scuffled with a couple of young gentlemen from the Inns of Court. It is tempting to describe them as law students but this is not quite right. The study of law was one nominal reason to attend the Inns of Court, but the institution was closer to a cross between a finishing school and members' club. Young gentlemen and the sons of gentlemen went to the Inns of Court to pick up a little polish and some schooling in the gestures of social class. The place of the actors was less certain. Robert Leveson and Lawrence Dutton are described in the ensuing reports as 'servants of the Earl of Oxford'. They were members of the playing company sponsored by the eccentric earl and therefore, technically at least, members of his household. This is a fiction, really; they did no household service and spent much of their lives on tour in the provinces, spreading the good name of their lord. Little else is known of Leveson; Dutton was brother to a more successful actor, John.

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This sunny springtime afternoon, the silky young legal gentlemen were out on a jolly, to see a play in a poorer suburb, and their voices rose from the yard up to the stage. There was mockery, high laughter. Leveson and Dutton stepped down from the stage into the yard, and the young men, divided by social class, met in blows.

The next morning, the Lord Mayor of London sent for the under-sheriff of Middlesex – the Theatre is in Middlesex – and for the Earl of Oxford's Men. The Lord Mayor, Sir Nicholas Woodroffe, was a member of the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers. He had made a fortune in trade and risen in the City and was ready to hate the players, but before they had time to arrive he received word that the previous day's fray was being investigated by the Privy Council. This changed the situation. Where the Lord Mayor was elected by the citizens of London, the Privy Council represented the queen. His authority did not, technically, extend beyond the City walls and out into Shoreditch, but every Lord Mayor sought to broaden his domain. This is why Woodroffe sent for the under-sheriff of Middlesex. These men were jostling for influence, but in an absolute monarchy there is only one end to every power play. Woodroffe wrote to the Lord Chancellor. He restated his contempt for the players – 'a very superfluous sort of men' – and insisted that plays at the Theatre could lead only to 'great corruption of youth with unchaste and wicked matters, occasion of much incontinence, practices of many frays, quarrels, and other disorders'. Then he stood down. 'I have surceased to proceed further,' scraped the Lord Mayor, 'and do humbly refer the whole to your wisdoms and grave considerations.' The Privy Council moved quickly. The following day, they sentenced Leveson and Dutton, 'servants unto the Earl', to the Marshalsea, 'for committing of disorders and frays upon the gentlemen of the Inns of Court'.

These letters are collected, along with the majority of the surviving documents relating to London's playhouses of this period, in the four volumes prepared by E.K. Chambers in the years following the First World War. 'Chambers', as this anthology is familiarly known, is a

great monument of scholarship. It is also, by accident, very funny. Appendices C ('Documents of Criticism') and D ('Documents of Control') in volume 4 are a 150-page closely printed pantomime of bygone irritation. A Lord Mayor called Sir John or Sir William writes to the Privy Council, complaining of recent trouble at a playhouse. Then nothing happens; or something does, but only for a while. The Lord Mayor huffs and the Privy Councillors reply. A lord with a familiar name writes to complain that his servants have been wronged while at a pulpit a preacher draws breath and the real players in this shadow drama are the institutions of England: the City, the Crown, the Church, the noble households. Sometimes there is plague and sometimes just disorder. One letter describes the playhouses as 'pestered' and this might mean busy or it might mean ill, for pestilence of some kind – moral, epidemiological, a mix of the two – is just beneath the surface. A tussle breaks out and perhaps the players are involved or perhaps the playhouse is simply the backdrop. Young men fight young men while others look down upon them, making everything worse.

In this shifting world everyone knew a handful of simple positions. The playhouses had to close when plague deaths rose. This was one point for the Lord Mayor. However, in another and more powerful point for the queen, the players had to be allowed to perform in public because this was how they rehearse for their engagements at court. This seems a slightly unconvincing excuse; even at the time everyone knew that it was a fiction. 'They pretend they must have exercise to enable them in their service before her majesty,' notes one tired reply from the City's Common Council, and yet 'It is to be noted that it is not convenient that they present before her majesty such plays as have been commonly played on open stages before all the basest assemblies in London.' But as a fiction, it is a revealing one, for it suggests something of how the hierarchy worked, and how knowing your place might in turn give a little freedom.

The Dutton brothers did not know their place. They were restless, improvisatory. There were rumours that Lawrence managed a brothel

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at the Bell, a house in Shoreditch. Later, John would run an inn on Bishopsgate called the Dolphin. ‘Fickle’ was the word that people used of them. This is not only because Lawrence had the temerity to brawl with a few rowdies from the Inns of Court – nobody could blame him for that – but because in the months immediately before the brawl he and his brother had jumped ship from one lord’s company to another. The Duttons had been part of the Earl of Warwick’s Men for several years, but in February or March 1580 they had attached themselves instead to the Earl of Oxford, the rich and powerful Edward de Vere. This was a canny move, perhaps a little too much so, for a set of mocking verses soon began to circulate, which cruelly lampooned the social aspirations of the Dutton brothers by imagining that their family might have a coat of arms. Against a fart-green background – known in heraldry as the ‘field’ – parade some distinctly un-heraldic beasts:

A whore that is rampant, astride with her legs  
A woodcock displayed, a calf and a sheep,  
A bitch that is splayed, a dormouse asleep.

The verse is a reminder of what happens when you try to reach above your station.

‘Mantled lousy, with doubled drink,’ it goes on: ‘Their ancient house is called the Clink.’ Instead of a fine old country seat the Dutton brothers were at home in the notorious prison in Southwark. It is a barbed joke: that a player might even dream of having a coat of arms. It reveals much of the snobbery of the age, but even as it does so, it also suggests the opposite. This old world of heraldry – of bloodline and name and loyalty – was beginning to look absurd.

The scuffle at the Theatre this fine spring afternoon was one more skirmish in a longer war over where to place the players. Theirs was not an institution of its own. Instead it was amphibious, loosely

attached, and in 1580 the players of England were at the end of several centuries of never being quite sure of where they belonged. In 1469 Edward IV licensed a Guild of Minstrels, made up of musicians who were free to wander the land. On makeshift stages in market towns, groups of local performers played holy stories: the mystery cycles, the Corpus Christi plays. In the late 1520s, the printer and lawyer John Rastell built a scaffold and stage for plays in the garden of his house near Finsbury Fields. There are records of churches renting out halls to small troupes of players, to pay for restorations, and in London, the livery companies sponsored dramatic entertainments. An interlude was played in Carpenters' Hall in 1541. On a Sunday the following year, twenty joiners performed in a company play.

English playing's long childhood was rich, varied and local. By the time James Burbage was born, in the early 1530s, it was under attack. When as a young man he moved to London he found a city newly hostile to playing. Following the vast theological and legal shift known as the Reformation, the old Church ways had been uprooted; and the old drama, which was associated with religious messages, looked suspicious. The City leaders – the Lord Mayor, the aldermen – tended towards a stricter Protestantism than that upheld elsewhere. In 1542, the Bishop of London Edmund Bonner passed an injunction forbidding plays in churches and chapels, and by the 1550s, the casual associations of common players began to disappear. The historian William Ingram notes: 'There are simply not many direct references to plays and playing in the City from the middle third of the [16th] century.' Playing, exiled from London, slowly returned in the following decades. In 1566 the Court of Aldermen permitted playing in the City so long as the players had a licence; in 1569, innkeepers were permitted to present plays between the hours of three and five in the afternoon, and only upon payment of a bond of £40. This was useful revenue for the City, but each minor step towards permitting the players was only one more gesture in the ongoing squabble



between differing authorities over who had the right to regulate them. According to Chambers: 'It is in 1572 that symptoms of a conflict of judgment between the City and the Privy Council first declare themselves.' That year, the Aldermen moved to ban plays from the City for fear of plague, and the Privy Council wrote to request that the playhouses should remain open.

This same year, the Crown moved to regulate another form of playing. By 1572, James Burbage had for several years been part of the company of players sponsored by the Earl of Leicester. Leicester was a flamboyant figure: a great patron of poets and painters; an investor in exploration and close to the queen. She described him as her brother while his biographer describes him as her surrogate husband. He knew how to show off. In 1559 he spent £450 on goldsmith's work, much of it jewels for himself, and his playing company travelled the country wearing his livery. The badge of the earl was a bear roped to a staff: ready to be baited, ready to entertain. In these years, Leicester's Men often led the Christmas revels at court. They were paid £10 for each show and these were splendid, in rich costumes, with dances and song.

But the Tudor state was hungry: for power, for control even over its lords and their rich households. The great project of authoritarian states, argues the political theorist James C. Scott, is to make its citizens 'legible'. This means that they may readily be identified as belonging to specific and discrete categories, so that they may be regulated and taxed with greater efficiency. The aristocratic households, with their travelling companies of players who might be professional entertainers or might be servants, are a classic example of illegibility. In January 1572 the Crown announced the renewal of an old act, long on the books but mostly forgotten, that restricted the members of an aristocratic household to those who really were household servants. That summer, a second old act was reissued: a late medieval law that set punishments for able-bodied beggars and vagrants. One earlier iteration of the law had instructed that such

vagrants be branded. When this act was brought back into force in the summer of 1572, a new phrase was added, which for the first time defined vagrants and beggars as also including ‘all Fencers, Bearwards [those who tended the bears set at stakes, for entertainment], Common Players in Interludes & Minstrels, not belonging to any Baron of this Realm or towards any other honourable Personage of greater Degree’.

What threads through this history of clashing institutions is the life of one man. James Burbage – of no obvious trade other than his membership of an aristocratic company of players – faced a particular crisis in the summer of 1572. He was, as we have seen, unusually attuned to the rhetoric of human relations: a poet of getting what he wants. When the times call for brawls, he is your man; but sometimes a sweeter song is useful, and here too he was a master. That summer, as the Elizabethan state was tightening its grasp upon the players, the Earl of Leicester’s Men sent a letter to their lord. It was signed by six men, and while we cannot know exactly who wrote it, it seems likely that it was Burbage himself, for his name appeared as the first signatory. It has his slickness. ‘May it please your honour to understand,’ the letter addressed the Earl: ‘there is a certain Proclamation out for the reviving of a Statute as touching retainers, as your Lordship knoweth better than we can inform you thereof.’ The Crown said that players must be servants, and Burbage played the good servant. He buttered up the Earl with a superfluous compliment and with a bow and a scrape went on:

We therefore, your humbler Servants and daily Orators your players, for avoiding all inconvenience that may grow by reason of the said Statute, are bold to trouble your Lordship with this our Suit, humbly desiring your honour that (as you have been always our good Lord and Master) you will now vouchsafe to retain us at this present as your household Servants and daily waiters.

The letter signed off with a merry little poem:

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Long may your lordship live in peace,  
A peer of noblest peers:  
In health, wealth and prosperity  
Redoubling Nestor's years.

The old world would change, soon enough. The letter and its comically deferential tone suggest the ragged end of an ancient way of arranging relations between men, and it would be washed away as in a great flood. It must have felt antique even in 1572, but Burbage's letter worked. In May 1574, a little less than two years later, the queen granted a royal patent – the first for a company of adult players – to Leicester's Men. The patent was addressed to the justices, mayors, sheriffs, bailiffs and constables of England. It instructed, that is, those who might like to close down the players. 'Know ye that we of our especial grace, certain knowledge, and mere motion have licensed and authorised' the Earl's servants, it began, naming the players as 'our loving subjects' and 'servants to our trusty and well beloved cousin'. Now these players were permitted 'to use, exercise, and occupy the art and faculty of playing comedies, tragedies, interludes, stage plays, and such other like' in the City, the liberties and throughout the realm. They were not wholly free. They were permitted to perform only plays which had been approved by the Master of Revels, and not during the time of common prayer or an outbreak of the plague. But the servants to the earl had royal licence, and with it their place was made a little more certain.

In the years following the royal patent London became a boom town for the playing companies. This was the context to Burbage's decision to build a permanent playhouse, as well as the Curtain which followed it. Its design, too, was informed by Burbage's years as a travelling player. As Laurie Johnson suggests, the distinctive round shape of the Theatre, with circling stacked galleries for the crowd, married 'the balconies of the inn-yards with the tiered galleries of the hall playhouses'. The design of the Theatre was not so much a nod to

ancient Rome as a lesson learned by a travelling player about what worked best in the two specific types of building in which he was accustomed to playing. But London was becoming the more inviting place, for the growing metropolis offered both crowds to watch and houses to play in. After 1576, Leicester's Men performed regularly in London, and often at the Theatre.

In the following years, the players settled, and the urban industry of commercial playing began to emerge. In the summer of 1579, the pompous scholar Gabriel Harvey wrote a long letter to his friend the poet Edmund Spenser. He complains that Spenser has published some of Harvey's verses without permission, and goes on to joke that he might as well become a writer for hire. 'I suppose thou wilt go nigh and shortly send my lord of Leicester's or my lord of Warwick's, Vaux's, or my lord Rich's players, or some other fresh start up comedians unto me for some new devised interlude, or some malt conceived comedy fit for the Theatre or some other painted stage,' mocks Harvey, 'wherat thou and thy lively copesmates in London may laugh their mouths and bellies full for pence or twopence.' 'Malt-conceived' is a resonant phrase. It suggests a play dreamt up by a drunken writer, and it was another slur about where the players belong. They may have been servants to the earl but the players were start-up comedians, or upstarts, dreaming above their status. Loving subjects or superfluous men; servants, waiters, orators: there are many things a player may be, and many names you may call him, and beneath the abuse and the changing regulations we might feel some subterranean pressure, some shifting of tectonic plates, as the institutions of Elizabethan England jostled against one another.

The earthquake hit London at a quarter to six in the evening of Wednesday, 6 April 1580. It would today be classified as strong, at perhaps 6.5 on the Richter scale, and its epicentre was beneath the Channel. From east to west the tremor passed through the City as a wave, causing church bells to ring and buildings to dance. At the

Middle Temple in the Inns of Court, the gentlemen students were just sitting for their supper. As the refectory shook they jumped to their feet. At Tower Hill, the cannons hopped. At the chapel of Christ's Hospital in Newgate Market the preacher was in the middle of his sermon when a stone fell from the roof, striking an apprentice shoemaker named Thomas Gray upon the head. It killed him instantly. Sitting next to him, a girl of the same household suffered injuries so severe that she died a few days later. At the Theatre in Shoreditch, actors were on stage and a play was underway. As the playhouse swayed the members of the audience in the upper gallery panicked and leapt down into the yard.

Wednesday fell in Easter week, four days before the playhouse brawl between the actors and the gentlemen of the Inns of Court. A doctor from Sussex named Thomas Twyne was visiting London. In a pamphlet written a few days later, he noted that the morning had been calm and cool – 'nipping' is the word he uses, the bite of late winter frost – and misty. As the morning went on the mist gave way to a long, narrow cloud. The ground was wet after the winter's rains and as the morning cleared Twyne went for a stroll with a couple of friends. They were in the green fields that ringed the City to the north when the earthquake hit. The sun stopped shining and the wind dropped as if the earth were breathing in.

The earthquake hit an unsettled city, and one that was ready to interpret wonders. For Twyne, a doctor and a good Christian, the ultimate origin of all things must be God, whom he calls the 'cause of all causes', but the earthquake might also have secondary causes, found within the natural, not the supernatural, world. Twyne names these God's 'under Deputies' and he goes on to sketch a rough idea of the causes of earthquakes which might feel clumsy but which is not wholly wrong. Twyne notes the unusual weather patterns which preceded Easter. The winter's rains, he suggests, gathered underground and were then heated by the quick warm spring, which in turn led to a great build-up of pressure. He describes an entirely

orthodox division, between the primary cause which is God and secondary, natural causes; but it was not universally accepted. Such thinking, insisted the poet Thomas Churchyard in his own pamphlet written immediately after the earthquake, leads us into confusion and a shaken world. 'Perhaps, some fine headed fellows will wrest by natural arguments God's doing and works to a worldly or earthly operation,' mocks Churchyard: 'so man thinks no longer on a wonder than a dream, and makes no more account of a marvel, than if a trifle had been told him.'

For Churchyard, this was a moment of learning. Here in what he jauntily terms 'God's mighty motion' the City turns into a token, a sign that points outside itself. Everything is metaphor. 'Churches, Palaces, Houses, and other buildings did so quiver and shake,' he writes, 'that such as were present in the same were tossed to and fro as they stood.' He names the court at Whitehall, where a Council meeting was in session, and Westminster Abbey, where the tower shook. He describes a London composed of the institutions of power and yet whose buildings may be set to dance at the whim of a greater power. One specific building is significant. Churchyard's account begins in prose but he adds a moralising poem, and here he turns his attention from Westminster and Whitehall out to Shoreditch:

The Theatre, for (some great regard)  
     that open world should note  
 Was shaken so sore, that sundry there,  
     a fearful frightening got.

In the spectacle of its shaking, the Theatre had much to teach.

On its title page, Churchyard's pamphlet is dated two days after the earthquake, so he must have written it as soon as the after-shocks passed. It survives in a single copy, held in a library in California, and it reads as though it were assembled in haste. Four short texts by Churchyard are followed by four short accounts, some

in prose, some in terrible verse. The second of these, 'A true Report of the Earth quake in London', is the most interesting. It records how a couple of men strolling in Moorfields decided to rest upon the side of a low hill, and then when the earthquake struck it tumbled them down the hill, and winded them so that they could not speak. The waters in the ditches frothed, 'the Beasts in the field roared wonderfully' and the merchants at the Royal Exchange wept with fear. This account, with the others of the second part of the pamphlet, is signed off with the name of a second author: Richard Tarlton. The details indicate that he was in north-east London that day: near enough to feel the ground shudder, to hear the roaring animals, to see the frothing waters. It does not – unlike most accounts of the quake – mention the playhouses, and this is stranger still given that its author certainly knew them. In a few years, Tarlton would be the most famous player in England. In the late 1570s he was a member of the Earl of Sussex's Men, and probably still played with them in 1580. Perhaps he was at the Theatre that Wednesday; perhaps he was on stage, for aristocratic companies such as Sussex's Men were performing there.

Tarlton insisted that the earthquake was a thing to be remembered. 'Through the whole City this sudden token was suddenly feared and I stand in doubt will as suddenly be forgotten,' he wrote. He was correct, for the quake was remembered in prayers and in jokes. Edmund Spenser wrote to a friend that the earth was like a drunk person, staggering and reeling, and sensibly so, for the cold winter had been bleak enough to drive anyone to drink. The queen's official printer issued a special set of prayers. Arthur Golding, celebrated for his translations of Ovid, rushed into print a slightly rambling meditation upon the topsy-turviness of the world, the unseasonable seasons, the signs in the clouds and the frost. All are, he insists, proofs of 'God's only determinate purpose, who maketh even the very foundations and pillars of the earth to shake, the mountains to melt like wax, and the seas to dry up and become as a field'.



These publications – which commented upon, rewrote and explained the wonder – were as a second set of aftershocks. The hack writer Abraham Fleming sped into print a new version of an old treatise about earthquakes by the Bishop of Vienna, the splendidly named Friedrich Nausea. Fleming added the familiar details about the apprentice shoemaker and the shaking towers and worked himself up into a closing rage which was aimed specifically at the players and their playhouses. The players were ‘selling wind for money’, he raged, in a colourful phrase, and ‘infecting the tender minds of youth with the poison of your profanations’. He demanded: ‘Doth not God see your filthiness, or think you that your trade of life depending wholly upon those poor Heathenish exercises, are not offensive to his Majesty?’ He thundered on – ‘Will he wink at such filthiness as is continually concluded upon and committed in your Theatre, Curtain, and accursed courts of spectacles?’ – and the pamphlet builds up to a second earthquake, this time imaginary, which is not limited to a little shaking of the timbers but will finish the task it has surely begun:

O how glorious a work should that be! How happy a day! How blessed an hour! Wherein the people of God might see all such abominable places dedicated to Gentilism, or rather Atheism (for who can directly say, that either God or the devil, heaven or hell, is once thought upon in the prosecuting of such shameful scenes?) utterly torn up from the foundations, rent in pieces the timber from the stone, wasted with fire, laid even with the ground, and no appearance thereof remaining.

Fleming was not the first, nor the last, to imagine tearing down the Theatre.

What was on stage when the earthquake hit and the players brawled? A largely sneering pamphlet of 1579 names, for the first time, two

plays that were at the Theatre: *The Blacksmith's Daughter* and *Catiline's Conspiracies*. Each sounds, in its own way, promising: some slapstick about the lively daughter of a hard-working man, perhaps, and the tale of a tyrannical rebel. But we only have the titles. The plays themselves are lost, and the pamphlet goes on to comment that 'These plays are good plays and sweet plays', each of which teaches 'the honourable bounty of a noble mind'. The answer is disappointing. On stage at the Theatre were instructive moral dramas.

One play that was performed here at around this time survives. *The Three Ladies of London* was by Robert Wilson, who as well a playwright was a player with Leicester's Men. The Theatre was closed for much of the summer of 1580, so Wilson's play was on stage at the end of 1580 or in early 1581. Wilson was later celebrated for his wit, but it is hard to see it. His characters are named Conscience, Simplicity, Dissimulation. There is an Italian merchant, Mercadorus, who speaks in a humorous accent. Lady Lucre and Usury are the villains. 'God grant that Conscience keep within the bounds of right,' says one character: 'And that vile Lucre do not haunt her heart with deadly spite.' Usury raises the rent on Conscience's house and stabs Hospitality to death. It ends with a trial and a moral.

That the plays on stage at the Theatre in 1579 and 1580 were didactic both is and is not surprising. A pamphlet of 1580 called the Theatre a schoolhouse of Satan, a chapel of ill counsel: a place where one might only learn all the wrong lessons, be schooled up in badness. So here in the early repertoire was one answer to the allegation. The preachers said that the trouble was trade, that God would visit fury upon the players who tried to sell the wind for money and infect the minds of the youth. *The Three Ladies of London* replies in the most flat-footed and defensive possible way. It is a play that says, we are on your side. It says, forgive us our trespasses.

In the middle of the play, a character named Sincerity enters. He laments that once he trained to be a priest but wishes that he had

studied something else for 'divines, that preach the word of God  
sincerely and truly, / Are in these days little or nothing set by.'  
Sincerity goes on in lines which are almost familiar:

But what is he that may not on the sabbath-day attend to hear  
God's word?

But we will rather run to bowls, sit at the alehouse, than one  
hour afford,

Telling a tale of Robin Hood, sitting at cards, playing at skittles,  
or some other vain thing,

That I fear God's vengeance on your head it will bring.

Some other vain thing: the sin that is obviously missing from Sincerity's list is playgoing. The cliché heard from many a pulpit was that the distractions from worldly service offered in London were games and gambling, taverns and playhouses. *The Three Ladies* proposes that a play may do moral work too.

On the page, the play is flat, nervous, small. But perhaps to read it is to miss what gave it power. Like ballet, stage acting is an art that is always vanishing, and this play even more than most needs an actor to bring it to life. At the Theatre in 1580 and 1581, the role of Simplicity, it seems likely, was taken by Richard Tarlton. Simplicity is a garrulous fool, and cousin to Sincerity. There is a running joke about him being hungry and another about him being illiterate. He sings a song with the chorus 'No bidding in London for Conscience and Love', becomes a beggar, is whipped. What Tarlton did with the material we can guess, for there are surprisingly many accounts of his acting style. He was a very early celebrity. He was a large man, famous for his broad shoulders. He had apprenticed as a water carrier, bringing heavy barrels of water to households in the city, and his comedy played against his strength. In one celebrated routine, he duelled with a small dog. He made audiences laugh as soon as he appeared on stage, before he said a word. In his hands – in his body,

in his movements – the role of Simplicity must have been a hoot, delirious, magic.

Tarlton was a little larger than the lines set down for him. His style cannot be captured by the play text. ‘Words weren’t his language; he spoke in action,’ wrote John Lahr of the great Hollywood clown Buster Keaton: ‘Prose was no match for the poetics of gesture.’ And this – what Lahr calls ‘the collision of improbable event with his opaque personality’ – was what drew the audiences in and made them laugh. Tarlton was a star of a moment that saw actors as the focus of dramatic performance. Not the words, the costumes, the meanings or the poetry: Tarlton emerged as a star because the industry needed him. ‘This busy industry, circulating through the countryside, seeing London as the magnet for expansion, aiming for court performances, serving the interests of its aristocratic patrons, and above all trying to turn a profit,’ note the historians Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, ‘was above all an actor’s theatre.’ Tarlton was probably not by modern standards a fine actor at all; we would see him as too much or too loud. He was most adored for his mastery of the jig, the wild foot-stomping dance that ended the play.

As well as an actor Tarlton was a skilled fencer and a pamphleteer. “‘Stage-playing” was not in this early period even a clearly defined activity,’ suggests William Ingram: ‘the normal repertory of a stage-player in the early sixteenth century might have included dancing, tumbling, clowning, juggling, fencing, mime, and minstrelsy along with (or sometimes instead of) the declamation of lines.’ We might call him an entertainer, but this is an old and slightly condescending word. Above all, he was fun, even if the plays he appeared in were not.

The world of traditional drama – moral, sermonising, caricatures and lessons – stands beneath Shakespeare’s plays. He departs from it but only because he also remembers it. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Nurse pauses as she tries to recall exactly how old Juliet is. ‘I remember it

well,' she says: 'Tis now since the earthquake eleven years.' She gives us the date when Juliet was weaned. 'I shall never forget it,' she adds, and laughs at the memory: "'Shake," quoth the dovehouse!' Shakespeare's biographers have sometimes tried from this detail to establish the date of the play, as written eleven years after April 1580. But that does not quite fit what else we know about his life, and it perhaps misses the point of the scene and its passing memory. The earthquake was a story told by older players to the young Shakespeare when he arrived in London. It was the old world for him.

Robert Wilson's play was also the old world for Shakespeare. In one subplot in *The Three Ladies* the crooked Italian merchant Mercadorus borrows a large and specific sum from a Jewish money-lender named Gerontus. 'You know I lent you two thousand ducats for three months space,' Gerontus heckles him, 'And ere the time came you got another thousand by flattery, and thy smooth face.' Gerontus pursues the merchant, only to be tricked by him. Later, Shakespeare would spin a whole play out of this racist banter. 'Three thousand ducats, well,' says Shylock, in his first line in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the young Italian who is taking the loan confirms: 'Ay, sir, for three months.' Shakespeare's play could not be more different from Wilson's. He turns the whole so that it hinges upon this character who is no longer a caricature. But it begins with Wilson and the memory of something staged at the Theatre.

In these moments of fracture – a brawl, an earthquake and an echo or a memory – we glimpse the new world emerging from the old. In January 1583 – and on another Sunday, the Sabbath – another natural disaster with human causes struck a playhouse. A collapsing scaffold at a bearbaiting arena on Bankside called the Paris Garden killed eight spectators, which prompted the accustomed cries against the players and their playhouses. The queen did not quite listen. Instead, in March, she formed her own company of players. Her flunkies summoned the dozen leading actors of the day to leave their old companies and to combine as the new Queen's Men. They were

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given a livery of red coats and the status of grooms of the chamber. Before, the actors had been loosely under the authority of the earls. Now they were directly under the protection of the queen.

Richard Tarlton joined the Queen's Men, as did the fickle John Dutton, from Oxford's Men. Of the five actors named in the 1574 patent for Leicester's Men, three in turn joined the Queen's Men, including Robert Wilson, the author of *The Three Ladies*. One former member of Leicester's Men who notably did not join the Queen's Men is James Burbage. Perhaps he was never a great actor, and anyway, his mind was on other things. The aristocratic companies and the royal company which grew out of them were designed for touring. For James Burbage, owner of a playhouse, the future lay not in the old models of service but in a newer place.



## The Landlords

One day in the early summer of 1582 a brash young man in his early twenties shows up at the Theatre. His name is Edmund Peckham and it is his belief that the playhouse and the land upon which it stands rightfully belong to him. He is accompanied today by a small posse of stout followers and he means trouble. Today is not the first time. On and off all spring, he has been turning up, quarrelling, making threats. Sometimes he arrives while a play is underway and it has become a nuisance enough that the playing companies are increasingly wary of performing at the Theatre. So James Burbage has taken to paying a few local men to stand guard, and they are waiting. In a deposition given nearly twenty years later, a middle-aged painter named Randolph May who does odd jobs at the playhouse recalled the day. In front of the playhouse, as the painter watched, Peckham's servants and Burbage's hired men came to blows with such heat and fire that he felt 'in danger of his own life'. May was a timorous figure, and Burbage less so, but all were unnerved by



the spectacle of grown men brawling, on behalf of others, over who owned the land beneath their feet.

Edmund Peckham was from a line of men who liked to take what the age had to offer. The Peckham family were long-time Londoners. The grandfather – also named Edmund – began low in the offices of financial administration under Henry VIII. Through hard work he rose fast. He was famously trustworthy. He became high treasurer of the mint, a privy councillor, and was knighted. The king smiled upon him. Sometimes a royal smile meant land. In the early decades of the sixteenth century the Church owned between a quarter and a third of all the land in England and Wales; but the king was hungry. He began in 1536 with the lesser monasteries, the priories and religious houses with annual income of less than £200. Two hundred of these were dissolved by the end of the year, and in 1539 he moved on to the greater monasteries. Gold, plate, buildings and most of all land were transferred to the Crown and quickly sold off or offered to men like the new knight Sir Edmund Peckham.

The dissolution of the monasteries and the subsequent redistribution of land are one strand among the great transformations of the age. The Tudor state sought to promote commerce and industry, and did so in part by undermining the old feudal order in which aristocratic families drew power from their ownership of land. 'In the turbulent days of the fifteenth century land had still a military and social significance apart from its economic value,' wrote the historian R.H. Tawney, for land meant tenants and retainers who might, if called upon, ride out as a private army. But in the following century the Tudors, 'by drawing the teeth of feudalism, had made the command of money more important than the command of men'. This age saw 'the transition from the medieval conception of land as the basis of political function and obligations to the modern view of it as income-yielding investment. Landholding tends, in short, to become commercialised.'

Sir Edmund acquired manors through royal grants. He bought a dissolved monastery in Buckinghamshire. His family had Catholic

sympathies, but not strictly so. When the great schism of the Reformation came, he played all sides. The monarchs changed – Edward, Mary, Elizabeth – but the waves of history washed gently over Sir Edmund.

He was the grandfather. He had a son named George, who was in turn a creature of the hungers of his moment. Young Sir George married well, to the daughter of a court favourite, Henry Webb. Webb was gentleman usher of Queen Katherine Parr's privy chamber and in 1539 he had been granted the lands around the old Holywell priory in Shoreditch. Webb soon died and the Holywell property passed to his daughter Susan. She died in childbirth, and the property came into the hands of the Peckhams. Sir George married again and had two sons and gave them the family names. Soon he fell in with the great adventurer Sir Humphrey Gilbert: a man lit up with the ambition of settling the barbarous Americas. Peckham planned an expedition with Gilbert to North America, where they hoped to claim 8.5 million acres of land. This was known as the Western planting movement and was a fashion among flash Elizabethan courtiers for a year or two. Bad weather ended the expedition and blew the voyagers home but did not quite quench the idea. In his *True Report of the Late Discoveries*, Peckham insisted that future adventurers would be richly rewarded for the savages who live in America would freely give 'such competent quantity of Land, as every way shall be correspondent to the Christians' expectation, & contentation, considering the great abundance they have of Land, and how small account they have thereof'. Peckham was dreaming of millions and ease, not a few muddy acres in Shoreditch, and along the way he sold the Holywell property to a family named Bumsted.

As it passed through various hands the parcel of land at Holywell was chipped away and by the 1560s it was a little over five acres, the size of not quite three football pitches. The walls of the old church stood roofless, and across the plot were twenty-two messuages – small houses each with a square of garden – and a further forty

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cottages, four barns, four dovecotes, orchards and a couple of old walled gardens. This sounds like a lot of buildings but they were mainly tiny tenements, of one or two rooms, and most were built into the old monastic refectory and dormitories. These were valuable rental properties in the London boomtime, offering cheap housing to the young craftsmen arriving in London. The Bumsteds in turn mortgaged the Holywell property to a man named Giles Allen. Allen controlled tenements across Shoreditch, and he regularly came into London from his home in Essex to collect his rents. Allen was a canny figure, made of grit and elbows, and in 1562 he foreclosed on the mortgage from the Bumsted family and claimed that the Holywell property was his. Soon he turned the old priory gardens – the Ladies' Garden, the Prioress's Garden – into tenements fronting the high street to the east side of the site. In 1576 Allen granted a ten-year lease on a small section of the west side of the site to James Burbage.

Allen was a professional landlord not an old feudal earl. But immediately to the south of his holding was a plot owned by the Rutland family. Where Allen was new money the Rutlands were old, grand landowners, and Holywell was a tiny portion of their estates. Their plot spanned Holywell Lane, which had long been used as a way into the old priory and was the quickest route from Bishopsgate. But Rutland's men took to chaining up the lane so that carriages could no longer pass. Land, and access to it, was the major political and economic question of the age.

This was the backdrop to Edmund Peckham's arrival at the Theatre with a small crew of heavies in the early summer of 1582. Edmund was born in perhaps 1558 or 1559, at the dawn of the new queen's reign. He had the family names but not the knighthood. Like his grandfather's estates, it had slipped away, and Edmund's ambitions were straitened. Perhaps he lacked the drive of his forefathers; perhaps he wished for an adventure of his own. Where his father George had planned to seize a country's worth of land in the new world, Edmund pursued a series of legal suits in the Court of Exchequer. He claimed that his

father's sale of the Holywell property to Bumsted was invalid, and therefore Giles Allen had no right to it. By Easter of 1582 Edmund abandoned the law and took a firmer approach. He started turning up at the Theatre; soon he brought his followers. He did not really want a playhouse. But there was a brutish, bullying logic to him. Like everyone else, when he looked at the Theatre he saw a moneymaking machine. By threatening Burbage and disrupting the players, he was cutting the flow of income and putting pressure on Allen. His was a fight by proxy, and he was like everyone else playing violent games of land and force.

This was a London that felt the rush of the new but only had the old words in which to understand it. All the signs pointed the same way and everyone knew one big thing: that it was good to be a landlord.

This was a growing London. Having contracted in the fourteenth century and remained stable in the fifteenth, the population exploded in the sixteenth century, and most sharply in the capital. During the second half of the century London's population shot from 75,000 to about 200,000, including the City and the suburbs that ringed it. The annual rate of population growth was close to 2 per cent, which is relatively small, but in contrast to the glacial change of the previous centuries, it felt like a crisis.

This was an immigrant London. As the historian Steve Rappaport explains, London had an unusually high mortality rate. 'The expectation of life at birth was 20 to 25 years in poor parishes,' he notes, 'roughly *one-half* the life expectancy elsewhere in England.' It was better to be born elsewhere; so many were. A growing city with a high mortality rate can only be explained one way. Rappaport, again: 'It is clear that the extraordinary growth of its population was due entirely to immigration.' At the end of the sixteenth century 4,000 immigrants were arriving in London each year. The vast majority came from elsewhere in England and these were, in the phrase of the time, called 'foreigners': those like the Burbages a generation earlier, coming to the city, where wages were better, particularly for skilled

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construction craftsmen. Those from other countries were called 'strangers', but they were fewer. In the early 1550s, apprentices travelled an average of 115 miles when they moved to London. They came from the Midlands and the North, from Wales. They were young and male: because of the flood of young apprentices coming in, there were more men than women in London. They were unmarried, for an apprentice was not permitted to marry, and the women were marrying at an average age of twenty-four.

This was an expensive London. Like the population, prices had remained stable during the later fifteenth century and then in the early years of the sixteenth century they began to rise. By the 1570s a basket of standard foods cost three times what it had at the start of the century, due to a rising population and frequently failing harvests. Wheat doubled in price between the 1570s and the 1630s. Meat, cream, poultry all cost starkly more each year. Wages rose less quickly, which meant that it felt, for any individual, like they were being paid less and spending more.

This was an unequal London. Cheap labour, a growing population, rising prices: bad for many but good for some. The economist John Maynard Keynes saw the last quarter of the sixteenth century as unique. 'Never in the annals of the modern world has there existed so prolonged and so rich an opportunity for the businessman, the speculator and the profiteer,' he wrote in his *Treatise on Money* (1934): 'In these golden years modern capitalism was born.' London was witnessing a classic bull market, with high liquidity, rising consumption and what Keynes calls a 'profit inflation'. Such an economic moment is, Keynes notes, 'almost certain to bring about a more unequal distribution of wealth', but he adds: 'The offsets to be considered on the other side are the spirit of buoyancy and enterprise and the good employment which are engendered.' All of this was excellent news for those in the building trades, and the food and drink trades, and the entertainment trade; and most of all for those who owned the land upon which new houses might be built.

This was a London of new building regulations. In 1580 the Crown prohibited the construction of any new building within three miles of the City walls ‘where no former house had been known to have been within living memory’. Construction was permitted only on half-developed sites such as the old Holywell priory. So half-developed sites were newly valuable; a falling down building was an asset. The City aldermen sent out orders to the companies of carpenters and bricklayers, banning their brothers from working on new builds, and instructing them to report any such ‘annoyances’. The building continued at such a rate that there were fears of a timber shortage.

This was a London of a thousand changes and they were being felt in Shoreditch. The thoroughfare of Bishopsgate ran a gentle north-east past the City walls and out towards the parish of St Leonard’s, where the Holywell site was. Along the way it passed through Norton Folgate, where a dozen new tenements – three-storey, timbered, tall and narrow – lined the road by 1576. Development accelerated in the closing years of the 1570s. In March 1582 the road was re-covered in new sand. There were small houses on each side of the road, with slightly larger houses behind, and then the fields behind these. This is known as ribbon development, as it flows in long thin lines next to the main roads, but as the 1580s went on development started to creep into the surrounding fields. There were garden plots and what were known as ‘tenter yards’, where weavers stretched their cloths out upon thin wooden frames. It was common to build in wood but the big green fields that sat behind Bishopsgate – Lolesworth Field, Spital fields – were filled with brickearth. This was stripped and fired and because bricks were cheap and easily available this spurred the development further and faster.

This was a London reflecting upon the whirl of change. In the middle of the turbulent liquid 1580s, John Stow began compiling his *Survey of London*. Stow was prompted by what he described as the transformation of the surface of his city into ‘a continual building’, as

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if the change had no logic or meaning beyond the change itself. Perhaps this is the characteristic experience of living in modern times, whenever they may be. Stow tells, as an archetypal story, of a row of tenements called the Crown Rents, which ran along the east side of Bishopsgate and immediately to the south of the site upon which the Theatre stood. These were once, he notes, 'proper small houses with Gardens for poor decayed people, there placed by the Prior of the said Hospital'. Here the tenants paid a penny a year in rent and on Christmas Day they dined with the prior. With the dissolution the old world of charity was washed away. Falling into disrepair, the almshouses were given the nickname 'Rotten Row', and were sold on, Stow recounts, 'to Russell a Draper, who new builded them, and let them out for rent enough, taking also large Fines of the Tenants, near as much as the houses cost him purchase, and building'. Russell was a slum landlord and he underpaid even his own workmen: 'For he made his bargains so hardly with all men, that both Carpenter, Bricklayer, and Plasterer, were by that Work undone.' Stow concludes with a joke about the grasping Russell and how he has ruined the neighbourhood: 'In honour of his name, it is now called Russell's Row.'

This was a London telling stories of good and bad landlords. At the Theatre the audience was laughing at Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London*. In the play Usury raises the rent on Conscience's house and stabs Hospitality to death. He is Rotten Russell; he is Giles Allen; he is the creature of a grasping age which converted land to cash and his only dream is accumulation. As the play makes clear, the landlord's hunger grows upon the swelling population. Simplicity, a good country miller, moves to the capital to find preferment; Fraud comes to the City too, but in search of entertainment. The names are old but the story is current. More people means higher demand for housing which means higher rent which means that some are blessed. The merchant Mercadorus convinces the landlady Lucre that her tenements are a golden opportunity. Rent them out to these new



Londoners, he advises, and best of all are the most desperate. He calls them 'strangers', which is the old term for foreigners, those from other countries, for they will be, Mercadorus insists, 'content / To dwell in little room, and pay much rent'. Lucre smiles. 'Truly I may thank the strangers for this,' she says: 'that have made houses so dear, whereby I live in bliss.'

But Burbage and Brayne were not landlords. They were tenants on the Holywell property, and in 1581 and 1582 they were scarcely even that. For at the end of September 1581, a huge debt fell due. An acquaintance of Brayne's – another grocer, named John Hyde – had, a couple of years earlier, lent the two men a substantial sum: £125 and a few shillings. The loan was set up as a mortgage. As collateral, Burbage and Brayne had offered the lease on the Holywell property, and the deal was further backed by a bond for £200. When its term ended, in the autumn of 1581, Burbage and Brayne found themselves unable to pay. Hyde was, it seems, a good and fair man; or perhaps he saw that his only chance at retrieving his money was to keep the playhouse open. 'It was agreed on both sides,' he explained in a deposition a decade later, 'that if the said Burbage and Brayne, or either of them, did pay this deponent £5 a week till all the foresaid mortgage money were paid with some reasonable consideration for the forbearing of it, that then they should have their lease again.' It is a tight repayment schedule. At £5 a week it would take them six months. Burbage and Brayne managed for four or five weeks, but then the payments stopped, so by early December 1581, the lease was forfeit to Hyde. It remained in his possession for close to eight years, until it was returned to the Burbages in June 1589.

Perhaps Peckham had heard of their trouble, which was why he chose the spring of 1582 to put the squeeze upon Burbage and Brayne. His thuggery worked, to a degree, for in the early summer of 1582 Burbage and Brayne stopped paying rent to their landlord, Giles Allen. The rent payments were due on quarterly feast days of

the Christian year: the Annunciation, the birth of St John, the birth of St Michael and Christmas. The second of these falls on 24 June, but in 1582 Burbage and Brayne did not make the payment.

That spring, James's older son Cuthbert was seventeen years old. He was beginning to take an interest in the financial affairs of his father's business. In a deposition given years later he recalled the challenging spring and early summer when Peckham's men disrupted the players, and added in a careful conditional that it may have had an effect upon the regular payment of rent: 'for which Causes if any part of the rent were unpaid it may be this Complainant's said father detained some part of the rent in his own hands and did not pay the same at the days limited'. Cautious, guarded Cuthbert: he was a man comfortable with the small print, a man at ease with the conditions of a lease, and he gave nothing away for free. Allen later testified that he turned up at the playhouse to demand his rent, but was unable to 'that way help himself for either the Doors and gates were kept shut that he could not enter'.

The playhouse closed and the creditors circling: it looks like a crisis. The spring and summer of 1582 were a scrappy season for Burbage and Brayne, but now – when even the ground beneath his feet was no longer his own – James Burbage decided to embark upon an extensive project of rebuilding. After finishing work on the playhouse in 1577, the carpenters had simply stopped. Across the wider site were half-ruined buildings. Immediately to the east of Burbage's small subsection was the carcass of the old priory. The lead had been stripped from the roofs of the chapel and refectories but many of the walls had been left, and had for forty years been slowly falling down. There were a few two-storey buildings: black and white half-timbered cottages, some with chimneys, some lacking roofs. The largest building was the Great Barn, which stood immediately to the south of the playhouse. It had once been an impressive structure, as its name suggests: eighty feet long by twenty-four feet wide, made of timber and tiled. But it was by 1582, as one carpenter later recalled,

‘past ready to fall down’, and Burbage began here. ‘James Burbage did then cause the same Barn to be shored up, grouncelled, Cross beamed, dogged together,’ explained the carpenter, in a lovely flourish of craftsman’s poetry. The groundsills are part of the foundations, so the old barn must have been brought down and then reconstituted from the ground up. Once it had been newly raised, the barn was shored by a couple of stout timbers to the playhouse next to it. The old barn had contained workshops, an abattoir, a store for a tavern and lodging for at least one tenant. Burbage put eleven new tenements into the barn, and for each of these charged twenty shillings a year rent.

In some ways Burbage was looking backwards, and finishing the work that had not been done earlier. On the site there were piles of building materials left over from the construction of the playhouse: timber, lead, brick, tile, lime and sand, to the value of 100 marks. The valuable materials had long since been stripped from the old priory, but the less valuable stone had been left behind, which was useful for filling foundations. Just as he was working with old materials, Burbage called back the old team of builders. Brain Ellam – who had helped to build the Theatre in 1577 – returned, bringing with him his stepson Richard Hudson. Hudson was twenty-two, but not a formal apprentice, so he assisted his stepfather with a little carpentry and some bricklaying. Burbage’s workmen tended to be locals, and their testimonies all emphasise that they knew him well. One labourer, William Furniss, was a tenant on the site as well as worker on it. These men were close, bound like a family, and doing easy summer work: a team who know one another well, with tools in the sunshine, finishing that which had been left unfinished five years before.

But in other, more significant ways the work of the summer of 1582 looked forwards: to possibility and the future, to a reinvention that would become the true foundation of all that followed. It might seem counter-intuitive that at such an uncertain moment, when the lease was not in Burbage’s possession and seemed unlikely to return, that he should embark upon such extensive redevelopment. He had

a simple motive. The original lease, offered by Allen, stipulated that Burbage should have the tenancy for twenty-one years, with the possibility of extension after the first ten years on the condition that Burbage had done improvements to the site, worth £200. In the spring of 1582, Burbage was planning to ask Allen for an extension, so he had to do the improvements. And he wished to extend the lease because there was at last money coming in. Hyde's arrangements suggest that it was reasonable to expect a profit of £5 a week. Now the playing companies were settling in London there was a steady supply of performers, as well as a growing audience.

The spring and summer of 1582 were a paradoxical moment. The repayment schedule offered by Hyde asked for repayment of £5 a week. They agreed upon this: the figure struck informed contemporaries as reasonable, for nobody would agree to an impossible repayment demand. Assuming forty weeks of playing each year – for there was no playing in Lent, and frequent closures for plague and other interruptions – this gives a total of £200. The historian Herbert Berry notes that across the many testimonies collected about the Theatre this number or something close to it recurs: the estimate that the Theatre generated an income of £200 per year. Added to the £11 annual rent that Burbage would shortly receive for the new tenements in the barn, this is substantial; the income from the new tenements alone was close to the £14 annual rent Burbage owed Allen. Burbage and Brayne were also able to raise capital for the developments. A couple of years later, a team of builders did two inspections on the site and found that the repairs had cost £240. And yet Burbage and Brayne were apparently unable or reluctant to pay their rent. Worse, they elected not to repay the loan to Hyde until 1589, even though each of these decisions put at risk their possession of the site.

Their liabilities outnumbered their assets. Burbage and Brayne did not hold the mortgage on the site. They technically owned the playhouse itself, but not the land upon which it stood, nor did they

hold the lease upon it. And yet: the business was valued by highly interested parties at perhaps £200 a year, which is – taking into account all investments into the construction and running of the Theatre – a return on capital of 29 per cent. Here is the oddity: everyone wanted to invest in a business that had no obvious value. Subtract current liabilities from current assets and what remains is working capital. At the very least, Burbage and Brayne owed £200 and at least one rent payment of £3.5 to Allen. They were in a position of negative working capital and yet they were investing substantially more.

Every instinct must tell us this is bad. Common sense insists that it is better to hold more assets than liabilities: this is positive working capital. However: a business that has prepaid all its bills and owes money to nobody might have assets on paper, but only because it has sent all its cash to its suppliers and customers. The converse is equally true. A business that owes people more than they owe it may have negative working capital but is sitting on the cash that is coming in and which has not yet been paid to its suppliers. It can therefore create a chain and use the cash for other things. This is the witchcraft of negative working capital, and most simply, it is a way of thinking about time. By extending the repayment period – which is exactly what Burbage and Brayne were doing with the Hyde mortgage – they were turning a liability into a source of cash, and any increase in cash flow increases the value of a business. Such an exercise depends upon two factors: that the business is growing, with income coming in; and a willing creditor. Perhaps it was a simple gamble: that Hyde would not foreclose on the mortgage and shut down the Theatre. Burbage has learned – perhaps he has intuited it – that it is better to have an asset than to work for a wage. It is better to hold capital than to pay your debts. It feels like a startlingly modern lesson, but it is also brutal common sense, and the proof of it is the cash in your hands. This is one of the curious moments when James Burbage steps out of his age and into something closer to ours.

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Tenant into landlord; debt into cashflow: the summer was full of quiet transformations. No copy of the original lease survives, but a copy of the new lease offered by Burbage to Allen does, and it included an odd clause, newly added. 'It shall or may be lawful for the said Giles & for his wife & family upon lawful request therefore made to the said James Burbage his executors or assigns,' ran the new clause: 'to enter or come into the premises & there in some one of the upper rooms to have such convenient place to sit or stand to see such plays as shall be there played freely without any thing therefore paying.' This seems generous, inviting Allen and his family to come and see a play for free. But it was a coded, precise gesture. Allen hated players and playing. The land was his, so the suggestion that he might be granted permission skirts close to a tease. The clause converts a landlord into a spectator. The gesture speaks: it says, in the voice of James Burbage, that this is mine, that what happens here – who comes, who goes – is my business.

The Burbage family was growing. The two boys, Cuthbert and Richard, were seventeen and fourteen, and there were three girls – Joan was perhaps eleven, Ellen was eight and Alice was six. Theirs was a well-planned family, with the children born two or three years apart, and they had been living for the past six or seven years in a rented house close by in the parish. In 1582, as part of the wider development of the site, James Burbage built them a home on the other side of the Holywell plot, and perhaps 200 yards from the Theatre. It was not grand. It likely followed a common plan, with a kitchen and hall on the ground floor, built around a central chimney stack, and bedchambers on the first floor. Above these were smaller, low-ceilinged rooms beneath the roof. Perhaps some old tiles from the priory were used as the floor in the kitchen, and the main material of the house was brick, with some timber from the first floor. It stood in the old cloister of the priory, and despite its recycled materials and ancient setting it was new. The same workmen who were shoring up the barn and renovating the tenements across the

Holywell site built the house for Burbage, and their testimonies touch briefly upon it. 'Almost all new from the ground,' specifies the deposition of Thomas Osbourne; a second testimony confirms that it was new and had a second new house next to it.

In the summer of 1582, as the Burbages were building a home, a small tragedy struck. The parish ledger at St Leonard's church records the burial, on 18 August, of their daughter Joan. That she died in late summer suggests that the cause might have been plague. The family had survived the previous year's outbreak. Joan had passed the riskiest time of early childhood; the summer of 1582 was not a particularly severe plague season. They might have felt that they were safe, but it was not so. It is sometimes said that people of the sixteenth century did not much care for their children, and that our sentimental attachment to childhood is a later historical construction. But the poetry of this period expresses a deep clear grief for lost children, and the Burbages were nothing if not tightly bound. Theirs was not a family that let things go. The story of this summer is the story of making a home in Shoreditch, and a daughter buried in the local churchyard is one small strand of it. 'For as much as it hath pleased almighty God of his great mercy to take unto him self the Soul of our dear sister, here departed,' says the priest, as Joan's body is lain in the Shoreditch earth, 'we therefore commit her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' The Burbage family went on burying their sons and daughters here for decades to come, and they went on acquiring local property long after the Theatre was gone. Cuthbert lived in their house until 1610, while Richard lived nearby. Half a century on, in the summer of 1636, Cuthbert and his wife Elizabeth were buried in the local churchyard. By then, the Burbages were rich and famous. They had risen to be landowners, landlords of their own, but they never left Shoreditch.

At Holywell, the Burbages had a curious, amphibious status. They were both tenants and landlords; they were twenty-year Londoners,



not from here and yet far more local than the new arrivals washing in. At the site of the old Holywell priory, John Stow noted that ‘many houses have been builded for the lodging of noble men, of strangers born and others’. So who were their neighbours in this shifting new suburb? It is thanks to Edmund Peckham that we can answer. For Peckham’s lawsuits of the 1580s failed, as did his attempts to retrieve the property by force, but in a slightly mysterious turn, the Holywell property returned from Allen to the Peckham family in the early years of the new century. In 1612, Peckham’s son George sold the Holywell property to an Essex knight, and the sale contract included an indenture which listed all the inhabitants of the property. They were the neighbours to the Theatre. We might picture at least a few of them as witnesses to one or several of our brawls.

The 1612 indenture survives in a rustling cylinder of papers known as a Close Roll in the National Archives in London. It names thirty tenants who were either renting property on the site or had until recently done so. There are five women – three widows and two wives – and the remaining twenty-five men are named as the heads of their households. Because a man’s work was considered part of his identity their trades were often listed. There is a skinner and a doctor of physic and the remaining men tend to have some tie – it is tempted to say woven, to say knitted – to the cloth trade. We have Thomas Smith, silkweaver; Robert Sissen, of the company of Merchant Taylors, and his wife Joyce; five further silkweavers are named. Anthony Chock, tenant of a new house recently built by George Peckham, had two sons: one later appears in the records of the Goldsmiths’ Company, and the other in the Clothworkers’. John Golborne – ‘Citizen and Merchant Taylor of London’ – is named in his company’s records in July 1593 when he bound an apprentice, the young John Fox. And Fox then appears on the 1612 indenture as renting a property of his own on the Holywell site. Of the twenty-five men named as living on the Holywell site in 1612, a dozen were in the cloth trade, and a further ten were of unknown trade. Old Holywell priory was, then, a

new neighbourhood of clothworkers for exactly the years of the Theatre.

London's economy was built upon wool. Historians estimate that a third of the male labour force was engaged in activities connected to the wool trade. They worked mainly in finishing the cloth, and as the century went on more and more were in the business of exporting. The cloth tended not to be woven in London, but was brought there for finishing and then to be exported, most often through Antwerp. By the end of the sixteenth century, 90 per cent of England's cloth passed through London. Specific professions tended to cluster in neighbourhoods. There were apothecaries on Bishopsgate and grocers on Bucklersbury, and in Shoreditch there were weavers. One of the tenants on the Holywell site in 1576, when James Burbage first leased it from Giles Allen, was a weaver named Edwin (or Ewen) Colefax. He died in 1592 and was buried at St Leonard's. Before him, there are records of a clothworker and citizen named Sir John Davis, who owned two tenements on the corner of Holywell Lane, immediately to the south-east of the priory; he died in 1566. The artillery ground a little further to the south, by Bishopsgate, where the gunners from the Tower of London practised on Thursdays, was still known as the teasel ground, after the teasels grown for use in clothworking here in the 1520s. The old names of Shoreditch preserve a longer history of clothworkers in the area. There was, for example, Stocking Frame Alley on the west side of Bishopsgate.

By the 1560s and 1570s, the industry was changing. English cloth was broadcloth – heavy, unfinished woollen cloth – and was starting to look old-fashioned. The history of commerce is a history of hungers and there was a new taste for lighter fabrics with lovely names: bays, says, mockadoes. People wanted damasks, bright silks, the figurato blend of silk and white spun yarn. The indenture specifies that six of the tenants were 'silkweavers', which is a coded word: it points to luxury, to shiny things, soft to the touch, things from abroad. In the late 1570s, according to the official history of *The London Weavers' Company*

(1933), ‘Those engaged in the older arts of wool and linen weaving were jealous of the ascendancy of the silk weavers.’ This is nicely euphemistic for the jealousy had a racist inflection. The new fabrics required specific skills in their manufacture, and those skills were famously practised in northern France and Flanders: in Amiens, and Arras, and among the French-speaking Calvinist Dutchmen known as the Walloons. Beginning in the 1560s, northern European Protestants were arriving in England. In 1567, the Spanish invaded what is now the Netherlands, and in the years immediately following, their Catholic army marauded its way across modern-day Holland, Belgium and northern France. In 1572, Protestants across France were terrified by the St Bartholomew’s Day massacre. And then in November 1576 Spanish troops sacked Antwerp: a thousand homes destroyed, eight thousand dead. Each calamity sparked further immigration: first the Walloons, then the French and then more Dutchmen. Collectively, this became known as the first refuge, and these European immigrants brought with them the word ‘refugee’, which entered the English language from French at around this time.

In 1568, the City of London ordered a census of strangers. The count – known as a ‘return’ – found 6,704 strangers in the City and the liberties surrounding it. Twenty-five years later, another return found the number to have remained more or less the same. These numbers are low, as numbers on any census often are, so we might guess at a true figure of closer to 10,000. Later, in what is known as ‘the second refuge’ of the 1680s, the new arrivals tended to be the French Protestants known as Huguenots, but three-quarters of the immigrants in the first refuge were from the Netherlands. Their trades, writes the Huguenot historian Irene Scouloudi, ‘comprised new or unusual activities for England such as varied kinds of cloth making, especially those concerned with silk, tapestry, and lace’. A third of them worked in the cloth trade, and all tended to work in the luxury end of whichever was their trade. Luxury goods were less regulated by the guilds.

The strangers knew how to bake sugar and cut diamonds and most of all they knew how to weave silk. They were not the first foreign workmen in England. Flemish weavers had been invited in by Edward III, 250 years before, and from the end of the fifteenth century these were permitted to run their own workshops in the City. But their numbers had been tiny, and the huge rise in immigration from the 1560s led to new restrictions upon these strange workers. They were taxed at double the rate of an Englishman. In 1574, an Act of Common Council forbade English citizens to take as an apprentice anyone whose father was not an Englishman. In 1585, the Weavers' Company passed a new injunction restricting admission to the company to those who had done an apprenticeship, and it applied also to the strangers. Without completing an apprenticeship, they could not become citizens, and along with their work their place was regulated. A new policy settled the strangers in specific cities and restricted their trade to specific materials. At Canterbury, the strangers were permitted to make bays and stammels but not kersies of the English style; at Colchester they worked on bays and stays. There were perhaps 4,000 Walloons in Norwich by the early 1570s, making



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a third of the population. In London, they settled in the eastern wards, just inside and outside the walls. These areas were close to the dilapidated chapel in the old priory of Austin Friars, just to the west of Bishopsgate, where Dutch worship was permitted.

Among the tide of immigrants arriving in London, the number of strangers – those from other countries – was relatively small. The strangers comprised perhaps 4 per cent of the population of the City and its suburbs, and their number remained constant through the period. But difference is remarkable, even more so in times of change, and these Walloon weavers were visible in the national trade. The industry was in a separate but connected crisis. The same wars that drove the strangers out of northern France and the Netherlands threatened the major trading point. Antwerp was, in the 1570s, the key entrepot for English wool; but following the sacking of the city, Antwerp was closed to English merchants. The stranger weavers were arriving, too, into a London in which a growing workforce meant a declining demand for labour. For all these reasons, theirs was felt as an outsize presence. In 1571 a group of Londoners presented to the queen a complaint ‘against the great number of strangers in and about this city’. It sings a sadly familiar song. ‘They are a commonwealth within themselves,’ the Londoners lamented: ‘They keep themselves severed from us in church, in government, in language and marriage.’

The complaints went on: that the strangers kept private shops, and traded only among themselves; that even as they made money they did not spend it here. In 1574 the Common Council issued its own objection against these strangers who have ‘of late time in great numbers come from parts beyond the seas and inhabited within this realm and also in and near this city of London’. They were not to be trusted, for they acted as ‘common colourers of strangers’ goods’, which meant they were suspected of selling wares on behalf of aliens barred from the retail trades. In 1593, the poet and buccaneer Sir Walter Raleigh told the House of Commons that ‘the nature of the Dutchman is to fly to no man but for his profit, and they will obey

no man long', and in each of these the same accusations recur. The strangers speak in two tongues, doing one thing while saying another. Having two nations, they can have none.

Welcomed in and yet restricted; needed and yet feared: Dutch-born weavers were notorious in the immigration debates of this moment. At Holywell in Shoreditch we have their names. Abraham de Plew is listed on the indenture as tenant of a house with a garden. Since 1550 Dutch Protestant refugees had been permitted to worship in the nave of a dilapidated chapel which had once been part of the old Augustinian priory of Austin Friars, just to the west of Bishopsgate, and some of the records of this Dutch church survive. In April 1579 one Martin Plugh was baptised here; there are also families named Plovier, and Pluijmers, including several Abrahams. This suggests that de Plew might be a transcription of a Dutch name; and it suggests, too, that some of the tenants at Holywell kept themselves apart. For the Dutch church held to a stricter Protestant worship than that offered at the parish church of St Leonard's; that might have been closer to de Plew's taste. Another tenant on the Holywell site was the silkweaver Samuel de Tewe, and this name De Tew, or Theus, or Theeuws, appears in the records of both the Dutch church at Austin Friars and St Leonard's. Perhaps the De Tewes were another Dutch family, of a similar name, but this suggests that as the century wore on and as the strangers settled and began to raise their families so they began to worship in the local church. A girl named Sara De Tewe was buried at St Leonard's in August 1612; a boy named Thomas De Tewe married a girl with the almost comically English name Rebecca Sussex in April 1610. As the years passed, the strangers married and buried their dead in the local church.

We can see a European weaver of the period in a woodcut by the Swiss printmaker Jost Amman, whose *Ständebuch* (1568) or book of professions pictures men – and a few women – at their trades. There is a tailor, a brewer, a shoemaker and a weaver: a man sitting at a loom, operating the foot-pedal, while a woman brings him a bundle

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of what looks like fine yarn. It is an image of work but it is also a domestic scene: of co-workers who are man and wife.

The strangers of the 1560s were mainly Dutch, but following the St Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572, more and more Protestant immigrants arrived from France. Soon the Dutch church at Austin Friars could not hold the growing congregation, and the immigrant Protestant community in London split. The Dutch remained at Austin Friars while the French worshipped at St Anthony's on Threadneedle Street, just to the south. At Holywell the French lived alongside the Dutch. A silkweaver, Lawrence Sempier, was tenant of a house with garden at Holywell, and the name is all over the records of St Leonard's. Between 1578 and 1593, seven of his children were baptised at the local church, and he was buried there in 1622. In the indenture, the Sempier household is listed next to another clothworking family named the Fandrells, which might indicate that they were neighbours. At St Leonard's in June 1631, Ellis Semper – the grandson of Lawrence – married Lucy Fandrill, or Fandrell, the girl next door.

They fled from wars in northern France and the Low Countries to settle in Shoreditch and carry on their work. At Holywell, they lived next to other new Londoners, those from across England and Wales. The anti-immigrant voices said that these strangers kept themselves apart, but the records of one patch of property in a new suburb tell a different story. Here at Holywell the strangers married their neighbours and baptised and buried their children in the local church. In their study of early modern immigrants in England, the historians Nigel Goose and Lien Luu estimate that by the start of the seventeenth century 40 per cent of the Dutch and French population of London had been born there. One child suggests a wider story. Cuthbert Sempers was baptised at St Leonard's in February 1615. He did not live long, for he was buried in the same churchyard in September 1625, and he was grandson to Lawrence Sempier.

The name Cuthbert is not wholly unusual. Children named Cuthbert were buried and baptised at St Leonard's in 1589, 1601



and 1635. But only one other lived on the Holywell site. The indenture records that Cuthbert Burbage was living here, in a house next door to another Frenchman, one Joseph Bardolf, until a few years before 1612. For thirty-five years the Burbages were close neighbours to the Sempers. It was common for a child at baptism to take the name of a godparent. It is a leap, but a slight one, to suggest that the newborn Cuthbert – the son and grandson of silk-weaving strangers – was godson to Cuthbert Burbage. The Burbages were landlords and tenants, foreigners and local, and in Shoreditch they came to settle among the strangers.

The stranger is a cartoon danger. He has a funny name, and works in cloth, and speaks a foreign language. Buried inside *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a small reminder. The buffoonish Bottom is, we are told during the rehearsal, a weaver. He speaks good English but later when he is transformed by a fairy's prank he greets the fairies in lordly French. 'Monsieur Cobweb, good monsieur,' he flirts: 'Where's Monsieur Mustardseed?' It is a Shoreditch joke: a friendly Walloon weaver, who might be your neighbour, transported into the land of the fairies.

The opposite of a landlord is an immigrant. The opposite of a landowner is a poacher, one who steals animals from land which belongs to another. In 1580 Shakespeare was sixteen years old, and still living in Stratford, where a small cluster of legends holds that he fell in with what an early biographer called 'ill company'. Inspired by them, he poached a deer or two from a local landowner and justice of the peace named Sir Thomas Lucy. Shakespeare was caught and punished, and in revenge wrote a mocking ballad. Perhaps so; it is colourful gossip. But later accounts do suggest that Shakespeare was, if not a thief, opportunistic. This quality served him well in an age that offered opportunities to those who knew where to look. It was an age that rewarded a Burbage. The opportunistic Shakespeare, who made free with other men's property and who would rise to be a landowner of his own, is the central character of all that follows.



1 & 2. The City of London and its surroundings, from an atlas of the cities of the known world which was first published in 1572. Westminster is to the left and the Tower of London is to the right. The text notes that London is 'famed amongst many people for its commerce'. At the top, just to the north-east of the walled City, is the suburb of Shoreditch.



3. Richard Burbage (1568–1619) was the first actor to play Romeo, Hamlet, Othello and King Lear.



4. Will Kemp (d. 1610?) was a jester, dancer and celebrity. It is likely that Shakespeare created the role of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for him.



5. Robert Greene (1558–92) was England's first celebrity author. Although his works were bestsellers, he was always broke.



6. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is the most celebrated writer in the world. But until the late 1590s, he would have been the least famous person on this page.







8. The remains of the Theatre were discovered by archaeologists in 2008. This was London's first purpose-built commercial playhouse and was constructed in a suburb of the City known for new property developments and workers in the cloth trade. The site is now occupied, fittingly enough, by an estate agent and a fashion designer's workshop.

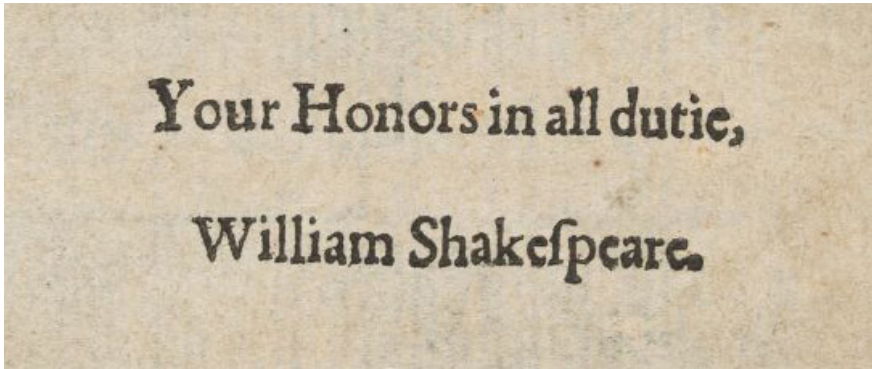


9. St Leonard's was the parish church and soon became associated with actors and those in the entertainment industry. The medieval church, pictured here, collapsed and was rebuilt in the early eighteenth century. Its bells are remembered in a nursery rhyme: 'When I grow rich, Say the bells of Shoreditch'.





10. In the yard outside St Paul's Cathedral stood an open-air pulpit known as 'Paul's Cross'. Huge crowds of Londoners would gather to hear official announcements of doctrine, furious denunciations of London's sins and attacks upon the new playhouses. 'The cause of plagues is sin,' preached Thomas White in 1577. 'The cause of plagues are plays.'



11. The dedication to the poem 'Venus and Adonis' (1593) offered by Shakespeare to Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, is the first appearance of Shakespeare's name in print.

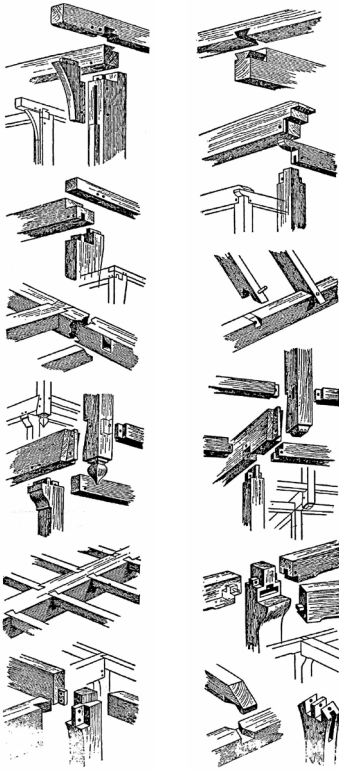


12. Robert Dudley, first Earl of Leicester, was perhaps the most brilliant courtier of the Elizabethan age. He loved jewels, art and learning.

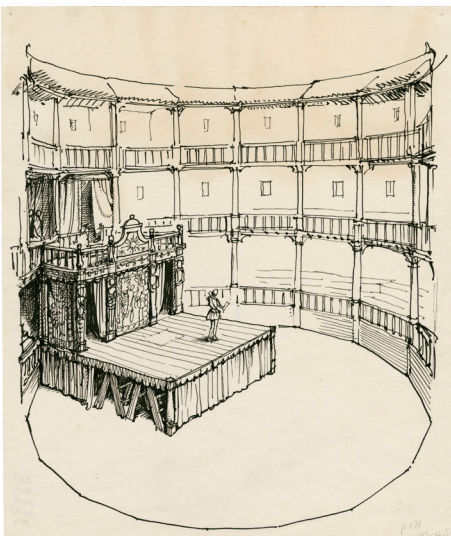


13. Henry Carey, first Baron Hunsdon, was a privy councillor, cousin to Queen Elizabeth, and patron to Shakespeare's playing company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men.





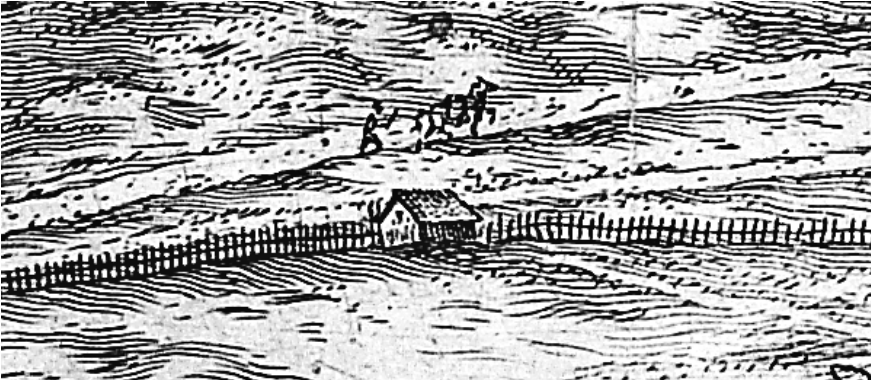
14. 'The Tudor carpenter used fitted jointings of a variety and complexity unapproached in today's construction: scarfings, notchings, coggings, dove-tailings, housings, halvings, mortises and tenons, joggles, bridles, wedgings, and so on' (Irwin Smith, 1952).



15. A speculative drawing of the interior of the Theatre by Walter C. Hodges. The highly ornate tiring house on the stage was likely less decorative but the three tiers of galleries and the rough scale are accurate. At the Theatre, the actors were close to the crowd.



16. The penny paid for admission to the playhouses was dropped into a ceramic money pot, or box, such as this. This is one possible origin for the modern phrase 'box office', which refers to the income from a performance.



## The Apprentices

On a Monday afternoon in June an apprentice sleeps in Finsbury Fields, just next to the low brick wall to the west of the Theatre. As he snoozes upon the grass, another man passes. He has a fancy, unusual name. A long letter sent from William Fleetwood, the Recorder of the City of London, to Lord Burghley, the queen's principal adviser, gives the details of the scene. The older man was called Challes, but he went by the nickname of Grostock, and this curious, slightly illegible detail suggests that Fleetwood knew him. Fleetwood, at least, seems to know what Grostock was thinking. For, as he recounts, Grostock considers himself a proper man, and the lazy scene irritates him. He reaches out the tip of his boot to prod the sleeping apprentice upon the belly and once his foot meets soft flesh he turns his toe. The apprentice jumps up, startled, and as the two men grapple a crowd quickly gathers around them. There are many strolling in the fields on this summer afternoon and they watch as the apprentice and the gentleman scuffle. Fleetwood in his letter estimates a crowd of

‘the number of 500 at the least’. He is surely exaggerating, but the presence of an audience only enrages Grostock further. He is a gentleman, he tells the watching crowd, and the apprentice before him is a rascal. ‘Some there were, little better than rogues, that took upon them the name of gentleman,’ he shouts. They like to fashion themselves so, but really they are no more than the scum of the world.

The City was on edge this Monday, 8 June 1584, for midsummer was the season when the apprentices liked to kick off. A little summer trouble was common. Some years it was worse and apprentices ended up hanged. Most years the trouble was contained by the careful, close apparatus of the Elizabethan state: extra night watchmen; summer festivals cancelled. We might trace several causes. Perhaps it was a response to economic uncertainty, or perhaps a legacy of the old Catholic holy days which had been suppressed. Perhaps it was just the warmer weather. Fleetwood was writing to Burghley to keep him updated on the City’s preparations. The next day, Tuesday, the Privy Council ordered a handful of arrests, as a precaution to keep the peace.

On Wednesday a servant named Brown turned up at the Theatre. He was wearing a blue coat and carrying a sword and had come looking for something more than a show. At the playhouse door he found a group of slightly scruffy apprentices gathering. ‘Certain poor boys, handicraft apprentices’ is how Fleetwood describes them. They were training up as bricklayers, or carpenters. Brown started to mock them for their poverty and their meagre trade, and they started to shove, and as soon as the fight sparked to life Brown drew his sword and struck one of the apprentices upon his left hand. Again, a crowd gathered. This time Fleetwood estimates the crowd as a thousand, and the only way he can even be close to correct is if the whole of the audience inside the Theatre rushed outside to see the secondary drama underway. There was blood on the ground and Brown fled. He ran across the fields to Holborn, and hid in a tavern, where he soon was found and arrested.

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Picture a sea of young men waiting. They are sleeping; they are bored; and they are so many. The life of an apprentice in late Elizabethan London was like this.

Perhaps 1,200 young men arrived in the City each year to begin an apprenticeship. They were from the West Country, the Midlands and the North, and their average age was eighteen and a half. By the end of the century there were 15,000 apprentices in London: unmarried young men, far from home. They were there to enter the great system of apprenticeships and commence their working life, for it was through apprenticeships that the livery companies regulated access to the world of work. We cannot begin to understand how work was imagined and arranged in the period without first understanding the structure of the system. It feels alien to us now, recalled only in a much looser modern use of the word 'apprenticeship' to mean vocational training, or working while learning. But in Elizabethan London the system of apprenticeships was closer to a religion, and one founded upon a very specific ideology of work, and life, and the relation between the two.

It began with an oath. A young man – and it was almost always a young man, although women were not barred from apprenticeships – bound himself to an average of seven years of service under a master of a particular trade. He would live in his master's household. Here he would be given meat, drink, clothing and lodging, but no pay, and in return his master would train up the apprentice in his trade. And while he was apprenticed in a specific trade – he was an apprentice carpenter, or an apprentice weaver – he had little contact with the company. He was focused, specifically and personally, upon his master. There survives in the British Library a copy of an apprentice indenture from a little later. This was the contract signed by an apprentice at the outset of his term. For the term that he was bound 'the said Apprentice his said Master faithfully shall serve, his secrets keep, his lawful commandments every where gladly do'. The master was a surrogate God, or a stand-in father; the apprentice was an ideal child,

bound and full of worship. He promised to play no cards or dice, not to commit fornication or contract matrimony. He swore that 'he shall not haunt Tavern or Play-houses, not absent himself from his master's service day nor night unlawfully'. The master was his father now, and the household was his family and his place of work.

The apprenticeship offered a place and a path. Once it was completed the apprentice might join the company and once sworn in he became a citizen of London: free to work, to participate in civic life, to vote in elections. The livery companies originated in medieval guilds, which had regulated craft and trades: they checked wages, and the quality of workmanship. From the late fourteenth century, a series of royal charters transformed the guilds into companies, so these had a royal blessing but were really City institutions. The twenty-six wards of London were each administered by an alderman, and the court of the aldermen was the most important governing body in London. Those aldermen were elected by the freemen of the city, or the citizens. To become a citizen, one had to be a member of one of the companies. And membership one of the companies almost always depended upon the completion of an apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship was not the only path to citizenship. A young man might buy his place in the company by a process known as redemption, or he might claim his place by patrimony, if his father had been a member of the company. But these routes were expensive and rare. What was common, by contrast, was to serve an apprenticeship, and two-thirds of all men in sixteenth-century London did so. To put it differently: of the fifty people who have so far appeared in this book, twenty-three definitely served apprenticeships. A further seven probably did, or at least began one. Nineteen probably did not, or are unknown. The Earl of Leicester certainly did not.

The apprenticeship was a common system and a shared language; it was a structure that bound and tied society together and most of all it arranged the first steps of a working life. In *As You Like It*, Jacques famously pictures the seven ages of man. He is the infant, mewling



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and puking; the schoolboy, whining with his shining morning face. He is the lover, soldier, justice, the lean and slippered pantaloony; then last of all a second child. Nowhere in this chronology is he an apprentice, which is because Jacques's speech imagines a faraway, glamorous world. But, as Catherine Belsey observes, each of the ages lasts approximately seven years. The seven-year apprenticeship was the foundation beneath each step. Even when they were not apprentices, the logic and shape of the structure organised how the men of sixteenth-century London understood and imagined their lives.

Beneath the system was a dream. It proposed an idea of goodness, and meritocracy, which built up from the family to the state, and offered a way of understanding the world and one's place within it. But it was also hard. The seven years of an average apprenticeship term represented an outsized portion of a man's life in the city in which the life expectancy was perhaps thirty. It was the kind of idea that sounds most reasonable to the middle-aged for it depends upon keeping the young in their place. 'Until a man grow unto the age of 24 years, he (for the most part though not always) is wild, without judgment, & not of sufficient experience to govern himself,' insisted the 1573 memorandum on the Statute of Artificers, which regulated the length of the working day, rates of pay and the structures of training. Between March and September the working day began at five in the morning and lasted until seven or eight in the evening, with short breaks for meals and half an hour for a sleep. In the winter months it ran dawn to dusk. It was exhausting, which explains why the apprentice in Finsbury Fields was sleeping in the middle of the afternoon. A thousand new apprentices were bound each year in London and between half and two-thirds of them never finished the full term.

The apprenticeship system promised advancement. If you are willing to make your time someone else's for a while, it says, then you too shall have a place at the top. But everyone knew that the system was rigged and its promise of rising was at best half true. It certainly



did not offer opportunity equally to all. 'Men of certain trades and occupations', instructs the Statute of Artificers, 'cannot take any to apprentice but his son or the child of such as may dispend by land forty shillings yearly.' The restricted occupations were the goldsmiths, the drapers and the merchants who trafficked beyond the seas, and the Statute made explicit that the condition had been 'enacted so that gentlemen or others of living might have some convenient means to bestow and place their younger sons in the common wealth to live in reasonable countenance and calling'. Other occupations were open to all, including those lowlier, more manual trades which the gentleman at the Theatre had mocked: the plasterers and carpenters, the bricklayers and the thatchers, the weavers of wool.

Those apprentices were not supposed to be at the Theatre. In 1582, the companies circulated a mayoral order that warned members of the companies not to 'suffer any of their servants, apprentices, journeymen or children to repair or go unto any plays, prizes, or interludes' in the City or its liberties. This was not – or not simply – because the playhouse was sinful but because it raised the terrifying spectre of idleness. 'By the daily and disorderly exercise of a number of players & playing houses erected within the City, the youth thereof is greatly corrupted,' complained the Lord Mayor in a characteristic letter of 1592 to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and this leads to 'the prentices & servants withdrawn from their works'. The two worries are neatly braided as into a single rope: immoral playhouses and work-shy apprentices. Following another – and more bloody – set of apprentice riots, of July 1592, a pamphlet called *A Student's Lamentation that Hath Sometime Been in London an Apprentice* was published. In the voice of a regretful apprentice who has slipped from the path of goodness, it addressed those who might also fall. 'You slumbering idle persons, whose life about the City is but a dream,' it admonishes, and insists: 'The root of all evil is idleness, and idleness is your only exercise.' The Theatre looked like the opposite of work and its proper places. Here the City's discontents surfaced in their

most colourful forms. An apprentice sleeping on a summer afternoon; the rage of a gentleman: everywhere we look we find the signs of a world that is ready to change.

In the summer of 1584 a youngish man named Richard Hudson was doing some carpentry for the Burbages on the Great Barn. After the renovations of a couple of years earlier, the properties on the site required ongoing upkeep, and James Burbage called in a handful of carpenters and labourers for a few months each year. The men who first built the playhouse were ageing. James's brother Robert was ill, and he died before the end of the summer; he was buried in his parish church of St Giles Cripplegate in the middle of August. Brian Ellam had turned fifty and started handing his work over to his stepson. Richard Hudson, son of Ellam's wife, was twenty-three years old. The Burbages went on hiring Hudson: they called him back to do repairs and an inspection in 1585 and 1586. Later, he was very likely one of the men who dismantled the playhouse. Later still he would build a new house for another member of the company by their next playhouse, the Globe. Richard Hudson worked for the Burbages for more than thirty years and this summer he was starting out.

Hudson was exactly the kind of worker that the Burbages liked. He was young and well trained and most of all he was loyal to them even as he was not, strictly speaking, one who played by the rules. Later, Hudson was called up before the Court of the Carpenters' Company. They wished to know why he, whose name appears nowhere in the records of the company as serving his apprenticeship, should apparently be working as a carpenter in London. In a marvelously petulant deposition given on 17 February 1608, Hudson 'confessed before this Court that he was never apprentice to any man but learned his trade where he could'. Where he could: Hudson did not say it, but he learned his trade at Holywell, under his stepfather, working for the Burbages. While slightly unorthodox, this was technically permitted, for he was, he explained, the son and grandson of

a member of the Company of Bricklayers, and through his dead father had the right to claim the freedom by patrimony. So while formally a bricklayer he had worked throughout his career as a carpenter. It was unusual enough that the company wished to investigate. But Hudson's improvisations did not stop here. For, he added, he had taken on two apprentice carpenters of his own, and one of them was married. The court was perplexed but officially unable to do anything, so the hearing ended here, on Hudson's flourish. There were some who kept the apprentices down; who beat them into their place. And there were some who were inventing a new place of their own, within the old structures of work.

In the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon in the summer of 1584 William Shakespeare was living at home, in his father's house on Henley Street, with the glovers' workshop next door. He was married. He had a one-year-old daughter and his wife was pregnant with twins. He was twenty years old and he had not, as far as we know, yet written a word. Youthful love, rash lust, a seduction one way or the other: there is so much space for speculation about Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway. But most immediately, it had the effect of barring the young Shakespeare from an apprenticeship. Apprentices were not permitted to marry; a married apprentice was fined, and might enter the company only through redemption, which was enormously expensive. Most of all, an apprenticeship was a seven-year promise that Shakespeare could not afford. He had a young and growing family and needed to provide for them.

Shakespeare at twenty was the perfect age to begin an apprenticeship, which is what the young men of Stratford did. They did not go to university. They bound themselves to a trade. Shakespeare's contemporary Richard Field – who would later publish Shakespeare's poems – was bound to a stationer in London in September 1579 and he in turn bound his own younger brother. The son of a Stratford glover was bound to a stationer in 1577; another, the son of a tailor,

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in 1583. These were the boys Shakespeare knew from school. After finishing school at sixteen or seventeen, some of them stayed in Stratford while those with the widest horizons moved to London. Perhaps 150 young men from the Midlands took the journey south to find fortune each year, which means a handful from Stratford. For each it must have felt like the grandest adventure, but it was ordinary.

Shakespeare's first biographies, which began to be assembled seventy or eighty years after his death, mention a rumour of an apprenticeship. In 1681 the antiquarian John Aubrey asked around in Stratford and was told that Shakespeare's father had been a butcher and that the young Shakespeare followed him. 'When a boy he exercised his father's Trade,' Aubrey reported, 'but when he kill'd a Calf, he would do it in a *high style*, & make a Speech.' That word 'boy' might mean a youth but it also means a servant, a junior worker or more precisely an apprentice. In 1693 a tourist was being shown around the church and asked the parish clerk after Stratford's famous son. 'This Shakespeare was formerly in the town bound apprentice to a butcher,' he was told. It seems unlikely – young Shakespeare, playing at butchery – but it was not exceptional. For, as Aubrey continues, 'There was at that time another Butcher's son in this Town, that was not held at all inferior to him for a natural wit.' The other butcher's boy was Shakespeare's equal, Aubrey reports: 'his acquaintance & coetanean,' using the old word for contemporary, 'but died young.'

Shakespeare's father sat on the parish council with a butcher named Ralph Cawdrey. In his will, Shakespeare mentions one Richard Tyler, who was the son of a butcher. Young Shakespeare, that is, knew the local butchers, and that there was a second, witty butcher's boy hints that this was something like a skit. A little blood on the floor, the knife raised high: some biographers have suggested that here is a trace of an old dramatic set-piece among the amateur folk players of the time, known as 'mummers', who performed simple costumed plays in the street. If so, the anecdote gives us a

glimpse of Shakespeare in the act of transposing a stage routine into the workshop.

Shakespeare's father was not a butcher but a glover, as is well documented in other local records. The confusion is understandable, for the two trades shared some things: knives and animal skins. But we might read the anecdote as a parable instead of a biography and see how it catches something essential to the world of work. Apprenticeships were by far the commonest route into work, and into manhood. It was deeply unusual that Shakespeare did not do one, but here perhaps is a trace of an aborted apprenticeship: a might have been, a counterfactual, a path not followed. What we are thinking about when we think about apprenticeships is possibility, and potential, either cut short or permitted to flourish. The other butcher's boy got left behind in an early grave in Stratford while young Shakespeare – twenty, married, with children, and needing work – went on.

Aubrey tells another anecdote, perhaps best seen as the twin to this one, about Shakespeare's greatest rival and contemporary, the playwright Ben Jonson. As a young man, Aubrey recounts, Jonson was laying a wall of bricks at Lincoln's Inn in London with his stepfather, who was a bricklayer, and while he worked he declaimed lines from Homer aloud. A passing lawyer, on his way to the Inns of Court, heard him and on the spot decided to pay for Jonson to go to university at Cambridge. The unlikeliest elements of the story are true. Jonson did indeed train as a bricklayer, gaining his freedom through the Worshipful Company of Tylers and Bricklayers. He did, too, study at Cambridge, while his plays borrow heavily from classical models. Both these anecdotes are origin stories, and they are equally about the origin of a writer and the origin of his works. Shakespeare and Jonson, in these apprentice snapshots, were notably not idling off from work to write poems quietly in the corner. They were at work. Because they were laying bricks or cutting a carcass the poetry came.

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What they also shared was restlessness. These were young men with a destination. In the anecdotes, Jonson was already in London but Shakespeare was not. Shakespeare's first biographer was Nicholas Rowe, in 1709, and his version of the life is a haze of romantic half-truths and gossip. For Rowe, what prompted Shakespeare's exit from Stratford was that wild trouble involving the local landowner, a little poaching, a whipping and a revenge ballad. It might be so. Or we might see his trajectory as a commoner one, and suppose that the young Shakespeare, twenty and twenty-one, followed the tide of apprentices to London. Once there he headed to a playhouse. He would work there for the next fifteen years. Rowe: 'He was receiv'd into the Company then in being, at first in a very mean rank, as Servitude, for what was he at this time, for all his Promise, but a Butcher's Prentice run away from his master?' He needed money and had a quick wit; he spotted a need. 'At that time Gentlemen were accustomed to ride to the Playhouse,' Rowe reports, so 'Shakespeare, driven to the last Necessity, went to the Playhouse door, and pick'd up a little Money by holding the horses of those who had no servants.' Shakespeare was at the Theatre door, among the waiting apprentices. Like them, he was restless. He did not want to be a glovemaker. Unlike them he had no trade nor path laid out before him, so he had to invent one.

We cannot know exactly when Shakespeare arrived in London. His biographers tend to assume that he was in Stratford for the baptism of his twins Hamnet and Judith in February 1585. Their birth indicates that he was – to put it politely – in Stratford and with his wife in the spring of 1584. But the parent plays only a small role in the baptism rite in the English Church, and there is no record of whether he was present that day or not. This year or next is the beginning of what his biographers know as the lost years. For between now and September 1592, when he was named in a gossipy slander in London, we have no secure record of Shakespeare's whereabouts. It was a

four-day walk from London to Stratford; perhaps he occasionally returned to see his young children; we simply do not know. Working backwards, we know his destination. By the end of the decade he was an established figure in the world of London playhouses. It matters less when Shakespeare got here than where he got to: the old monastic precinct of Holywell, where the Theatre stood. Later, Shakespeare would prefer to live within the walls of the City, in a quiet close off busy Bishopsgate. But when he first settled in London he likely chose to rent a room outside the walls. 'Lived in Shoreditch' says John Aubrey, on reliable testimony. His great fortune – perhaps his greatest fortune – was to arrive here. For several interconnected reasons, Shoreditch made him.

First, Shoreditch was a suburb of London. The merchants were concentrated inside the City walls, which was a well-regulated world; it had to be, for there was little space. Outside the walls it was noisier and busier. Certain trades had been forced out to the suburbs: the feltmakers, the leatherworkers, the tallow chandlers, all the smellier occupations. After the merchants of the City and the aristocrats of the West End here was what the economic historian A.L. Beier has called 'a third London'. In these edge zones ringing the city production and manufacture were on the rise. There was space, and London's new arrivals were settling here.

The new arrivals – the silk-weaving Walloons and the apprentices washing in from the Midlands, from the North – were in turn changing the city they found. Half a century before, the livery companies had responded to London's growing population by relaxing the extensive requirements and admitting more men to the freedom. By the middle of the century, three-quarters of London's adult men were freemen. The privileges were no longer so special, and the old system was starting to decline. As immigration continued, and the populations swelled, it was no longer sustainable. In 1600, apprentices made up 15 per cent of the population of London; in 1700, they were 4 or 5 per cent. And it was in this third London that apprenticeships



began to trail off. 'Broadly speaking, this development involved a change in the mode of production from the regulated system of the medieval guilds to something like a free-market situation,' writes Beier. 'Not all of London was affected, for the guilds remained vital institutions within the walled city. The mainspring of the shift was the growth of production outside the city walls and outside the guild system.' In Shoreditch, the old systems and structures that once had knitted a society together were beginning to unravel.

Second, Shoreditch was a liberty. We have already met Richard Hudson, the carpenter who was not really a carpenter, the apprentice who was never an apprentice. His career seems a flagrant abuse of the regulations but he was permitted such flexibility because of where he worked. As an old monastic precinct, Holywell was what was known as a 'liberty'. This is an evocative term but it has a technical history. As part of their authority to regulate work, the livery companies had been granted the power of search, which meant the authority to inspect workshops and places where work was being performed. A 1523 Act of Parliament had given the companies regulation over all craftsmen within two miles of the City walls. But with the dissolution of the monasteries, all authority over the monastic districts had reverted to the Crown. Within these former monastic precincts, therefore, the companies did not have the power of search. Here was a rare place where a married man might take several jobs and work a little more freely.

Third, and most broadly: Shoreditch might be on the edges but it was still London. According to what was known as the 'Custom of London', which was really a loosely defined but closely guarded set of late medieval habits and de facto agreements, a man freed to one trade had the right to practise another. The point was to be a company man; the actual trade was less relevant, as Richard Hudson insisted. This flexibility underpins a variation upon the system which seems arcane to us. As the historian David Kathman has uncovered, young actors bound themselves to company men in proxy apprenticeships.

As Kathman writes, 'The London livery companies played a crucial role in the economics of the professional theatre, particularly its apprentice system.'

There are numerous examples. John Heminges, who would later compile the First Folio of Shakespeare's works, was apprenticed to a grocer while he worked as a boy actor. When he gained his freedom he bound ten apprentices of his own, who he then trained as actors. The actor and goldsmith Andrew Cane bound an apprentice, Ellis Worth, who later described his apprenticeship as follows. He had been bound, he said, 'for a Certain number of years to Learn the trade of A Goldsmith', and in these years 'he this Deponent Did usually Act & play parts of Comedies & Tragedies in the time of his Apprenticeship'. The apprentice actors played female roles; later they moved into male roles. There is no necessary connection between the trade or the company and the young actor except, perhaps, the ties of friendship and neighbourhood. The actor Robert Benfield, of the King's Men, was made free by Rhys Morris of the Clothworkers in 1608. Morris was neighbour to the Burbages on the Holywell site, so it seems likely that he had done them a favour by taking on the young Benfield as apprentice.

In the summer of 1584 Richard Burbage was sixteen. He was just old enough to begin an apprenticeship. Half a century later his brother Cuthbert would refer in passing to Richard's '35 years pains, cost, and Labour' of work as an actor. Richard died in 1619. If we are to take Cuthbert at his word, Richard began as an actor in 1584. If so, he likely bound himself to another trade. We have no evidence. But as an older man, Richard bound as apprentices of his own two young actors. The first was Nicholas Tooley, who witnessed Richard's will, and who referred then to 'my late Master Richard Burbage'. The second was Richard Robinson, who would later marry Burbage's widow. Again, it was entirely common for a rising apprentice to do so. Perhaps these young actors were bound to different trades while they trained up on the stage. Or perhaps they were, like everybody else, falling back upon the old vocabulary and the old words which

indicated a way of arranging the world and the workers within it. A young man apprentices as an actor by acting as an apprentice.

The old structures may go – and they were fading here in Shoreditch – but what they leave in their wake is a language. Sometimes it looks strange, out of place; sometimes it crops up by surprise. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the weaver Bottom is enchanted by the fairies, who turn his head into that of an ass. This half-man, half-beast returns to his fellows. 'Bless thee Bottom, bless thee!' cries Quince, in surprise, and: 'Thou art translated.' That word 'translated' is conventionally glossed as something like transformed or changed, but it has a secondary and specific meaning within the livery companies and the structures of work of Elizabethan London. That meaning is lost to us but it was current – and a key part of the joke – for the play's first audiences. In the account books of the Carpenters' Company there is a note of a receipt of twelve pence paid in November 1581 by Robert Burbage to 'translate' an apprentice, one William Galardie, from another master. In the summer of 1596, Peter Street translated an apprentice, and paid the same fee, and the term refers to the transfer of an apprentice between masters. Bottom is translated from one master to another, and from the human to the fairy world, just as the ghost grammar of work is being translated into play.

In case we miss the joke, the play repeats it later, but differently. Bottom has gone missing, into the land of the fairies, and his fellow actors are looking for him. 'Out of doubt he is transported,' says Starveling, sadly. The term is specific. On 8 July 1578 John Griggs, who helped to build the Theatre, was 'transported from the Company of the butchers to this Mystery', according to a note in the records of the Carpenters' Company. Transported here describes the movement of an apprentice from one company to another and again the old words for the old structures are brought back to life in the world of play.

It was common to serve an apprenticeship so let us see Shakespeare as common. Let us imagine his name upon that indenture, bound for a

term of seven years to learn the art and mystery of playwriting. In 1584 he was nineteen and twenty. He was young to be married and old to be setting out, but not troublingly so; plenty were his age and not yet bound. He promised to serve faithfully: to keep the secrets and do no damage. He was haunting playhouses, certainly. We do not know about the games of cards and dice. He had contracted matrimony, but there was not necessarily any fornication. His apprenticeship was not with a single master – indeed, it would have several phases – but he was ready to learn.

The Queen's Men were playing at the Theatre throughout the 1580s and watching them there was Shakespeare's first training. The titles of the Queen's Men's plays are familiar for a very simple reason. *The Troublesome Reign of King John*; *The Famous Victories of Henry V*; *King Leir*; *The True Tragedy of Richard III*: of the nine surviving plays we know were performed by the Queen's Men, Shakespeare later rewrote four into plays of his own. 'Shakespeare knew the plays of this company better than any company but his own,' note Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, and 'The plays of the Queen's Men are the largest theatrical source of Shakespeare's plots.' In the following years he went to work on these old plays. He gutted them; he turned them inside out. He switched their plots; he stole the beams and reassembled each into something new.

Here is one example of his craft. *The Troublesome Reign of King John* is characteristic of the company's offering: a large-cast history play, upon a Protestant theme; a little jingoistic. There is a saucy nun and a lying friar. Some of it is in iambic pentameter but it is not end-stopped, so it is written in verse paragraphs. Like the other plays listed above, it is anonymous. When it was printed, in 1591, the title page boasted that it had frequently been played by the Queen's Men in London, so we can assume that it was a popular play of the late 1580s.

Shakespeare cut much of what makes *The Troublesome Reign* distinctive. He junked the nun and the friar and end-stopped the verse. He added soliloquies, notably to the mocking character known throughout as 'the Bastard', who speaks last in acts 1 and 2 and

threatens to derail the whole. More interesting than what he changed is what he kept. As Chambers notes, Shakespeare follows *The Troublesome Reign* ‘pretty closely as regards historical events, the selection of scenes, and even the logical run of many of the dialogues’. He puts it lightly, for what makes Shakespeare’s treatment so uncanny is that he followed its structure exactly. In each of his new scenes, he included the same characters, more or less, as in the original. They talk about the same things, more or less. But the words themselves are different. There is one identical line, and another that differs by one word, but in 150 places Shakespeare picked up a word or phrase and used it in a different context. There is something cool about the method, and reading the two plays side by side is chilling, like watching one of those wasps that hatch out of the brain of a larger, slower animal. Shakespeare’s play is a parasite that feeds only on the diet of its predecessor and yet it makes from the old stuff something wholly new.

Shakespeare did not generate his own raw materials. Few workers do. It is what he did with the materials supplied by another that makes him distinctive. In *The Troublesome Reign*, the king commands his servant Hubert to murder a boy he has taken captive. ‘Then Hubert, as thou shortly hear’st from me,’ says the king, ‘So use the prisoner I have given charge.’ It is a euphemism, and we know full well what it means. Shakespeare’s John does the same thing differently. ‘Good Hubert, Hubert,’ he begins: ‘I’ll tell thee what, my friend, / He is a very serpent in my way.’ He adds: ‘Dost thou understand me?’ and of course we do, but it is not enough and Shakespeare expands the unsaid death sentence out into a line that simultaneously maximises and minimises it to the greatest possible degree:

King John: Death.

Hubert: My lord.

King John: A grave.

Hubert: He shall not live.

King John: Enough.

That which is unsaid is said; that which is said is unsaid. To take a wholly different metaphor, Shakespeare reversed the magnetic field of the original. In *The Troublesome Reign* the grieving Constance, whose child has died, is close to wordless. ‘Must Constance speak?’ she asks piteously. ‘Let tears prevent her talk.’ In Shakespeare’s hands the moment becomes an opportunity for a set-piece which is perhaps the most famous speech from the play. ‘Grief fills the room up of my absent child, / Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,’ the queen laments. ‘Then have I reason to be fond of grief.’

He was learning how it could be done, beat by beat, from the inside. If it sounds a little like a schoolboy exercise, it is perhaps because it was. At school in Stratford he had been taught to take a classical text and make it new in a brilliant paraphrase, or an expansion, in the rhetorical techniques known as *amplificatio* and *copia*. The handbook of *copia* commonly used in Elizabethan schools was by the humanist Erasmus, and it famously gives 195 variations on the same drab sentence. ‘Learning by rote, writing according to rhetorical formulas, reproducing the sententiae and the beauties of classical authors, the work of imitation,’ notes Jonathan Bate: ‘these fundamentals of Elizabethan education exercised a profound influence on Shakespeare’s writings.’ This was his schooling, back in Stratford, and then in Shoreditch he went to work, doing the old things differently. Later, the playwright John Webster – who himself learned much from the older Shakespeare – praised Shakespeare for what he called ‘copious industry’. He meant the richness of Shakespeare’s lines, in the modern meaning of the word: copious as multiple, as rich, close to endless. But the compliment also contains an older meaning, of *copia*, the schoolboy trick. In the 1580s Shakespeare’s schoolroom was the Theatre where he watched the Queen’s Men play.



## The Unbound Man

It is the evening of Sunday, 14 June 1584, and James Burbage is at home close by the Theatre. After the apprentice scuffles of last week the past couple of days have been quiet. But this evening a messenger arrives with a summons from William Fleetwood, Recorder of the City of London. Burbage knows full well what this means: that he will be called to the Lord Mayor's Court, upon which Fleetwood serves as judge, made to promise that playing at the Theatre will stop, and kept in his place with the threat of a heavy fine. His response is quick. He certainly will not, he replies, and sends the messenger away with a blast. Tell Fleetwood, Burbage declares, that he is 'Hunsdon's man, and he would not come'. He has, he insists, the favour of a great nobleman, Henry Carey, the first Lord Hunsdon, and instead of the City officials he will pay a visit to his lord in the morning.

What Burbage does not know is that powerful forces are moving against him. Earlier that day the Lord Mayor has sent two aldermen to see the Privy Council at Whitehall. He wishes to express his usual



grave concern at the rowdiness of the playhouses and their audiences and in light of the recent brawls calls for 'the suppressing and pulling down of the Theatre and the Curtain'. That the Lord Mayor calls for both a temporary suspension and a permanent pulling down reveals the scope of his ambition as well as what he might reasonably expect. He hopes for much but knows he might not get all; like Burbage, he is familiar with this game. In the Privy Council chamber, debate ensues. The popular Charles Howard, second Lord Effingham, speaks against the ban on playing. Howard was, a couple of months earlier, made Lord Chamberlain, a role that gives him responsibility for arranging royal entertainments. He has also for the past decade been patron to his own playing company; his players are on tour but they are looking to settle in the London playhouses. For all these reasons Howard is inclined to keep the playhouses open. With Howard a second voice is raised in favour of the players: that of Howard's deputy, Sir Christopher Hatton, who falls in with his boss. The lords deliberate, although not for long, and return with the usual compromise. They sign a letter which commands the suspension of playing at, but not the destruction of, the Theatre and the Curtain. Fleetwood sends the letter on to the players in Shoreditch, and all might be satisfied that they have played their customary roles in a long-running drama.

What follows in this otherwise routine episode is an odd swerve which reveals that all the participants are, even when they seem most sure, only improvising. The playing company at the Curtain this week is Arundel's Men, and they immediately stand down. They are sensible. Their patron the Earl of Arundel and his wife are under house arrest for suspicion of conspiracy against the queen. Arundel has been planning to flee the country; soon he will be betrayed once more, arrested and sent to the Tower of London. This is not a moment for his players to look for any trouble. At the Theatre is a more confident company. The Queen's Men have been performing here all summer, and they have the royal favour, and while they agree to a pause in the playing they are also ever so slightly reluctant. The

leading actor of the company, who is described in Fleetwood's report as 'the chiefest of her highness' players', advises Fleetwood to follow up with Burbage. Burbage is, the player explains, 'the owner of the Theatre' and 'a stubborn fellow': stubborn enough, he adds, that he will almost certainly ignore the command, and to make him comply Fleetwood will have 'to bind him'.

'To bind him': a common Elizabethan practice for keeping the peace. A little like bail, a wrongdoer was forced to behave properly under threat of the forfeit of a substantial fine. This is not the first time Burbage has been coerced into good behaviour but it is a curious gesture nonetheless. The Queen's Man is selling out Burbage, but even as he does so he is acknowledging a wider truth about the marshy world of playing. It is not the queen, not the lords, not Howard or the Lord Mayor: the player is saying that the man who truly runs the show and the only one able to make it stop is James Burbage.

All this business is backdrop to Fleetwood's summons, and Burbage's response only confirms the player's suggestion: that authority here is up for grabs and has been grabbed by Burbage. On that Sunday evening Fleetwood's first messenger returns with Burbage's boast, and Fleetwood sends a burlier figure called 'the under-sheriff'. Burbage agrees to come. He walks the mile down from Shoreditch to Fleetwood's office in the City. 'At his coming he stouted me out very hasty,' writes Fleetwood, in his report, using a splendid old word for something like brazen defiance. Burbage insists, again, that he is Lord Hunsdon's man, and he is therefore protected. Burbage is running hot but Fleetwood's patience is thinning. With a flourish, Fleetwood takes the letter, signed by Hunsdon and the other lords, and hands it to Burbage. 'I showed him my Lord, his master's hand, and then he was more quiet,' wrote Fleetwood.

There is a lovely dramatic irony to their encounter. Fleetwood knew what Burbage did not, which was that Hunsdon had signed the letter from the Privy Council which called for the closure of the Theatre.

That Burbage did not know reveals much of Burbage and, equally, of the world that surrounded him. It is sometimes tempting to see only the narrows of this history: to see it only as a drama about and around the playhouses, a drama in which Burbage was a major player. It did not look that way to the lords. They imagined themselves as the only heroes, and Elizabethan aristocrats liked to dress up in the old costumes – shining armour, bright badges – of the chivalric age before them. Perhaps he hated to do so, but Burbage began to acknowledge his subordinate status. I am Lord Hunsdon's man, he said, and what he meant was, my words have weight only because I am tied to him.

Henry Carey, first Baron Hunsdon, was a courtly figure: martial, lavish, subtle. There is a portrait of him: long face, black velvet, gold buttons, sidelong glance. His crest was a swan and his motto was *Comme je trouve*, as I find it. He was also, they whispered, the illegitimate brother of the queen, for his mother Mary Boleyn had been mistress to Henry VIII. The following summer he was appointed Lord Chamberlain, taking over the running of royal entertainments from Effingham. He had long been a friend to the players, which is likely how Burbage had come into contact with him: Hunsdon's Men were a touring company, and in 1583 they were at Bristol, Norwich, Bath. A decade from now Hunsdon would indeed become patron to a company of players that included both Burbage's son Richard and Shakespeare. But there is no evidence that Hunsdon was any kind of protector to Burbage in the summer of 1584. It is hard to escape the implication that Burbage was once again only stouting.

Burbage knew that Hunsdon's was a good name to drop. But he did not know that this shining lord was, in June 1584, in a crisis. For the past fifteen years he had been acting as the queen's agent in the North, meeting with rebellious earls and smoothing the prickly relationship across the border with Scotland. In the spring of 1584, tensions had risen again, and Hunsdon was supposed to return to his northern residence at Berwick. For reasons we do not know, he had

delayed his journey north. On 8 June – the same day a scuffle broke out at the Theatre between a gentleman and a snoozing apprentice, which kicked off a week of strife – Hunsdon's son Robert had been at Richmond, where the queen was in residence. As Robert wrote to his father the next day, the queen had expressed her irritation at the delay; Hunsdon immediately offered to resign his position. It was not a moment to irritate the queen. She was in mourning, following the death of her old suitor François, Duke of Anjou and Alençon, on 1 June, and spent much of the first half of the month in her bedchamber, refusing to meet with her Privy Council. 'Now melancholy so possesses us that both public and private causes are at stay for a season,' wrote Elizabeth's spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham, adding, 'I found her offence towards my lord of Hunsdon rather increased than in any way diminished, and he, seeking to qualify her displeasure, received hard speeches himself.' All were on eggshells before the queen's grief.

Elizabethan court politics was like a merry-go-round. One lord fell from favour while another rose and soon their places switched. All were focused upon the queen but also tied to one another. Effingham and Arundel were cousins; Effingham married Hunsdon's daughter; and Effingham and Hunsdon knew one another well. In this close world power lay in who knew who and where each was standing at any moment.

Burbage was at best a bystander to this dance. He could only guess at its rules, its arcane conventions, the power of a glance or a smile or the slightest line of a frown. He owned the playhouse but he did not control the players within it. He had some right; how much was uncertain. Even after Fleetwood showed him the signed letter, Burbage persisted. To die for it he would not be bound, he told the City official, and went on doing so even after Fleetwood threatened to arrest him and have him tried. The account we have of the fracas comes from a long letter written by Fleetwood but that does not mean he should have the last word. For the Theatre stayed open.

Sometimes James Burbage spoke a new language, sometimes a curiously new one. When he insisted to Fleetwood that he would not be bound, there was inside his defiant phrase a secondary meaning. For Burbage had very likely once been bound, as an apprentice to a joiner in Coleman Street parish in London. He never completed his apprenticeship, and never entered the company, but the memory of regulated company work remained.

The men who built the Theatre and the men who paid for it; the men who acted upon its stage and the men who wrote plays for it: what they shared was that they were company men, men of the trades and occupations, who had passed through apprenticeships and in many cases been made free of the livery companies. They had, that is, once been bound. We have met the carpenters, but it is equally true of the others. John Brayne was free of the Company of Grocers. John and Lawrence Dutton – the brawling actor – were free of the Company of Weavers. John Heminges – who later acted in Shakespeare's company and edited the Folio edition which preserves Shakespeare's plays – served a nine-year apprenticeship as a grocer. Robert Armin served an eleven-year apprenticeship with the Goldsmiths' Company from 1581. Later, Shakespeare would write for him the roles of Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night* and the fool in *King Lear*.

For the playwrights of this and the following generation, the livery companies were the world of their fathers. Thomas Kyd, author of the hugely successful *Spanish Tragedy*, was son of the warden of the Company of Scriveners, and likely served an apprenticeship with the company, although he could also have claimed his freedom through patrimony. Kyd had famously neat handwriting, and copying documents neatly is what scriveners did. Christopher Marlowe's father was a shoemaker and became warden of the company. Thomas Lodge's father was a grocer. Thomas Middleton's father was a bricklayer. Lording Barry, forgotten playwright and theatrical investor, was free of the Company of Fishmongers through patrimony.

'Most of the players have been either men of occupations, which they have forsaken to live by playing,' declared the clergyman poet Stephen Gosson in a pamphlet of 1582, 'or common minstrels, or trained up from their childhood to this abominable exercise and have now no other way to get their living.' The men of the playhouse world were certainly men of occupations, but they did not forsake them. Here is a repeated pattern in their careers. The actor John Dutton apprenticed as a weaver and left the trade in the early 1570s, when he acted in several companies. He did well in the 1580s, and took a part share in an inn on Bishopsgate, but by the end of the decade his work was drying up. From 1591 he resurfaces in the records of the Weavers' Company, where he rose fast, becoming warden, bailiff and finally master of the company. John Brayne stopped paying his brotherhood dues to the Company of Grocers in 1577, shortly after the construction of the Theatre. Then in early 1585, a record in the company accounts: for a payment of two shillings, his annual contribution, from John Brayne. Perhaps he saw the end coming; he died the following year.

The name of Ben Jonson, the celebrated poet and playwright, crops up with regularity in the accounts book of the 'Tylers' and Bricklayers' Company, as he pays his quarterly payments of fourpence. He was not wholly reliable. On St James's Day 1601 – St James was the patron saint of bricklayers – Jonson returned to Bricklayers' Hall to pay his arrears of two shillings. The same day, Richard Hudson – the bricklayer who worked as a carpenter on the Theatre – went in and paid the same amount; it seems likely that the two men knew one another. In 1602 Jonson stopped paying his dues, instead pursuing a lucrative writing career with aristocratic patronage and commercial success. Then in the spring of 1611 – the same year the eldest son of the king appeared in a court masque specially written by Jonson – he returned to the company hall and paid his full arrears: eleven shillings and four pence.

Don't give up the day job, they say. Even if the playing fails then people will still need bricklayers, grocers, fishmongers. Such pragmatism

was certainly part of it. But the worlds of playing and the livery companies were surprisingly interwoven. In company halls, on election days, before an audience of freemen and their spouses, there were shows throughout the middle of the sixteenth century. Company halls were easy to adapt as a playhouse: a rectangular room with, for the larger ones, a raised dais and minstrel's gallery. Here minstrels performed, dancers with a hoop, a hobby horse. There were short skits, on themes relevant to the company itself, or featuring its patron saint. The livery companies hired playwrights to write pageants for the Lord Mayor's annual show. This was sponsored by a different company each year and was a lavish event. In 1607, Ben Jonson was paid £20 to write a show for the Merchant Taylors. By welcoming, and sometimes sponsoring, the players and playwrights, the companies offered a hedge against the uncertainties of a chancy industry.

We might see it another way: as the tenacity of a worldview. The livery companies continued to exert a hold over the imaginations of even those people who had left them behind. In this changing world there was a ready-made mental architecture: a vocabulary and a structure within which to understand work. 'Company': it is an ancient word for an ancient thing. It comes from the Latin, *cum* + *pane*, with bread, and so a companion, one who eats with another. First it might refer to a group of soldiers and then from the fourteenth century it began to mean a group organised around a profession: a livery company.

The changing meanings of this word across time offer a micro-history of ways of arranging the relations between working men. From the very end of the fifteenth century or the start of the sixteenth, the word acquired new associations: it described a group of actors or singers who performed together. We have met several such companies: the Earl of Leicester's Men, the Queen's Men, Arundel's. The exact structure of these aristocratic companies is a little uncertain. But what the scarce records suggest is that they borrowed the structure of the livery companies. They relied upon apprentices: the boy



actors, bound and training up. Above them was a second group of workers: the hired men, sometimes also known as journeymen. These were paid weekly wages, and might work as musicians or book holders, take on minor acting roles, or as a 'tire man' looking after costumes. In total there were perhaps thirty boys and hired men. Above them were the leaders of the company. These were the eight men, for smaller companies, who owned a share in the company. They held its props, and playbooks, in common. The tripartite model of apprentices, journeymen and sharers or masters was also that of the livery companies.

The aristocratic companies were not primarily commercial. Their task was to tour on behalf of their lord, to provide entertainment and to spread his name and colours in a kind of sixteenth-century PR. This changed as the feudal arrangements of the old aristocratic order gave way to a more money-minded world. In the mid-sixteenth century, 'company' acquired a new meaning. It may be an association formed to engage in buying or selling, with a legal entity separate from its members. 'A commercial business', says the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and gives the first usage of the word in this sense as 1532. Niall Ferguson describes the development of the company as one of the 'most foundational institutions of the modern world', and by a company he means specifically a joint-stock limited-liability corporation. That the stock is owned jointly by multiple investors, and that their liability is limited to the money they used to purchase a stake: these principles stand behind the curious fiction in which a modern company has a separate existence, in effect as a legal person of its own. A word that once meant a bond between people now has no actual people in it at all.

Ferguson sees the origin of modern companies as 1602 and the charter of the East India Company. It might be earlier. The 'Mystery and Company of Merchant Adventurers for the Discovery of Regions, Dominions, Islands, and Places unknown' was founded in 1551, to search for the North-East Passage to China. Two hundred

and forty investors purchased a share of £25 each, and developed the Muscovy Company, which was chartered in 1555 and was the first major joint-stock company. That surprising word ‘mystery’ in the company’s first title is a clue. This was another word for the early craft guilds: the fourteenth-century royal charter to the Company of Carpenters is addressed to ‘the freemen of the Mystery of Carpentry of our City of London’. ‘Mystery’ suggests the secrets of the trade, jealously guarded by the company, and slides into the meanings of the similar but unconnected word ‘mastery’. As the historians Ann M. Carlos and Stephen Nichols argue in an article in the *Business History Review*, one origin of modern multinational corporations lies in ‘the early sixteenth- and seventeenth-century trading companies – the English and Dutch East India companies, the Muscovy Company, the Hudson’s Bay Company’. ‘These trading firms operated in a pre-industrial world,’ they note, ‘where a system of capitalist international trade had to be grafted onto a premodern system of artisans and peasant production.’ From the livery companies to Saudi Aramco and Apple: here is the biggest of histories in the smallest of things. The journey of the word ‘company’ is also a cold one. It travels from something defined by presence to something defined by skills and then in turn to something defined by a purpose; or from the company as the sum of its members, standing together, to the company as standing alone, separate from its members.

In 1584 James Burbage found himself at a juncture in his fortunes. The string of quarrels testifies to the popularity of the playhouse he had built and – more or less – owned. It takes a crowd to brawl and there were crowds coming in, paying a penny or more each for admission, all of which was good. And yet to fill the playhouse he was forced to rely upon companies of players agreeing to perform.

Burbage’s relationship with these aristocratic playing companies was fraught. He had been a player with Leicester’s Men for a decade in the 1560s and into the 1570s, while they were the leading company

of the land. But he left them to build the Theatre, and following 1583 and the creation of the Queen's Men, Leicester's players had virtually ceased to exist. Burbage was notably not asked to join the Queen's Men. Like the aristocratic companies that preceded them, the Queen's Men were often on tour. They followed a handful of regular circuits, the West Country, the Midlands, the flat reaches of the East. They performed at Norwich and Cambridge in the summer of 1583. They were well paid for it. At one town they received twenty shillings as a fee and on top of it sixteen shillings for wine. This was surely welcome but their rationale – and their richest pay cheque – came from performances at court. A little later the standard fee for a court performance was £10.

In the autumn, the Queen's Men came to London to prepare for the Christmas revels, and were granted permission by the City to play at the Bull on Bishopsgate Street and the Bell on Gracious or Gracechurch Street on Wednesdays and Saturdays. In the spring, as the weather improved, they moved to the Theatre. They may have been playing in Burbage's house but their loyalty was not to him. The old fiction: that a performance at a public playhouse was only a rehearsal for the royal show. She was the paymaster; she was the focus. When Fleetwood called for them to stop they did so, and in doing so sold Burbage out. Bind him, the chief of the Queen's Men advised. He is a stubborn fellow.

Another word for stubbornness might be capacity. In what another might see as a setback Burbage found an opening. On a mud-and-brick walled patch of land immediately to the south of Holywell Lane stood the Curtain, which had been constructed a year after the Theatre. On the same site was a fishpond, an old well and a few tenements hard by. Although the Curtain was a different shape from the Theatre, and a little larger, the proximity of the two playhouses meant that they were conventionally grouped together by outraged preachers. 'The Theatre & Curtain may aptly be termed', insisted William Rankins in his *Mirror of Monsters* (1587), 'the chapel Adulterium.'

This is cod Latin for something like the chapel of adultery, and he uses the singular to describe the two. Another outraged moraliser of 1583 uses a collective plural: ‘Mark the flocking and running to Theatres and Curtains daily and hourly, night and day, time and tide, to see plays and interludes.’ The Theatre is mentioned first: always the Theatre and the Curtain, never the Curtain and the Theatre. Perhaps this is a sign of the Theatre’s unusual resonance. In the grouping of the two, Burbage saw an opportunity.

In 1585, according to several well-informed depositions, James Burbage approached the owner of the Curtain, a man named Henry Lanman, with a business plan. The offer came, as he understood it, from both Burbage and Brayne. They proposed, as Lanman recalled, that the Curtain would become what he called ‘an Esore to their play house’. It is an odd and slightly puzzling word, but it seems to mean an ‘easer’. For seven years the joint profits of the two playhouses would be divided between Burbage and Brayne, as owners of the Theatre, and Lanman, as owner of the Curtain. Lanman agreed and for a year or two the profit-sharing arrangement ran as proposed. Later, after their agreement had foundered, Lanman estimated that Burbage was making profits of 100 marks or £80 each year.

Much remains mysterious about this arrangement. Little is known of Lanman. He describes himself as a gentleman on his deposition, as if he were above business. Perhaps he was only a property investor, another Shoreditch speculator. But the deal between the Theatre and the Curtain looks like a canny move. Burbage was a sharp dealer and a cheat, but also a rational agent. The upsets of the summer of 1584 revealed that there were crowds enough to support two playhouses in Shoreditch. The historian William Ingram speculates that the arrangement with Lanman was not a profit-sharing arrangement at all but instead a way for Burbage to purchase the Curtain at a price of seven years of profits. Perhaps so; as Ingram accepts, ‘our present store of facts is insufficient for certainty in this matter.’ But it is hard to avoid another more obvious explanation. Two playhouses in the

same neighbourhood might be viewed as rivals, or as the beginnings of an entertainment district, just as bookshops once clustered on the Charing Cross Road in London, or the sex shops in old Soho. Perhaps what Burbage saw was the advantage of collaboration, of joining up with others, in a kind of company thinking.

When late Elizabethan Londoners thought about art, they did so in a vocabulary borrowed from the livery companies. This might seem alien in our modern, post-Romantic world, which seeks to separate the category of the aesthetic from labour, from craft and trade. Perhaps the best-known English-born painter of the Elizabethan age was Nicholas Hilliard. He is celebrated for his starkly brilliant miniatures. They shine with their own precision; they are perfect aesthetic objects, tiny and rich and expensive. Hilliard was the son of a member of the Company of Goldsmiths from Exeter, and he apprenticed under a goldsmith in Cheapside, became free of the company and took apprentices of his own. Because miniature portraits were set in gold decorative mounts his work rightly belonged to that of the company, and Hilliard was a good company man. The more general art form of painting was shared out between several different companies. The men of the Worshipful Company of Plaisterers decorated buildings. The men of the Heralds' College painted coats of arms.

On 13 November 1575 the Painters Stainers Company submitted a petition to the queen. They observed with concern a rise in shoddy painting. 'Such pictures and works are not so substantially wrought as by skilful men traded in the same science have been,' they noted: 'the which slight workmanship is not only a slander to the whole Company of Painters but a great decay of all workmanship in the said science.' Traded is an unusual word to find here. It means, in the context, trained, but it reveals that the company saw the art of painting as a set of skills learned by a man and through which he might indeed make a decent living, but only with proper trade

protections. To remedy what they saw as the decline of painting they sought the authority to restrict ‘all person from painting pictures of the queen, noblemen, and others, as well as all other manner of paintings’ to those who had completed a seven-year apprenticeship with the company.

It looks like the company was over-reaching; but in 1581, as Alan Borg notes in his official *History of the Worshipful Company of Painters*, they were granted a royal charter. By the queen’s decree, it was ruled that ‘no person or persons of whatsoever estate, degree, or condition he or they be, shall use, exercise, or occupy the art or mystery of the Painter Stainers’ unless they had served a full apprenticeship. With this the company was granted also the right of search for ‘deceitful works’. This did not mean the right to search for paintings of fictional subjects but instead those created by artists who were not company men.

The reach of the companies was fading. More and more painters were settling in the suburbs outside the City; it was impractical to imagine that one might regulate a painting. For these reasons, the bid by the Painters Stainers Company to extend its jurisdiction failed and, absurd as it may be to say so, people went on painting. But the episode suggests to us a key analogy of the age: the idea that the realm of art might properly belong within the world of work, and might therefore both be taught and be regulated by official institutions. The idea surfaces in curious ways. It can take the form of protectionism. It can appear as blame or condemnation. Its invitation to snobbery lives with us today. ‘A cobbler’s eldest son’: this was how the roguish dramatist Robert Greene described the playwright Christopher Marlowe in 1589. He did not mean it kindly. Greene was probably himself the son of a saddler or a cordwainer from Norwich but that did not hold him back. In another pamphlet, from 1592 and part of a series on low-life London, he turned his attentions to Thomas Deloney, a silkweaver and popular ballad writer. Deloney’s brains were, mocked Greene, ‘beaten to the yerking up of ballads’.

An odd word, 'yerking': it means to draw stitches tight, as if his weaver's work had dumbed Deloney so that he could only stitch a ballad.

The flame wars of Elizabethan pamphleteering are tiresome but in their heat they reveal the pressure points of the moment: the categories into which things were sorted and by which they were kept apart, which differ in every age. Here, it is the age's recognition that modern art may emerge from medieval craft, and equally the age's insistence that this must not be so. Marlowe's biographer Park Honan observes that Marlowe in his plays and poems never once used the words 'shoe' or 'shoemaker', and when on a rare occasion he referred to leather or boots it was with mockery and some repulsion. Some children, when they leave home, go far, and Marlowe was a scholarship boy, bound for Cambridge. And Greene himself is worth returning to – and we will return to him, in a later chapter – for he is associated with an odd pamphlet, published just after his death, with his name in the title but likely not written by him. It is called 'Greene's Groatsworth of Wit' and is beloved by literary historians for it offers what is apparently the first reference to Shakespeare as a writer. Immediately after yet another attack on Marlowe, Greene turned to mock a new writer who, despite 'being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is the only Shake-scene in a country'. *Johannes fac totum* means something like 'Johnny do it all' but it is commonly translated as 'Jack of all trades', a phrase that entered the English language twenty years later. It nicely catches Greene's prejudice. Shakespeare, he sneered, is a man of the trades, not a true poet at all.

Shakespeare did not share Greene's snobbery. He loved the language of trades, their specialist vocabularies. He was the son of a glover and he has the adoring Romeo dream, 'O, that I were a glove upon that hand, / That I might touch that cheek.' It is a deeply sexy image. In the same play, Mercutio knows well the pliancy of certain types of leather. He can laugh about cheveril, the kid leather used to make fine gloves, 'that stretches from an inch narrow to an ell broad'. When Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is cast in the play, his



mind turns immediately to a technical question: what colour should he dye his beard? As he is a weaver, he knows the terms, and he lists the colours: straw, orange-tawny, perfect yellow like a French crown, or what he calls 'purple in grain'. This means a reddish purple, and the phrase 'in grain' refers to a type of dye produced by the *Coccus* insect. From the special durability of this dye the word has taken on a second meaning, in the form 'ingrain', which means something deeply dyed, or saturated. There is pleasure in knowing the words working men use.

Here is a small but distinctive habit of Shakespeare's: to see art as craft, and vice versa. In that same scene, Bottom describes the play they are to perform – the hapless tale of Pyramus and Thisbe – as 'a very good piece of work, I assure you'. His phrase dismayed the Victorian editor Charles Knight, who fretted that Bottom speaks of the play as if it were 'a piece of cloth or a pair of shoes', but that is exactly the point. He appraises it as a shoemaker or a weaver might. And this is how Shakespeare reflects upon his own labour. When he started out there was not a word for one who writes plays in the English language. The word playwright appeared in the early years of the seventeenth century: in 1618 it was used to abuse John Webster, mocking him as 'the playwright and the cartwright'. Webster was the son of a cartwright, one who made carts, and himself was a member of the company. The new word 'playwright' neatly conjoins the world of work, of things made by hand, and something like its opposite, play.

The only play in which Shakespeare uses the word 'company' to refer to a troupe of actors is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and he does so twice. In the woods outside Athens the workmen – a carpenter, a joiner, a bellows-mender, a tailor – assemble to rehearse a play they hope to perform at the wedding of the Duke of Athens. 'Is all our company here?' asks their ringleader Quince, and then later Bottom refers again, a little grandly, to 'our company'. This is not the only play to feature an organised group of actors. But in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Hamlet*, those actors are described only as 'players'.

## THE UNBOUND MAN

Sometimes for Shakespeare a company is a group of soldiers; sometimes it is a crowd of citizens. Shakespeare never uses the word 'company' in the modern, commercial sense. Most often he uses the word in its abstract sense: not alone; in the presence of a specified, particular other. 'I shall forget to have thee still stand there,' says Juliet to Romeo, 'Remembering how I love thy company.'

The only Shakespeare play in which a joiner appears is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Snug the joiner, who plays at being a lion, but remains only Snug. The only other Shakespeare play in which the word appears is *Romeo and Juliet*. Mercutio describes his vision of the terrifying, otherworldly Queen Mab:

Her chariot is an empty hazel-nut  
Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub  
Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers.

The joiner-squirrel is doing good human labour as he builds a coach: the work of a cartwright. In these two plays, and their distinctive mix of dreamworld and workplace, Shakespeare is considering his own career and what it is to be a playwright in an age that does not quite have the words for it.

The first step of his imaginary apprenticeship was watching – and then taking apart, only to reassemble – the Queen's Men's plays on stage at the Theatre. The second was to seek out older or more successful playwrights, and to collaborate with them. That many of his plays were partly written by another author has been one of the most powerful critical discoveries about his works of the past quarter-century. At least eight of Shakespeare's forty plays were collaborative. He did not collaborate on comedies, only on tragedies and histories; he tended to write the opening scenes of his collaborative plays. And that Shakespeare wrote in this way reveals something distinctive about him. His collaborative plays fall into two groups: at the very start of his career; and at the very end. It was highly unusual to do so at this early

moment. There was a rise in collaborative drama a little later, at the end of the 1590s, in a different economic climate and industry, but in the late 1580s and early 1590s Shakespeare, notes the great scholar John Jowett, ‘was collaborating more regularly, and more insistently, than anyone else at all’. The subtlest commentator on Shakespeare’s co-writing is Gary Taylor. ‘At the beginning of his career,’ argues Taylor, ‘Shakespeare was learning from more experienced craftsmen, in the kind of apprenticeship relationship normal throughout medieval and early modern Europe.’ He was inventing his career as he went along, and he was doing so in the old ways, newly wrought.

The exact timing and sequence of when Shakespeare wrote what is endlessly contested. The most recent attempt to establish a chronology is that by the *New Oxford Shakespeare*, which suggests that his first five plays were collaborative or at least heavily indebted to another playwright. In early 1588, he wrote *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which sounds as though it might have been written by John Lyly. Lyly was a celebrated playwright and fiction writer (there was not yet any such thing as a novelist) of the late 1570s and early 1580s, and his most famous book was the bestselling (there were not yet any bestsellers) *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*. It is distinctive for balanced phrases. The hero is a prodigal son, ‘with more wit than wealth, and yet of more wealth than wisdom’. One example of the style is sufficient. But Lyly’s book and rhetorical patterns caught the imagination of the moment and the imagination, too, of Shakespeare. In a parodical list of a woman’s attributes, Speed in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* laughs: ‘Item, she hath more hair than wit, and more faults than hairs, and more wealth than faults.’ From Lyly he learnt how to balance a phrase and that it might be funny.

In late 1588, according to the *New Oxford Shakespeare*, Shakespeare wrote *Arden of Faversham* with a co-author. He was the junior collaborator; he contributed, as was usual, the middle scenes. We do not know his collaborator – indeed, the play has long been described as anonymous – but the *New Oxford* editors speculate that it may have

been Thomas Watson, a once-celebrated playwright. In 1589 Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus* with the older and better-educated George Peele; Peele wrote mythological poems and plays, and pageants for the Lord Mayor.

Early Shakespeare so often sounds like someone else that we cannot know who wrote the line. That he is more famous than the co-authors who were at the time more celebrated than him means that we find him amongst books which are forgotten but for his connection to them. Such a curious reversal in fame has obscured what was happening: he was training and inventing himself, inside a collaboration with others.

At some point in 1584 or 1585, an extremely unusual play was performed at the Theatre. Thomas Watson's innovative Latin version of Sophocles' great Greek tragedy *Antigone* was not quite a translation. Watson cleaned up an old Latin rendering of the play by consulting the original Greek. He restored to the play some of its distinctive Sophoclean style, particularly the varied metres in which characters speak. He added what are known as *pompa* and *themata*: short speeches, by emblematic characters, called things like Nature and Obedience, who comment upon and try to draw lessons from the play which is underway. Nature speaks first. 'All of you my servants, learn from such / Horrific disasters,' he instructs, in a modern English translation, 'how advantageous it would be to / Follow the laws of Nature.' This is an ancient, pagan, classical universe, and not a Christian moral at all. The character 'Obedience' declares: 'I am contented with my lot. Whatever authority commands ...' But *Antigone* is a great and famous play about disobedience. Antigone will not follow the command of the cold ruler Creon and buries her brother even when she is forbidden to do so. Both classical and modern, Watson's lessons clash, at odds with one another.

Watson was a Londoner, born in 1555, and well educated. His mother was from a wealthy family. His parents died when he was

young. He was raised by a rich uncle and expensively educated, first at Winchester College, and then at Oxford, where he began but seems not to have completed his degree. The Oxford antiquarian Anthony à Wood mentions Watson there ‘in the smooth and pleasant studies of Prose and Romance’. When the rich uncle conveniently died Watson set off for Europe where he spent, he later wrote fancily, his *lustrum mediumq*, which is a Latin phrase best translated as something like ‘five years plus half of that’. So: seven and a half years on the continent, where he might have studied law and certainly picked up the new fashions in European poetry, formed his own version of an apprenticeship. There is a fairy-tale air to Watson’s career: each step made frictionless by money. He returned to London by 1580 and translated Petrarch into Latin. In about 1581, he worked on his *Antigone*. In spring 1582 he wrote the volume called *Hekatompathia*, which was a collection of classically minded eighteen-line sonnets in English, and then returned to writing in Latin: in his *Amyntas*, a set of eleven verse lamentations.

His poems were certainly admired. They were quoted in contemporary anthologies and commonplace books. Thomas Kyd, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, copied a line or two from the *Hekatompathia*; Shakespeare did too, later. After his death he was described as one of the ‘flourishing metricians’, meaning those who wrote in lively, exciting new metres, and, according to Thomas Nashe, there were ‘few his equals in England’. But that was all for his poems. We have his *Antigone*; he was mentioned alongside other playwrights of the mid-1580s in several later critical accounts. Here the trail begins to run dry. He might have co-written *Arden of Faversham* with the young William Shakespeare. He was described in his lifetime as a prolific writer. ‘Twenty fictions and knaveries in a play’, wrote a man for whom Watson worked as a tutor, was ‘his daily practice and his living’. He certainly wrote other plays for the public playhouses, likely performed at the Theatre. ‘You shake our theatres with Latin pomps,’ wrote the schoolmaster William Camden, about Watson,

which sounds like his *Antigone*, with its distinctive pomps. It suggests a public playhouse, so it must have been the Theatre or possibly the Curtain. We cannot be sure if it was this play at all, or another by Watson. It is a tantalising, well-recorded, resonant blank. Watson and his vexing play sit exactly at the outer limit of what we can know about the plays performed at the Theatre.

Watson's career, although close to invisible, is nonetheless highly instructive. It is possible for an artist to vanish. He can be admired by his peers, create great works and inspire others to do yet more; be the object of admiration, praise and envy; and still be forgotten. Watson's career asks: what are the conditions which enable the creation of lasting art? It is not education, for he had that; it is not wealth, for he had that too. It is not even talent, friends, predecessors, an audience. Perhaps part of it is luck. Watson died in November 1592, likely of plague, when he was thirty-seven. That is bad luck, but hardly uncommon, and many died younger and are better known. In 1595, Shakespeare was praised as 'Watson's heir'. It was meant as a compliment.

When Bottom returns from his sojourn in fairyland, he confusedly greets his fellow actors. 'I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was,' he tries to explain, even as the memory of it slips away, as dreams will when we wake. But then he has an idea how to preserve it. 'I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream,' he announces. 'It shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it hath no bottom, and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke.' He wishes to keep it safe against obscurity, or being forgotten, but then he forgets to sing it. So we never hear Bottom's Dream, and that too is lost.



## The Money Man

Sometimes a quarrel looks like a blessing. In the second week of June 1586, and in an upstairs room in a small house in Whitechapel, a man is an hour from death. John Brayne has tears in his eyes. By his bedside sits his nephew Cuthbert, reading aloud from a small book called *The Sick Man's Salve* by the Protestant preacher Thomas Becon. This was a popular handbook on how to die the proper death, so the ideal prop for the occasion. It says: the world is a dark place, best sooner left. 'Woe be unto you that are rich: for you have your consolation,' Becon warns: 'Woe be unto you that now laugh: for you shall wail and weep.' Sickness and struggle are the loving visitations of God. The world is full of snares, and good Christians faced with the end are here counselled 'virtuously to dispose their temporal goods, and finally prepare themselves gladly and godly to die'. As Cuthbert reads, his mother Ellen – wife to James Burbage, and sister to the dying man – urges her brother to settle things and to make his peace with the world he is leaving behind. 'I pray thee, John, make a will,'



she pleads, one more time, and the dying man begins to weep. 'Alas what will shall I make, having nothing to give,' he sobs. John Brayne was buried in his parish churchyard of St Mary Matfellow on 15 June 1586.

This poignant scene comes from a deposition given by Cuthbert Burbage a decade later, for Brayne's death sparked off a new round of litigation which lasted until the end of the century and a little beyond. It centred upon Brayne's last words and wishes. The Burbages insisted that 'at the time of his sickness & not long before his death' Brayne repeated his old promise: that all his interest in the Theatre should pass 'to your Orator's children aforesaid whose advancement he then seemed greatly to tender'. Brayne did already have a will, which he had written in July 1578. It appeared to leave all to his wife Margaret but made no specific mention of the Theatre. Perhaps the Theatre had not then looked like it would be valuable. At his deathbed the Burbages were – in the most charitable interpretation – asking him to update it. Notably absent from the lovely East London *pietà*, at least in Cuthbert's telling, is Brayne's wife Margaret. She was forty or forty-one years old when her husband died and she was also, possibly, pregnant.

Later, the Burbages repeatedly deposed about how Brayne had no head for business. It is true that he had constant trouble with workmen, whom he never seemed to pay on time. Perhaps he was absent-minded or perhaps, as is equally likely from the traces he has left, he was credulous. He liked to believe the best of people. Either way, nice that a foolish man should have had such a name. Because he was feckless or because he was greedy or because he knew that the playhouse was chancy and that his share in it chancier still, in the spring of 1580 he had begun a new venture. He took possession of the lease of a small cluster of buildings in Whitechapel, where he lived. This included a few small tenements with gardens and an inn called the George. It was expensive. The annual rent was £30, which was more than double that on the Holywell site. But Whitechapel was a growing suburb, and an inn looked like a more reliable route to income than a playhouse.

In Whitechapel, Brayne met a man named Robert Miles, who will be a major player in all the twists and switches of the remainder of the story of the Theatre. Miles was a goldsmith. The word was Elizabethan slang for a moneylender but Miles really was a goldsmith, for there are records of him taking on apprentices. Most likely, he was both; he was certainly a shark, and he lived in Whitechapel, and when in the spring of 1580 he heard of the new tenant at the George, Miles came to visit him. As Margaret recalled in a vivid deposition of a few years later, Miles recounted ‘his poor and bare estate that he was then lately fallen into and manifested and lamentably declared that his poor wife and children were in great necessity and calamity’. They had no home, said Miles. He promised that he would work for Brayne and that through his hard work he would make the inn ‘profitable and gainful’. Brayne was swayed. On the last day of July he assigned to Miles a half share of the profits from the inn and tenements, in return for which Miles agreed to pay half the rent and look after the running of it.

We have heard this sweet song before. The sequel is predictable. Once he had the lease, Miles used it as collateral to borrow more. When he did not repay the loans his creditors attempted to evict Brayne and seize the property. By the time Brayne died in 1586, he had been paying all the annual rent for the lease as well as the running costs. On his deathbed, then, the Burbages were urging him to protect his family and his property. What made them less than neutral is that they were also his family, and his property was – as far as they were concerned – really theirs. Brayne’s previous will not only made no mention of the Theatre. It also, coming before Brayne’s involvement at the George, made no reference to the inn and tenements. That Miles had a claim on the George opened a window onto Brayne’s other property, including his share in the Theatre.

Robert Miles was a mirror image of James Burbage: his double and his opposite. Both were colourful figures and skilled storytellers.

Both exploited John Brayne for money. Miles was free of the Company of Goldsmiths and bound apprentices in the company; Burbage was only a reluctant company man. Miles was a decade younger than Burbage but both men had children and, crucially, sons of the same age.

Burbage's older son Cuthbert had been, for the past five years or so, working as a clerk under the financial administrator Sir Walter Cope. Burbage had sent Cuthbert off to the City when he was seventeen or eighteen to learn, as would later be extremely useful, the ways of high finance. Cope was attached to William Cecil, the lord treasurer. He had a lucrative role in the court of wards, administering the rents from properties that had been inherited by the rich orphans. He was a powerful and quiet figure in the financial apparatus of the late Elizabethan state. 'Having the gift of making himself indispensable', Cope was, according to his biographer, 'a person well worth cultivating.'

In contrast to Cuthbert's rise, Miles's son Ralph was a resolutely downward-facing figure. Ralph had the right to become a goldsmith, through his father, but he pursued instead the trade of making soap. This is a lowly, grimy business, working with the rendered fat of animals, and he was not particularly good at it.

After Brayne died, Miles attempted to evict Margaret from the George. She filed an appeal in early 1587. 'The said Robert Miles of late hath expelled your said executrix out of the said tenement Inn and goeth about to expel certain of her tenants from the possession of such houses and gardens as they hold,' she pleaded to Chancery, and her appeal told a powerful story of an immoral man, a trickster run by money. Because not all the legal records survive, there are sometimes leaps and elisions. Sometimes the positions switch in unexpected ways. By the summer of 1588, Margaret and Miles had become allies against the Burbages. We know this because of a surviving bill, brought by the Burbages, against Margaret and Miles. 'They do all join together to imprison your said Orator James Burbage,' it pleads, slightly unconvincingly. Margaret and Miles

claimed – which is not unreasonable – that the Theatre in part belonged to them.

As in the children's game of pass the parcel, or the street magician's trick of hiding a ball beneath one of three hats, we must follow, amongst the flurry of hands, the real prize. The valuable property was the lease to the Theatre; and in 1588 the lease was still in the possession of John Hyde. Hyde was, it seems, a good man and a patient one. He held onto the lease for many years. Since he had entered the original agreement with both Burbage and Brayne, he reported, he would have preferred to return it to them both. When, after Brayne's death, Margaret and Burbage came to him separately, to ask for it, he was reluctant. Then Burbage came to him once more, and asked Hyde to convey the lease to his son Cuthbert. He found this unfair to Margaret, he later deposed, but Burbage and Cuthbert produced a letter, and it is worth quoting Hyde's own account for all that it reveals of the small games of favour here:

And at the last he and his son brought to this deponent A letter from one Mr Cope one of the Lord Treasurer's gentlemen, the said Cuthbert's Master, that he this deponent would at his Request and as he might be able to do this deponent any friendship in his occasions to his lord and Master should convey over his interest of & in the premises to his servant Cuthbert Burbage.

A powerful man is good to have in your debt. In June 1589, John Hyde returned the lease on the Theatre to Cuthbert alone.

When one story did not work for the Burbages, they told it again or told it differently. The suits between the Burbage and Brayne factions rumbled on for the following decade. They sued and counter-sued; one party filed a suit and another replied with what is known as a demurrer. Witnesses were called to depose, to give answers to the set questions known as interrogatories. One set of interrogatories, posed to a small group of witnesses in the summer of 1592, returned

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to Brayne's investment in the George. Amongst the dozen questions posed to the witnesses is one that suggests, in miniature, so much of the Burbage way. It began by asking about the money spent by Brayne but quickly turned, in the second half of the question, to a wilder and more serious allegation: 'And how often to your knowledge is the said Robert Miles indicted for common Imbarracie & Adultery or as you have heard, And whither was he called before the Coroner's Inquest for the death of Brayne. Yea or no?' That 'Yea or no?' was a brilliant touch, for the question was not really a question at all but the spreading of a rumour. At some point in late 1586 or early 1587, Margaret had given birth to a daughter, Katherine. Little is known of the child; like her mother, she died in an outbreak of plague in 1593 and both mother and daughter were buried at St Mary Matfellow, Whitechapel. But her existence solidified Margaret's claim to the Theatre. The two-fold allegation was that not only did Miles murder Katherine's father, but he was also her real father.

This poisonous question was asked to three witnesses that summer, but only one offered a reply. Henry Betts was an attorney based in Shoreditch. He knew the Burbages well and had been present when Hyde returned the mortgage to Cuthbert in June 1589. He was an informed witness. He detailed Brayne's business dealings and particularly his habit of hiding his own assets by assigning them to others, to keep them safe from seizure. He reports that Brayne certainly did not intend to leave his property to Miles for 'at his death (as this deponent hath heard it credibly reported) he charged Miles with his death, by certain stripes'. 'Stripes' are blows, a beating, and again the testimony turns upon the memory of what Brayne may have said in his dying hours.

The depositions are the only surviving evidence and they are often fragments. The pages have been shredded by time and eaten by mice. One rejoinder to a Burbage suit observes with outrage that all here is 'tedious and untrue', and another clipped phrase, on a partial page, speaks of 'divers sums of money'. Beneath the Burbage music and

beneath the interested, rival stories lies a huge imaginary pool of money.

How much were those ‘divers sums of money’? In his deposition, Henry Betts was asked directly about how much Brayne had made from the Theatre. ‘Brayne would never plainly declare how much he had received concerning the Theatre,’ Betts replied, and explained: ‘for he alleged, if the true value & sum were known, that it hardly would be allowed him.’ He made so much money that nobody would believe it; or, rather, he claimed he made so much money that nobody would believe him if he named the actual sum. He held himself like a rich man, Betts added: ‘It seemed by his talk, that he had gained & received a great deal of money, more than he had disbursed.’ But that is not the same as being a rich man. We can do a little accountancy from the bottom up. The Theatre’s income came from admissions receipts. So what did admission cost?

The simple answer is: a penny. A better answer is by analogy. In Elizabethan London, that same penny bought you a loaf of bread or six eggs. Two pennies bought you a chicken and six pennies a pound of sugar, a Bankside prostitute or a quarto copy of one of Shakespeare’s plays. Wages were set by statute, and an unskilled labourer might earn five to six pence a day, as Flute in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* reminds us. This makes playgoing relatively cheap, at least according to modern standards. The UK national living wage is £11.44 an hour, or close to £100 per full day. Adjusted to today’s values, a relative theatre ticket price would be £17, which is double the national average cinema ticket but far less than the average London West End theatre ticket, which is currently £52.

It began with a penny but admission was not equal. The playhouses – and this seems to have been true across London and to have remained constant throughout the period – had a tiered system of prices. It cost a penny to enter the yard, where one stood, and then another penny to go on into a higher gallery, then a third for a quieter

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room, sometimes known as the lord's rooms. Each penny was placed in a small ceramic pot, held by a 'gatherer', and the jingling contents of these pots were then transferred into a box which was held in the tiring room, or dressing room, behind the stage. Here is one possible origin for our modern term 'box office': the office where the money box was kept.

Let us estimate the taking from a full house at the Theatre. There are 800 people at capacity. Five hundred of them are standing, each paying a penny. Then 200 paying twopence, and a further 100 paying threepence. These guesses are probably generous but give us a neatly round figure of 1,200 pence, which is £5 in pre-decimalisation money.

So: on a good day there might be £5 income from the total admissions. By a complex arrangement, the total was shared between the owners of the playhouse and the players. At later playhouses, it was standard for the actors to take the revenue from the outer door plus half the receipts from the galleries. The arrangement was slightly different at the Theatre. There, it seems that Burbage – and, in theory but not in practice, Brayne – took all the revenue from the galleries while the acting company took the revenue from the main door. In this model, the players receive 500 pence, which is just over £2, while Burbage takes the remainder. Three pounds or a little less per performance is a huge sum: £18 per week, if we imagine six performances each week.

Eighteen pounds per week was very good money, or it would be, if it rolled in regularly like a river. But instead it came like a storm: some floods, and some dry periods. It was either a lot or nothing at all, and the Theatre was closed from 7 May to 24 August 1586. The playhouse historian Herbert Berry has averaged out the many estimates offered in the depositions and concludes that for the Theatre owners the income might have been £190 per year, to be divided – again, at least in theory – between two sharers. This was still good money but it is categorically not the golden number that it looks like the Theatre might make, and the mismatch scrambles everybody's thinking. There were the actual takings and then there was the



floating dream. Everybody overestimates. In 1585 a merchant from Ulm visited London and was struck by the playhouses. They showed comedies every day, he recorded, and had a striking design: 'some peculiar houses, which are so made as to have about three galleries over one another'. Most of all he was struck by the money coming in, which he estimated at between £10 and £12 per day. Music hath a silver sound, laugh the musicians in *Romeo and Juliet*, which is how these numbers sounded to the working men of Elizabethan London. A royal proclamation of 4 April 1590 recorded that wages with meat and drink for 'the best and most skilful workmen, journeymen, and hired servants of the companies' were between £4 and £6 a year. So a day's takings at the Theatre was a year's wages, or double that.

Any sum of money tells a story; a millionaire does not really have a million dollars. The figures are not necessarily incorrect, but they are interested. In July 1586, a few weeks after Brayne's death, Burbage hired a team of workmen, people he had long worked with, to inspect the Holywell site. They returned with an estimate of the costs he had put into redevelopment: £250. Conveniently enough, Burbage had agreed with Allen to spend at least £200 to renew the lease. Later, Margaret Brayne told the Court of Chancery that her husband spent £600 towards the building of the Theatre and the tenements around it. The actor John Alleyn guessed that Burbage made £100, or 200 marks (£133), a year; Henry Lanman, who owned the Curtain, guessed at 100 marks.

We can make the numbers sound big or small. In 1592, Ralph Miles deposed. 'He hath heard say by credible report that the said James Burbage,' he testified, 'since the decease of the said John Brayne [in 1586] hath Received great sums of money,' and then he added, 'to the value of seven or eight hundred pounds.' For the past six years, this is £125 per year. That same summer his father offered a slightly different figure. 'He doth verily think in his conscience that the said James Burbage and his said son [Cuthbert]', he reported, 'have Received of Rents and profits growing thereby to the value of two thousand marks at the least.' Miles the elder names a period of 'about

viii or ix years', which gives us 235 marks, or £156, per year. Each figure had a purpose.

The garrulous and gossipy Robert Miles is a gift to the historian. He hated and admired the Burbages, and he had a rare eye for the telling detail and the powerful anecdote. In July 1592, Miles was asked directly about a rumour that James Burbage was stealing money from the takings box. It is a classic lawyerly trick to ask a leading question, and Miles launched into a wandering anecdote. Soon after the playhouse was finished and 'great sums of money' were flowing in, then did James Burbage 'Purloin & filch to himself much of the same money by A secret key which he caused one Brayne a Smith in Shoreditch to make for him of the Common box'. With his specially made secret key Burbage opened the box and 'thrust some of the money ... in his bosom or other where about his body'. In this way did Burbage 'not only play false with him the said Brayne to A great value as it was thought but also Deceive his fellows the Players'. Soon Burbage was rumbled, and he was penitent, or put on a show of it. He confessed all to Brayne, 'praying him to forgive him, and he would if he lived make him Recompence'. The anecdote does not end here, and Miles adds one detail. Burbage, with surely a twinkle in his eye, explained 'it was the Devil that led him to do so'.

A scientific experiment has to be repeatable. The same is true, perhaps, for a business. In 1586, as John Brayne was dying and his heirs and partners were battling over his will, a new playhouse was in construction on Bankside, to the south of the river. It was named the Rose, after a garden or a street that was known for its brothels. The Rose was the Theatre's double. The ways in which it is the same as the Theatre show us that its builders and backers had paid careful attention to the successes of their predecessor. The ways in which the history of the Rose is starkly different from that of the Theatre are also revealing. These point, yet again, to the randomness, the

improvisations, the chances and cheats of the richer human drama that took place in and around and behind the Theatre.

In March 1585 a dyer and businessman named Philip Henslowe had bought a twenty-year lease on a plot of land known as the Little Rose estate. Twenty years: the two decades gave Henslowe more flexibility than the more contingent arrangement at the Theatre, in which the original lease was only for ten years with the possibility of renewal. Work began in late 1586, and Henslowe hired John Griggs to lead the works. Griggs was by now a master carpenter and he had direct experience of building the Theatre. The new playhouse was a copy of its predecessor. The Rose was a fourteen-sided polygon, twenty-two metres across. The Theatre had fourteen sides and was twenty-three metres wide. The Rose cost £800 to build. It was a little more expensive than the Theatre, but a decade had passed.

As at the Theatre, a family was at the heart of the Rose. But here, the family managed to work together. We might call them functional. Henslowe had apprenticed as a dyer and married his master's widow. This was a quick way to advance, for an apprentice, but it does not necessarily preclude love. When his brother died, Henslowe found apprenticeships for his nephews. His wife, Agnes, helped to manage the financial side of the playhouse. His stepdaughter married an actor, Edward Alleyn. Alleyn, who became the lead actor at the Rose, in turn hired Griggs to build him a house in 1592. In 1595 Henslowe bound his niece Mary to a seven-year apprenticeship under Griggs's wife, who was a seamstress. Mary was taught 'to sew all manner of works', including fine lace making and costumes for the players. A couple of years later, Griggs's daughter married another of Henslowe's players.

Looking at the records of the Rose it is hard to escape the impression that at every step Henslowe is considering the example of the Burbages and the Theatre and doing it better. That is: he did the same things but with greater efficiency and greater order. He was not a stouting man. He did not improvise. He was not a Burbage. When

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times were hard – which was simply a feature of the playing industry – Henslowe had strategies. He started a pawnbroking business as a sideline; while the playhouses closed for plague, he expanded pawnbroking into his main occupation. He took in richly lined capes, wedding rings, a little gilt cup. If nothing else, these would be useful as props. When the playhouses were open, he took all the ticket receipts, then from that total gave a share to the players. In time he became a moneylender, advancing money to the players against future receipts, and then their manager. He kept extremely thorough account books, and these survive. Chambers repeatedly describes Henslowe with polite horror as a ‘capitalist’, and contrasts him to Burbage.

Henslowe was a professionalised version of James Burbage. Like Burbage, he partnered with a grocer to fund his business, but unlike Burbage he did so with a clear contract. On 10 January 1587, as the *Rose* was readying to open, Henslowe signed an agreement with John Cholmeley. ‘For the great zeal and goodwill between them, and to the intent that they may the better increase their substance,’ the contract explains, the two men ‘are entered into a partnership and are become co-partners together.’ Cholmeley was given the right to sell food and drink to the playgoers, as well as a small house to sell them from, and a half share in the ticket receipts. In return, he paid £25 10s each quarter for eight years. His investment did not go towards the construction costs, for Henslowe had paid these. Rather, Cholmeley’s investment went towards the running costs of the playhouse, and therefore provided a solid and dependable income stream. Cholmeley must have expected that he would make at least £100 per year. He sold wine and ale to the playgoers, and fruit: apples, pears and nuts. Later, archaeologists found fragments of crabs and oyster shells here, the remnants of sixteenth-century popcorn.

Henslowe had no children of his own. He had two stepdaughters, from his wife’s previous marriage, and he raised them well. This seems to have fed into the security and stability of the *Rose*. Like

every household, with its apprentices living in, and every livery company, with its paternalistic structure, the Rose was a like a family but really a proxy family. Henslowe's stepdaughter married his leading actor, which was good for business. By contrast, the Theatre was an actual family, in which blood and money were muddled.

Inside the quarrels over the profits from the Theatre was an idea about children: about what they stood to inherit, what they had a right to expect. It was present, in an inchoate form, from the very beginnings of its construction, but it exploded into view at John Brayne's deathbed. There were simple reasons. In 1585 and 1586 the men who first dreamed up and built the Theatre were growing old and facing their ends. James Burbage was fifty-seven. At the same time, their children were reaching an age at which their voices had to be heard. Cuthbert Burbage was twenty; his younger brother Richard was eighteen. The Theatre was a family business and the family was changing. The invocation of children – their rights, their needs – was only sometimes made explicit, but it ran beneath every exchange and quarrel, giving depth and sometimes fury.

Robert Miles, talking his way into the Brayne properties, detailed his need by a simple contrast. As Margaret testified, he 'lamentably declared that his poor wife and children were in great necessity and calamity', being homeless, and he went on to remind John Brayne 'that he had not any children or any other great charge save only himself and your said oratrix then his wife'. The children gave pathos to his pleas. The Burbages, too, insisted upon the Braynes' childlessness. When they testified in the autumn of 1588, they explained that John Brayne had promised to leave his moiety in the Theatre to the Burbages, and specifically to Cuthbert, Richard and their sisters, 'for that he had no children'. Brayne was, they said, a childless businessman, building an empire of this world with no one to leave it to.

The repeated insistence upon her childlessness must have been hard for Margaret Brayne to hear. She had given repeatedly birth. By 1573 the Braynes had had four children: Robert, born in 1565; Roger,

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born in 1566; Rebecca, born in 1568; and John, born in 1573. All died in infancy. None were still alive in 1576, when Brayne began his partnership with Burbage, for if Brayne had a living child there is no way the Burbages could have believed that Brayne intended to leave his property to his nephews and nieces instead of to his own children. And then, in late 1586 and early 1587, Margaret gave birth again: to a girl, Katherine. This is the child who the Burbages suggested was not John Brayne's daughter.

In such a wholly disenchanted way of viewing the world, a missing or dead child is a business opportunity. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* opens with a tangle between Egeus and his daughter Hermia. He wishes her to marry Demetrius. He threatens her, with a convent or perhaps death. But she wishes to marry Lysander, and Lysander has a solution. 'Hear me, Hermia,' he begins: 'I have a widow aunt, a dowager / Of great revenue, and she hath no child, / And she respects me as her only son.'

The widow aunt never actually appears in the play and is never mentioned again. But she has a function in the plot: she is an escape hatch. For although she is an Athenian in the world of the play, her precise marital and familial background mattered in late sixteenth-century London. That she is a widow means that, under Elizabethan law, her property is her own. Women with a living husband or a son would see their property automatically pass to him. So her specific state, as a property-owning woman, is an unusual one. As a childless widow, she has not only inherited the property of her husband, but she can hold onto that property.

Lysander is saying that he expects to inherit. It is just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor man, laughed Marilyn Monroe, and the rich man might make life easier. Run away with me, Lysander bids:

From Athens is her house remote seven leagues.  
There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee,

And to that place the sharp Athenian law  
Cannot pursue us.

Seven leagues is, as every footnote will tell us, about twenty-one miles, but it is better viewed not as a distance but a passport from this world into a fairy tale. All depends upon a widow of great revenue, and she must be childless.

The most significant child – the nephew by the bedside of his dying uncle; the son who retrieved the mortgage; the money man – was Cuthbert Burbage. At the remove of 450 years, what we have of him is fragments. But in them we can trace a set of tendencies: the character of a man.

He was a canny figure. He counted and he remembered: what he owed and what he was owed. The rhythm of credit and debt was his music. He worked under Sir Walter in the Court of Wards, looking after inheritance and orphans. In June 1589, Sir Walter did him a favour. He made possible the return of the mortgaged lease to the Theatre to Cuthbert. Cuthbert married a woman named Elizabeth Cox in the summer of 1594. When their son was born, Cuthbert named the boy Walter. A second son was named James, after Cuthbert's father; then a daughter named Elizabeth, after her mother. Cuthbert kept close. In 1604, Sir Walter was arranging a play to entertain the new Queen Anne, and called upon Cuthbert, who suggested that they might do *Love's Labours Lost*. Sir Walter wrote to Robert Cecil, secretary of state, to propose the idea, and asked Cuthbert to deliver the message. He signed off the letter: 'Burbage is my messenger / Ready attending your pleasure.' In the halls of power, Cuthbert was deferential.

He was pragmatic. By the early seventeenth century he was rumoured to be making £1,500 per year. In 1610 he was sued by a goldsmith who had invested in a playhouse controlled by Cuthbert. The goldsmith claimed that Cuthbert paid the other owners of the



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playhouse to cancel all performances there, thus undercutting the value of the goldsmith's share. An empty playhouse does not look like good business but Cuthbert always made money. In June 1630, a few years after the accession of a new king, he was offered a knighthood. The knighthood was partly an honour and partly a money-raising scheme by the Crown. Cuthbert was rich enough but he turned it down, paying instead a £12 fine.

He lived long. He invested in property; he took leases on buildings in Shoreditch. In 1608 he and his brother acquired a house and a garden a little to the south of the Theatre. In 1614 he was still living on Holywell Street. In 1617 he – along with his brother – bought a patch of land with a few small cottages and a common pasture just to the west of Bishopsgate. In the early 1620s he moved out of Shoreditch, to Cripplegate. He signed himself 'gentleman'. When he died, in 1636, an old man of seventy, they brought him back to Shoreditch for burial at St Leonard's, next to all the other Burbages.

'In fair Verona', promises the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, 'we lay our scene.' The play mostly keeps to the streets of Verona, the bedrooms, the inner chambers of the household. But for a single scene, conventionally numbered as Act 5 Scene 1, and for eighty-six lines only, we leave Verona and, with the exiled Romeo, find ourselves in Mantua. 'There is no world without Verona walls,' says Romeo, when he hears of his sentence of exile. If so, then we are in Mantua already in the grave.

The scene opens with Romeo waking. It is Wednesday morning, and he arrived the afternoon before. We know the day because the play carefully sets out a tight timeframe. Time matters, here; we shall not have enough of it. Balthasar comes to Romeo with the terrible news that Juliet is dead. Again, we know that she is only sleeping, but Romeo does not, and he launches into an immediate plan. 'Get thee gone,' he commands Balthasar, 'And hire those horses.' He will go straight to Verona, back to Juliet. We shall not have enough time, and he knows it.

But he launches into an agonisingly long speech. 'I do remember an apothecary,' he begins, 'And hereabout he dwells, which late I noted.' Romeo only arrived in Mantua the afternoon before, but he has noticed the apothecary's house, where he dwells, which is also his shop, where he works:

in his needy shop a tortoise hung,  
An alligator stuffed, and other skins  
Of ill-shaped fishes; and about his shelves  
A beggarly account of empty boxes,  
Green earthen pots, bladders, and musty seeds,  
Remnants of packthread, and old cakes of roses  
Were thinly scattered to make up a show.

The description is almost flamboyantly redundant. The classical scholar Joseph Warton objected to it on precisely those grounds. 'I appeal to those who know anything of the human heart,' he wrote in 1763, astonished that any might seriously countenance the notion that 'Romeo, in this distressful situation, could have leisure to think of the alligator, empty boxes, and bladders'.

Shakespeare thought of that alligator. Alligators were a common display item in apothecary shops. There is still a stuffed one today high in the lobby of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society on East Smithfield in London. And the alligator returns us to the world: to a specific shop, perhaps, or to the memory of a real apothecary. The apothecaries of Elizabethan London were clustered around Bucklersbury, close to the grocers, for both these trades might sell drugs and spices. A family of apothecaries named Chetley or Checkley was living and working on Bishopsgate in the 1590s. William Chetley had four children baptised at St Helen's, the church of the parish where Shakespeare was living in those years. He was also a member of the Company of Grocers. Another, John Chetley – likely his brother – got into trouble in 1595 for selling treatments

he should not have. On trial, he pleaded that he had done so only under the instructions of a doctor named Edward Jorden, who was Shakespeare's next-door neighbour.

The apothecaries, real or imagined, return us to the world of work. Theirs was not a reputable trade. The physicians were learned men, and monastery hospitals cared for the sick, but the apothecaries, who administered the stores of drugs but also perfumes and spices, were tradesmen. In 1588 the apothecaries petitioned the queen for a monopoly on compounding and selling medicines. She did not grant it, in part because they did not have a company of their own until 1617. Until then, they could either join the Company of Grocers or work outside the protections of a company.

Romeo calls the apothecary 'beggary', and his shop 'beggarly', but he is not a beggar. He is an honest working man. His shop is shut because it is, as Romeo observes, a 'holiday'. So Romeo has to disturb him, but when the apothecary enters the scene he is reluctant to give him the poison that Romeo seeks. 'Such mortal drugs I have,' he says, 'but Mantua's law / Is death to any that utters them.' He is the only apothecary to appear in any of Shakespeare's plays. In other plays – in *King Lear*, in the second part of *Henry VI* – apothecaries are summoned, but they do not arrive on stage. Romeo's apothecary is different. In the source, the telling of the sad story of Romeus and Juliet by Arthur Brooke, there was a poor apothecary. But Romeus meets him by chance. It was not a holiday, nor was the shop shut, and nor was the apothecary reluctant. There was no alligator. These are Shakespeare's details.

'The world is not thy friend, nor the world's law,' Romeo tells the apothecary: 'take this.' He hands him money, a huge sum of forty ducats, and the apothecary relents. He hands Romeo the poison. He should not do so, by the regulations of his trade, but even as he does so he remains a professional, for he hands the poison to Romeo with instructions on the dose and how to take it. His trade is the preparation and sale of drugs for money.

'This is the praise of Shakespeare,' wrote Samuel Johnson in his 1765 preface to the plays: 'his drama is the mirror of life; that he who has mazed his imagination in following the phantoms which other writers raise before him, may here be cured of his delirious ecstasies by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world.' In this small scene, a transaction of the world takes place and we are cured of any delirious ecstasies of another, purer realm of art, of poetry. It is extremely unusual in Shakespeare to see what we do here: a financial transaction in which money changes hands as a working man performs his trade. We may prefer a cleaner world. We may see trade as sullied. Romeo does. 'Gold,' he says, as he hands over the ducats: 'worse poison to men's souls.' The apothecary stands for the fallen, golden world, in which money changes hands and in which men such as Cuthbert Burbage prosper.

But then Romeo changes his mind, and the apothecary is redeemed, and through him the world of work. For Romeo cannot stop thinking about the apothecary. He returns to Verona, and in the tomb finds Juliet, and here he opens the poison. 'Here's to my love,' he says, and he drinks, and then: 'O true apothecary! / Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss a I die.' Romeo dies with the apothecary's name on his lips.



## The Best Actor

In the middle of the afternoon on a weekday in November 1590 a crowd is flooding into the Theatre. They are mostly men, and mostly young, but there are some women too, and they dip through a narrow opening in the high playhouse wall and emerge into the yard. The summer has been long and fair and although the season is turning the ground is dry underfoot. Playing in the professional playhouses is not supposed to begin until after evening prayer, at half past three, but before the play there is perhaps an hour of rough preliminary entertainments. On the stage are dancers and tumblers and as the audience fills the yard they look up and laugh. Just inside the entrance is a second, smaller door. It leads up to the galleries and here a man is standing. His name is Nicholas Bishop. He is thirty years old and has no real trade. In later depositions he will describe himself as a soap maker, but he is not at work today. He is a chancer, and he is not quite as tough as he seems.

Bishop is here because he is a friend of Ralph Miles, the surly son of Robert, and he has been accompanied on his trip to the Theatre by his friend's father and Margaret Brayne. These two have devised a bold plan. They will install Bishop at the gallery gate inside the Theatre yard as a 'gatherer'. Here, he will collect the money paid by those playgoers who wish to buy their entry to the galleries, and in this way, Margaret will recoup some of what she feels she is owed. By placing him here, she is making a careful point: that she is an owner of the playhouse, and that her share of the profits therefore comes from the gallery takings. It means, however, that she, Miles and Bishop must stand inside the playhouse. Before they arrive at the Theatre, Margaret and Miles warn Bishop that the Burbages might respond with violence. They advise him to avoid a fight, if he can. He stands at the gallery door, and begins to collect money from the playgoers, and Margaret and Miles stand a little apart from him, and in the freewheeling carnival atmosphere of a playhouse warming up, their plan seems to work.

But not for long. The Burbages arrive like a small whirlwind, all at once. James, and his wife Ellen, and their younger son Richard rush out of the tiring house at the back of the stage, where the actors are getting ready, and down from the stage into the yard, and push through the gathering crowd. Perhaps it looks to the playgoers like an unexpected and enjoyable part of the pre-show entertainments, for Richard has in his hand an unlikely object: a broomstick. As the Burbages reach the gallery door Robert Miles holds up a rolled document. It is, he says, an order issued by the Court of Chancery, and it instructs that Margaret has a right to a share in the profits from the Theatre. James Burbage scoffs. The court order is nothing but a scrap of paper he might use to wipe his tail, he says.

As the crowd turns with amusement to the scuffle, another man joins them. He is named John Alleyn, and while he is sometimes an actor he also works as a business manager for the playing company performing here today, so perhaps he is in the yard to watch the show. Now Miles is warning Burbage. He is, he insists, in contempt

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of court, and Burbage replies that he would commit twenty contempts sooner than lose his property. Alleyn tries to calm things down. He tells Burbage that Margaret does have some right to a share in the profits, and that everybody knows. Hang her, whore, replies Burbage. But she has conscience on her side, Alleyn insists. Conscience? replies Burbage, and swears: God's blood. Next time, he says, my sons will meet them with pistols and shoot them in the legs.

The older couples rail and swear: James Burbage and Ellen, Robert Miles and Margaret Brayne, scuffling over a scrap of paper. Richard watches. As Robert and Margaret start to leave, he turns and walks over to where Bishop has been standing. He still has the broomstick in his hand. In contrast to his father, he does not raise his voice. There is something uncanny about him. It is as if he happens at different speeds, both very quick and luxuriously slow. As he approaches Bishop, he plays idly with the broomstick. It is a prop as much as a weapon, and it is a joke: he is here to sweep out the rubbish. He comes close to Bishop, and he reaches out his free hand, and tweaks Bishop's nose. Your friends have left, Richard says. But you can stay, if you'd like to pay to see the play.

It was a desperate plan by Margaret and Miles but their last two weeks had been a rollercoaster of triumph and setback. On Friday, 13 November, in a surprise for all, the Court of Chancery had ruled to uphold Margaret's claim to her moiety of the Theatre. On the following Monday, 16 November, Robert Miles and his son Ralph had paid a visit to the Burbage family house just off Holywell Street, close by the Theatre. There they met Cuthbert Burbage, and he coolly answered their claims. When Miles and his son insisted that they were owed, Cuthbert replied that the lease on the Theatre was his property, for he had obtained it from John Hyde. When they repeated that the Court of Chancery had ruled against him, he answered that he would give his answer, if needed, before the court, but that he would not give away that which he had paid for and that which was rightfully his. Overhearing, James looked out of the



upstairs window. Unlike his sons, he could not control himself. 'Murdering whore,' he shouted out, at the mention of Margaret, and sent them off with another shout: a cart, a cart, to carry you away. Miles and his son left.

Richard Burbage, the younger son, was not at home on the day that Miles and Ralph had called. But he heard of it from his father and his brother, and he waited. He knew that Miles would return. Tuesday 17th was Accession Day, and there were tilts at Whitehall and bells rung in churches across the city, in celebration of the queen, and Miles and Ralph plotted their return. They called upon Bishop and asked for his help. While they did so, Richard waited. He knew his opportunity was coming.

Who was he, then, this hot and cold man, Richard Burbage? He was twenty-two years old, younger brother to Cuthbert, younger son to James, and at this moment he was all rolled up: coiled and ready, like a tiger, to spring.

By the autumn of 1590, Richard had been acting for five years, since 1584 or 1585. He began his career at sixteen or seventeen as working men did: with an apprenticeship. The actual evidence for Richard's early years is scarce. But we do know that later, when he was a triumphantly successful actor, he bound apprentices of his own, Nicholas Tooley and Richard Robinson, who remembered him as their master. So we can assume that Richard set out in the customary way. He began by taking small roles, of children, the occasional servant, and then when he was slightly more experienced the female roles.

Boy actors went on playing female roles until they were twenty-one or so. This seems late, but young men were held back through long training before they were fully considered men; and in this malnourished society, in which food was scarce, puberty was often postponed. 'Nay, let me not play a woman,' pleads Francis Flute in the second scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as the actors gather to cast their play: 'I have a beard coming.' Flute, the bellows-mender,

is a working man, not a teenager. He is ready to become an adult, to take on the adult roles.

In the closing years of the 1580s, while Richard was playing small roles and learning his craft, Shakespeare was busy with his own apprenticeship. He was four years older than Richard. The young playwright, in 1588 and 1589 and 1590, had been collaborating with other, more experienced playwrights: with Peele on a gory Roman tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*; on a sprawling historical sequence we know as the *Henry VI* plays with Marlowe and Nashe. Another play on stage at the Theatre that year has long been described simply as 'anonymous'. *Arden of Faversham* is dated, with some certainty, to late 1588 or early 1589, and it tells the ramshackle true-crime story of the murder of a landowner in Kent by his wife and her lover. The play is unlike the others that Shakespeare had been working on. It is unusually domestic. And it centres upon a female character: Alice, the home counties femme fatale, who seduces, murders and grieves.

The play has prompted much speculation by Shakespearean textual scholars. But there is increasing agreement that Shakespeare wrote at least part of it, and the editors of the *New Oxford Shakespeare* include it among Shakespeare's complete works. They add, as a further speculation, that the demanding lead role of Alice might have been written for Richard Burbage.

We cannot know and do not really need to. Whether or not Shakespeare wrote this play, and Richard acted in it, in these years and at the Theatre the two men met and quickly bound themselves to one another. Their friendship enabled both to do extraordinary work in the decades ahead, and although it is hard to imagine that the two men did not deeply care for and respect one another, perhaps friendship is not quite the right word. In his will, Shakespeare remembered Richard Burbage as one of his 'fellows'. The word holds a range of associations: co-worker, collaborator or perhaps brother.

The Theatre in the last years of the 1580s was the setting for the meeting and apprenticeship of these two remarkably creative men. It

was a moment of beginning, and of powerful potential, and crucial to their joint and increasingly collaborative apprenticeship was them learning to work with and upon raw materials. In their case these raw materials were not timbers or wool but the basic elements from which plays may be made. They went to work – and learned how to work – by drawing upon the materials they found at the Theatre.

There survives a handful of mentions, in gossipy pamphlets, of a popular but short-lived play. In the summer of 1589 the playwright and hack journalist Thomas Nashe joked about a new imitation of Seneca, a kind of pastiche Roman tragedy that featured what he called ‘whole *Hamlets*, I should say handfuls, of tragical speeches’. There is a note from a few years later, recording the performance of a play called ‘Hamlet’ at another playhouse in London, and then a couple of years later, another pamphlet laughingly recalled ‘the Vizard of ye ghost which cried so miserably at ye Theatre, like an oyster wife, Hamlet, revenge!’

The play was clearly terrible. All those who mention it describe over-wrought, mock-classical, bloodthirsty rubbish. A character intones the deathless line ‘Blood is a beggar’ while another cries out ‘Hamlet, revenge!’ These phrases are all that remain. It was performed only a handful of times; it was never printed. But it leaves a tantalising enigma. This play – about a character named Hamlet, with a ghost who calls out for revenge – was played at several playhouses in London including the Theatre in the spring or early summer of 1589. But this is a decade before the composition of the famous play we know as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which scholars date with confidence to the very beginning of the next century. The earlier and lost play is sometimes referred to as the ‘proto-*Hamlet*’, and we do not know who wrote it. Perhaps, as with *Arden of Faversham*, it was Kyd, or perhaps it was one of Watson’s lost plays.

The obvious speculation is to suggest that the young Shakespeare wrote the proto-*Hamlet*, and perhaps even for Richard Burbage. The *New Oxford Shakespeare* argues so. But this does not correspond with

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other details we categorically know, and it contradicts Shakespeare's common pattern of work. It seems too unlikely that Shakespeare and Burbage, having tried once with a Hamlet play which resulted in failure, should return to it a decade later and convert it into a success.

Instead, we might tell a different story, and one that is – as we shall see, in the following chapters – entirely characteristic of Shakespeare's working habits. The later *Hamlet* – Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as played by Burbage in 1600 – was his reworking of someone else's old play. At the Theatre in 1589 the young playwright and the young actor saw, and came to know well, a gory, unsuccessful play. They did not create it but they learned from it: as in a workshop, trying out what worked and what did not. The proto-*Hamlet* ties Shakespeare and Burbage together as apprentices, together learning from the successes and failures of their masters.

In the autumn of 1590, Shakespeare and Burbage were setting out. Ahead of them was a great run of roles. Over the next two decades, Shakespeare wrote and Richard starred as Romeo, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear. Shakespeare did not only write these roles; he wrote them for Richard Burbage. As Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern explain in their book *Shakespeare in Parts*, the Elizabethans believed that the first actor to play a role created that character and that all subsequent actors to take on the role were only imitating the first actor. Even now, when an actor takes on Hamlet, Lear or Romeo, he or she is only doing a distant impersonation of Richard Burbage, the first and true original.

He was the first; he was also the best. In a play written by Ben Jonson a couple of decades later a 'Burbage' is slang for 'the best actor'. We might guess at another nickname. The only surviving account of his acting style appears in a brief essay on the English stage written in the 1660s by the poet and playwright Richard Flecknoe. Flecknoe was old enough, just, to have seen Burbage on stage; even if he had not, he certainly knew people who had, and

Flecknoe calls Burbage 'a delightful Proteus'. This sea-god, who slips through shapes and is impossible to hold, is a fine honorific for any actor, but the name crops up in two early plays by Shakespeare. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* – likely written in 1588 – Proteus is one of the titular two gentlemen. He is a slightly insalubrious young man but a perfect role for the young actor. In the play we know as the third part of *Henry VI*, but which was first called *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* and likely written by Shakespeare and Marlowe in late 1590, the villainous Richard Gloucester boasts of his own transformations: 'I can add colours to the chameleon, / Change shapes with Proteus for advantages.' We know that Burbage played Richard. These are the only times Shakespeare uses the word: in early plays, written for performance at the Theatre, and with one specific actor in mind.

They played a game of names: affectionate, actorly, almost invisible. In 1601 Richard married Winifred Turner, and they settled in Shoreditch. Their first child, a daughter, was born in early January 1603. She was called Julia on the record of her baptism at the parish church of St Leonard's but she was Juliet on the record of her burial in September 1608. The names are close enough to be interchangeable, and here might be the slip of a clerk's pen, common enough in the church records of the time. Perhaps she was both. If she was Julia, she was named for the beloved of Proteus in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; if she was Juliet, then she was the love of Romeo. The great actor named his first-born daughter after one he had loved on stage. In September 1604, Winifred gave birth to another daughter. She died three days after her baptism, too brief, but enough time to give her a name, and she was Frances. Francis Flute is the bellows-mender in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who worried about his beard coming through and yet took on the role of Thisbe.

A boy was born, their first son, next, and they named him Richard. This was likely for his father, but his father famously played a Richard in at least two plays: first as the scheming Duke of Gloucester and

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then as the wily villain King Richard III. This young Richard was buried in August 1607 and the same month another daughter was born. She was named Anne. In *Richard III*, Lady Anne is wooed and won by Richard. The run of four children in six years was a strain upon them, and there was a pause until October 1613, when another daughter was born. She was named Winifred, for her mother, and she too died when she was just three. Another daughter was born on Christmas Day 1614, and they named her Julia, or Juliet. It was common to reuse the name of a dead sibling. Julia lived only a little more than six months.

In November 1616, another boy: William, surely named in honour of the playwright who had died six months earlier. Richard died in the late spring of 1619, but Winifred was pregnant again: she gave birth to a final daughter in August of that year, and the widowed Winifred named her Sara. Apart from Sara, over whose naming Richard had no say, and apart from Winifred – who was named for her mother – six of Richard Burbage's eight children were given names with a direct connection to Shakespeare, and more specifically to a role played by Richard.

These in-jokes hint at a deep and affectionate relation between the two men. It is tempting to see their working relationship only one way: Shakespeare as the maker and Burbage as his creature, saying aloud the words that he has been given, and with them finding fame. But this is too narrow, and just as Shakespeare was playing with his Proteus so too was Burbage giving something in return. He had the capacity, the promise, the swagger to perform such complex roles, which in turn enabled Shakespeare to write them. These roles were not loaned to Burbage. Instead, and through his own work, they were his, which is why he gave their names to his children.

Shakespeare and Richard Burbage were fellows throughout their long careers. In 1613, close to Shakespeare's retirement from writing, the two men were commissioned to create what was called an *impresa*:

a painted insignia, with a motto, to be carried by Francis Manners, the sixth Earl of Rutland, at a show to celebrate the anniversary of the accession of King James. Shakespeare wrote the motto and Burbage painted it and they were, according to a record kept by Thomas Screvin, who was Rutland's steward, paid forty-four shillings each in gold. This is a little more than £2, so not a bad rate for what must have been relatively quick work. The motto itself does not survive.

The payment ties the two men together, after close to quarter of a century of collaboration, and it ties them once more back to Shoreditch and the old Holywell site which had long since been abandoned by the Theatre and was covered with newly built tenements. For the Rutland family owned the southern portion of the Holywell site, and while the earls themselves certainly did not reside there – they preferred Belvoir Castle and their vast estates in Leicestershire – it seems that Screvin himself did oversee the running and rental of the Rutland properties at Holywell. In 1597 he had a small legal scuffle with Cuthbert over the exact border between the Rutland and Burbage holdings. The link to Holywell was not necessarily what prompted Rutland to hire Shakespeare and Burbage, but it does neatly indicate that the working habits and bond between these two men, which began at Holywell in the late 1580s, lasted their whole working lives.

After Richard Burbage died, in March 1619, a flood of elegies mourned the great actor. 'Here lies the best Tragedian ever played,' runs one: 'Poor Romeo never more shall tears beget / For Juliet's love and cruel Capulet.' It goes on:

Since thou art gone, dear Dick, a tragic night  
Will wrap our black-hung stage: he made a Poet,  
And those who yet remain fully surely know it.

The rhyme of 'poet' and 'know it' would surely have made Shakespeare wince, but he was three years dead by 1619, and in the death of his



most famous actor, their collective work was finally over. 'He made a Poet,' insists the funeral elegy, which suggests that it was Burbage who made Shakespeare, rather than the other way round. It was never a simple division of one writing the words and the other saying them, as another contemporary elegy suggests. This again names the characters Burbage played – Hamlet, King Lear, Othello 'the grieved Moor' – but not the playwright who wrote them. 'How did his speech become him,' continues the elegy, 'and his pace / Suit with his speech.' The speech was Burbage's, and Shakespeare has vanished, but he returns inside a pun. The words Burbage spoke became him, says the elegy, which means both that they suited him – that they were becoming – but also that Burbage in turn was made from those words.

'Labour': this was how Cuthbert described his brother's acting. Labour in Elizabethan London meant a company, meant collaboration, meant your fellows too, joined in collective work. Richard Flecknoe, writing towards the end of the seventeenth century, insisted that Burbage was above all a worker. 'Those who call him a Player do him wrong, no man being less idle than he, whose whole life is nothing else but action,' he wrote. But the twist is that he was working hard at something that did not look like work at all. Flecknoe adds: 'with only this difference from other men, that as what is but a Play to them, is his Business: so their business is but a play to him'. This is the purest expression of the whole Burbage provocation. In making play of business, and business of play, he was his father's son. But he was also Shakespeare's brother, his fellow.

He had the quality of going on, such that even when he had come to the end of the lines he remained, wrote Flecknoe, 'an excellent Actor still, never falling in his Part when he had done speaking; but with his looks and gesture, maintaining it still unto the height.' It made Proteus worth celebrating half a century later. He did not act only for the audience; or rather, for Burbage, everyone was audience. As Flecknoe explained, Burbage's power lay in 'so wholly transforming himself into his Part, and putting off himself with his

Clothes, as he never (not so much in the Tiring-house) assum'd himself again until the Play was done'. The tiring house was the small room immediately behind the stage, where the actors put on costumes, head-dresses – 'tires' – and even here, when he was offstage, he was in his role. He decided when the playing began, and when it stopped.

In November 1590, Richard Burbage was waiting for his celebrated roles to be created. But in some ways, they were all already here. In one of the few essays on Burbage, Alexander Leggatt observes a common tic among the Shakespearean leads first performed by the actor: 'Burbage's character repeatedly catches another character off guard with a sudden, brutal attack, physical and/or emotional, after earlier apparent closeness.' Romeo stabs Tybalt; Brutus stabs Caesar; Hamlet stabs Polonius; Othello loves Desdemona but he strangles her still. Leggatt calls the quick turn from closeness to rage a 'Burbage moment' and it was, we might assume, a characteristic habit of the man. He was impulsive – or he could act it beautifully – and Shakespeare saw something he could work with. It was both the intensity of the emotions and the speed of movement between them that was terrifying. He might be one thing; he might be another. In the yard of the Theatre in 1590, he was fooling with a broomstick. He was not on stage but he was in character. He reached out and tweaked Bishop's nose. 'Scornfully and disdainfully playing with this deponent's nose,' ran Bishop's affronted deposition. Richard Burbage was always playing.

A broomstick is an entirely common object. There was certainly one lying around in the tiring house, or by the stage; it would be useful for cleaning up at the end of a show. But in an actor's hands it becomes a prop, and it changes. At Christmas 1574 the Earl of Leicester's Men played before the queen at court, and the record of their expenses survives. It includes a payment for 'Long poles with brushes for chimney sweepers in my Lord of Leicester's Men's play, and for Moss and Sticks and other implements for them.' The

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Christmas play featured a dance or masque of chimney sweepers, fooling with broomsticks, tidying away moss and sticks, before an audience of richly dressed courtiers laughing in the holiday season. Richard was only six years old but his father James Burbage was likely one of Leicester's players, and he could have told his son the story. A broomstick has a joke inside it; a broomstick is funny. The only Shakespeare play that calls for a broom is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. At the end the naughty fairy Puck enters. He has caused so much trouble and he has come to set things right. 'I am sent with broom before,' he smirks to the audience: 'To sweep the dust behind the door.' He is only pretending to tidy up.

A broomstick is unexpected. More likely would be some stronger weapon: a club, a dagger, a sword. Almost every one of Shakespeare's plays calls for some kind of sword. Sometimes they are specified. Hamlet has a rapier, a long, thin blade for stabbing, and then foils, smaller fencing swords, for the play's final scene. Petruccio has a rusty old sword with a broken hilt in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Most often it is a generic sword. 'Hold, take my sword,' says Banquo, and all of these would have been available behind the stage. The playing companies were well armed. There survives an inventory of props held at the Rose playhouse in March 1598. It includes a dozen foils, eight clubs, three lances and a wooden hatchet. More glamorous weaponry was also available, for the stock of props also included a helmet, a shield, a shiny spear and a bow and quiver of arrows for Cupid. If something similar was available at the Theatre then Richard Burbage's choice of a humble weapon is telling. He might have come out like a gladiator. Instead, he came out like a servant.

The players had access to wonderful things. That same inventory includes six crowns: one with a sun, one for a ghost and one plain. It mentions an invisibility cloak, animal heads – a boar, lions, a bull – and a bay tree and a tree of golden apples. But plays call also for more domestic items such as plates and mugs, chairs and broomsticks, and these do not appear on the inventory from the Rose. A production of

*Arden of Faversham* needs a dagger, with which Arden is stabbed; but it also needs a chair and a table, for him to sit at when he is stabbed. These items have a double use, both on stage and in daily life, and for these more mundane items the players simply used what was available.

The only difference between a prop broomstick and a real broomstick lies in how it is being used. But there is a difference between a real gun and a toy gun. A gun was the other weapon mentioned in the fight in the Theatre yard. As John Alleyn testified, James Burbage had issued the following threat: that if Margaret Brayne and Robert Miles were to return to the Theatre he would give his sons 'charged Pistols with powder and hempseed to shoot them in the legs'. We know that there were real, working guns at the Theatre because of an awful accident that took place there. In November 1587, the Lord Admiral's Men were performing. The play, as one of the actors wrote to his father a few days later, called for the players 'to tie one of their fellows to a post and shoot him to death'.

The play might have been *The Spanish Tragedy*, by Thomas Kyd, which does feature a public execution of a minor character called Pedringano; or it might have been the second part of *Tamburlaine* by Christopher Marlowe, in which the governor of Babylon is shot. But these were stage executions, which feigned the actual death by firing. On 16 November, as the actor continued, the actors did not realise that their prop musket, also known as a calliver, was a loaded and real one: 'Having borrowed their callivers one of the players hand-swerved his piece being charged with bullet missed the fellow he aimed at.' The bullet ricocheted into the yard, where it killed a child and a pregnant woman and injured another man in the head.

The Theatre was a place where real violence happened. In December 1574, the Common Council of London passed an act that set new conditions upon the permissions granted to playing within the City walls. Among its customary catalogue of objections, the act observes that a trip to the playhouse was an opportunity to be robbed or corrupted, a distraction from divine service and an exposure to bad

language. On top of these spiritual and moral injuries it presented the occasion for actual bodily harm, for 'besides that also sundry slaughters and mayhemings of the Queen's Subjects have happened by ruins of Scaffolds, frames, and Stages, and by engines, weapons, and powder used in plays'. The galleries might fall upon you, as happened at the Paris Garden. You might be shot. This was not only Puritan worry but also a thrilling possibility: of real danger.

Having your pocket picked is one thing, and having your morals corrupted is another, but in a much more literal, bodily sense, the Theatre was violent. From the middle of the 1580s, there were rising rumours of conspiracies to overthrow the queen, and an invasion by the Spanish. Fishing boats in the Channel were mistaken for Catholic warships; a plot against the queen, known as the Babington Plot, was thwarted; in July 1588 an actual Spanish fleet was sighted off Cornwall. This has gone down in history as the Spanish Armada, and it was repelled by a combination of bad weather and – to a lesser degree – English naval pluck, but the fears continued. On 28 August that year the Theatre was the scene for a show of state violence: that day, on stage, a foreign priest was executed. His name was W. Gunter, which sounds German, not Spanish. It seems extraordinary for such an exercise of state power to take place in a playhouse on the margins of London. Perhaps it was as simple as a convenient setting. The Theatre had a raised stage and an area for the onlookers. A month later, it happened again: another execution, of another foreign priest.

The Theatre staged accidents and executions. It offered what we might see as an expansive idea of play. From the late 1570s and a couple of times each year, usually in the spring and summer, the Theatre was hired by the Company of Masters of Defence. They paid a good fee, of perhaps £2, to use the playhouse as a venue for what were known as 'prizes': public demonstrations of fencing, required for the men of the company to become provosts and masters. On Friday, 10 August 1582, John Dewell challenged the provosts of the company

with three weapons – the two-handed sword, the back sword and the sword and buckler – and was successful. On Friday, 20 May 1585, and then returning for a second round the following week, Andrew Bello played two prizes, with the sword and dagger and then the smaller rapier and dagger. These prizes were fights and also exams.

In the winter of 1588, and into 1589, a series of satirical pamphlets appeared in London. Presented as the work of a fictional character named Martin Marprelate, these mocked with zany humour the established Church. They were popular, gossipy and enough of a scandal that the ecclesiastical authorities replied in kind: by commissioning playwrights to write tracts in response and dramatic entertainments. One of these, which was described as a Maygame, included the ‘launcing and worming’ of Martin and was performed at the Theatre in the spring of 1589. It was somewhere between a public punishment, a play and a piece of propaganda.

At the Theatre no clean line divided the stage from the world around it. The sharp distinction between art and life – and between performance and reality – only emerged in later centuries. At the Theatre the stage was non-illusionistic. Everyone knew that a play was going on, for it was broad daylight, and the actors were not trying to be naturalistic. Complex theatrical machinery – the mechanised sets, the revolves and the curtain which falls and rises – was first developed in Italy, in the courts of the Medici and Farnese. It began to arrive in England in the following century, for masques under James I, and were followed by the proscenium arch, which hides the set and frames the stage action as separate from real life. Under the Victorians, play sets and playhouse design became increasingly spectacular and illusionistic. But in 1590, the stage at the Theatre was a bare and open space in which actor and audience were one.

When Richard Burbage came forward to fool with a broomstick he was making play with the materials of the workaday world. Each age thinks differently about the division between art and life; each age places the border somewhere new. The Surrealist exercise, in the early

and mid-twentieth century, of making art from banal, daily objects is only the most literal expression. A urinal became a sculpture; the handlebars and seat of a bicycle became a bull; perhaps what Richard Burbage was doing when he reached for a broomstick is best seen as one episode in a longer series. He was affronting the barriers; he was bringing the world into play, and all were his audience. Such is the logic of dreams, which draw upon and twist the things of our world before returning them to us unexpected, both familiar and strange.

In 1925 Virginia Woolf wrote a short, funny essay for the *Times Literary Supplement*. It is a clever cartoon that contrasts modern literature with Elizabethan drama. Books nowadays, she spoofs, are all about a timber merchant named Smith who works in the family business, does good work for charity and ‘died last Wednesday of pneumonia while on a visit to his son in Muswell Hill’. She puts down her modern novel, and reaches for an Elizabethan play, and she finds herself:

set free to wander in the land of the unicorn and jeweller among dukes and grandees, Gonzaloes and Bellimperias, who spend their lives in murder and intrigue, dress up as men if they are women, as women if they are men, see ghosts, run mad, and die in the greatest profusion of the slightest provocation.

And it is so boring: ‘so intolerably dull’, she concludes. ‘The Elizabethans bore us, then, because their Smiths are all changed to dukes, their Liverpools to fabulous islands and palaces in Genoa,’ she insists, with a sad smile: ‘The Elizabethans bore us because they suffocate our imaginations rather than set them to work.’ The world of these plays is not ours. They float above, miles up, and we can see nothing but clouds.

The plots are bad enough but the characters are worse. Other than in Shakespeare, and perhaps Jonson, ‘there are no characters in Elizabethan drama’, she insists, ‘only violences whom we know so



little that we can scarcely care what becomes of them'. She singles out one as an example: Bellimperia, from Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, which was first performed, although Woolf does not mention it and almost certainly did not know it, at the Theatre. This unlucky heroine is, Woolf concludes, a blank, a marvellous nothing: 'an animated broomstick'.

The closing years of the 1580s were a moment ready for change. The Queen's Men had dominated playing across London and at court for the past half decade. But their plays, with their flat characters, Protestant moralising and jingoistic propaganda, were looking stale. The summer of 1588 was wet, windy and unsettled. The same storms which had stopped the Spanish Armada caused flooding across England. At Stratford, a flood in the Avon carried away sections of the town bridge in the middle of July. On 3 September, the famous clown Richard Tarlton was buried at St Leonard's, Shoreditch. He had often played at the Theatre. The Burbages certainly attended his funeral in the church that had become associated with the acting profession.

Shakespeare was too young to have known Tarlton well, but he saw him on stage and in the streets of Shoreditch. As many have liked to suggest, when Hamlet stands in the graveyard and finds a skull of poor Yorick, his fellow of infinite jest, Shakespeare is remembering Tarlton, a beloved old clown who died years before. Tarlton was nicknamed Dick, which rhymes with and is nicely remembered in 'Yorick'. The day after Tarlton's funeral, Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, died suddenly. He was on his way to a medicinal bath in Derbyshire, and had been suffering ill health for some time, possibly from malaria contracted on one of his military campaigns. Leicester had been James Burbage's patron. With him died the last link to the older age of playing.

Any time of old things dying is a time of new things growing. The newest of the new things was Christopher Marlowe. His *Tamburlaine*,

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about the heroic rise of a shepherd warrior, Timur the Lane, debuted in the summer of 1587. There is a particular Marlowe music: exotic, wide, a carefully wrought excess, a tight release. It is there when Tamburlaine roars:

I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,  
And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about;  
And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere  
Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome.

And when he promises his lover:

A hundred Tartars shall attend on thee,  
Mounted on steeds swifter than Pegasus;  
Thy garments shall be made of Median silk,  
Enchas'd with precious jewels of mine own.

This is nothing like the old Queen's Men plays. It was irresistible and the crowds loved it. Marlowe immediately wrote a sequel, the second part of *Tamburlaine*, which was staged at the Theatre by November 1587, when it was possibly the setting for the accidental shooting. Even this did not dampen Marlowe's success. Among other playwrights, the resentment was thick enough to touch. Robert Greene pastiched Tamburlaine in his *Alphonsus, King of Aragon*. It did not do well. Greene's jibe that Marlowe was a cobbler's son was at least partly jealousy. Thomas Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War* was staged at the Theatre in 1588. These were historical epics, with great sweeps of plot, exotic in time or place. All, along with the distinctive high boasting, was copied from Marlowe.

His sound rang around the playhouses of London in 1588 and 1589. It is impossible to know with certainty exactly which plays were staged at which playhouse. Later, Marlowe's plays would be identified with the Rose playhouse, and were regularly performed

there, but in this moment the playhouses were sharing plays and the playing companies were moving between them. The stage historian Andrew Gurr places each of Marlowe's plays at the Theatre and suggests that in late 1588 or early 1589 he returned here with a new play, about Dr Faustus, who is bored with the world and sells his soul to the devil. With satanic power he sends spirits to do his bidding:

I'll have them fly to India for gold,  
 Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,  
 And search all corners of the new found world  
 For pleasant fruits and princely delicates.

'I'll have them wall all Germany with brass,' he boasts, and 'I'll have them fill the public school with silk.' *Dr Faustus* was followed by *The Jew of Malta*, the next year, and on into 1590 and 1591 a mix of playing companies – Strange's Men, and Admiral's Men – went on playing Marlowe's plays at the Theatre.

In 1589, at the peak of Marlowe fever, Shakespeare collaborated with an older playwright, George Peele, on a new play, *Titus Andronicus*. It is deeply Marlovian. Titus, the ruined Roman general, kills his own son and wounds himself, just as Tamburlaine did. One word suggests how Marlowe captured the imaginations of other playwrights. The word 'massacre' was just entering the English language. It had meant a slaughterhouse or meat market until August 1572, when Huguenots gathered in Paris for a royal wedding were murdered in a Catholic plot. This set off killings across France, and soon became known as the St Bartholomew's Day massacre or, simply, 'the massacre'. Marlowe loved the word, both verb and noun. He used it in both parts of *Tamburlaine*, and soon created a whole play about it: his *Massacre at Paris*, which recounts a slightly tabloid version of the violence of St Bartholomew's Day and in which characters speak the word ten times on stage. It is a perfect Marlovian

word: foreign, violent, a little sexy. In *Titus Andronicus*, Greene and Shakespeare took it to wink back at Marlowe. 'I'll find a day to massacre them all,' promises one character. 'I must talk of murders, rapes, and massacres,' says Aaron the Moor in the final act.

*Titus Andronicus* was a success. In the following years it passed between companies and was performed across London. It too was imitated. A lost play known as 'Titus and Vespasian' featured a dismembered hand as a grisly homage to Shakespeare and Peele. It appealed to audiences who had been trained up by Marlowe. In 1590, Shakespeare worked with Marlowe. The two men collaborated on the plays we know as *Henry VI, Part 2* ('The First Part of the Contention') and *Henry VI, Part 3* ('The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York'). A sweeping two-part historical epic with an over-reaching tragic hero: again, characteristic of Marlowe.

One key strand of Shakespeare's apprenticeship involved writing with more established playwrights, trying out their tricks and trying on their habits. It was not only Shakespeare who was watching on and learning. Richard Burbage was nineteen when Marlowe became famous. It seems likely that the lead in Marlowe's plays – Tamburlaine, Dr Faustus, the Jew of Malta, the massacring Duke of Guise – was played by another rising actor. Just as Marlowe was ahead of Shakespeare, so Edward Alleyn was ahead of Richard Burbage. Alleyn was a couple of years older; like Burbage, his fame as an actor derived from his association with a specific playwright. Like Burbage, he was a local boy: from the parish of St Botolph without Bishopsgate, just outside the City walls. Like Burbage, he was younger brother to more financially minded man in the theatre business: in his case, John Alleyn. Edward Alleyn had presence. His large voice, his arms-wide reach, his great gestures, were all made for Marlowe's lines. In the second part of *Tamburlaine*, Alleyn entered riding on a chariot drawn by a pair of conquered kings. They are his prisoners, reduced to horses with bits in their mouths. 'Holla, ye pampers'd jades of Asia!' he mocks them: 'What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day?'

It is a famous line, perhaps the most celebrated in all of Marlowe's plays, likely the most characteristic, and it was unforgettable. Later, Shakespeare turned the phrase inside out and placed it in the mouth of a minor, foolish character, in a play he writes a decade from now. There, a braggart boasts of the 'pack-horses / And hollow pampered jades of Asia'. Shakespeare picked a little quarrel with Marlowe of his own. But in 1590, the young Richard Burbage was watching on. He was a young man no longer quite a boy, in his father's playhouse, waiting for his own chance to shine. Perhaps it was a simple question of temperament, but when he came, Richard Burbage chose a different style of gesture. His was not the wild, exotic thunder but something lighter, tighter. When Burbage fooled with a broomstick he was not exactly doing an imitation of Marlowe. But he was – like Shakespeare, in these years – trying out the styles of violence and action.

For two young men at the Theatre, the apprentice years were coming to an end. Burbage and Shakespeare had learned the Marlovian ways, and how they might do them differently. They were assembling tools and tricks which they may have borrowed from others but which, in their hands, would be made anew. At the Theatre, a radically new model of working relationship was emerging. It went beyond the old world of an apprentice learning from a master. These two apprentices formed a fellowship of their own: learning from each other, each forcing the other further. Shakespeare's father's material was leather and Burbage's father's material was wood. Now for the younger Shakespeare and Burbage, the key raw material would be one another.



## The Journeyman

The play is done, and the dust settling from the jig afterwards. The Lord Admiral's Men return to the tiring room at the back of the stage, where James Burbage comes to them with his arms full of money pots. He shatters the pots upon a table and there is a lovely clean crashing sound as shards of pottery fall with coins between them. While Burbage loathes giving money away, he must love this. He is an old man of sixty, but this feels like success. The division is simple: Burbage takes the payments made at the galleries and the players take the payments from the outer doors. He turns the coins in his fingers. It is an early evening in May 1591, and a play is done, and there are takings to be shared out, and James Burbage is in his kingdom.

The Lord Admiral's Men have been playing at the Theatre. It is possible that they have put on a play called 'Dead Man's Fortune'. It has a great title, but is lost; it is possible that Edward Alleyn, with his big voice and distinctive wide gestures, has been on stage. It is Edward's older brother John who comes to collect the players' portion

of the takings. For the Admiral's Men Alleyn keeps track of payments and looks after their investments in costumes and playbooks. Perhaps the thing James Burbage hates most is a man looking over his shoulder while there is money on the table. In front of the actors, Alleyn approaches Burbage. He asks for what they are owed, and he reminds Burbage that a little more is owed on top, from the week before. He cannot help himself. The Admiral's Men have been playing at the Theatre regularly over the winter and Alleyn was present last November when Margaret Brayne came to the playhouse to ask for her money, only to be denied. He knows Burbage's ways. 'Or are you going to treat us like you did that poor widow?' he asks. If so, he continues, I'll have to go and speak with the Lord Admiral.

And James Burbage explodes. Perhaps it is the mention of the Lord Admiral, or perhaps it is the impudence of a player suggesting that he is equal to the co-owner of a playhouse. Little matter that Alleyn is right and Burbage has cheated and tricked Margaret Brayne out of her fair share. What matters to Burbage is the implication that he is small, even here in his own house. I care not, he shouts, for three of the best lords of them all. Then, with what Alleyn later describes as 'a great oath', Burbage turfs the Admiral's Men out of the tiring house and out of the playhouse and out of Shoreditch. They do not play here again.

John Alleyn did not forget. In February 1592, Margaret Brayne called upon him to depose in her ongoing suit against the Burbages. She had known him since at least the quarrel of November 1590, and she trusted him as both an ally and a witness. Upon questioning by the clerk of the court, he told a cool and money-minded story. He knew the details of the mortgage to Hyde, and he speculated that perhaps Burbage deliberately forfeited as a ploy to cheat the Braynes out of it. He offered an estimate of Burbage's income: a hundred pounds a year. 'He hath seen,' he deposed, and 'he doth know.'

Alleyn was an extremely useful witness. He was a former player, and familiar with the details of the playing companies and their



dealings with the Burbages. He was also well known in Shoreditch. His father had settled in St Botolph's parish, immediately to the south, and had purchased properties including an inn on Bishopsgate. He had risen to local prominence and oversaw the Bethlem hospital for the insane which stood on Bishopsgate. This was chiefly an honorary position. Alleyn inherited property from his father, and during the 1580s, he acquired leases on four more tenements in the neighbourhood. He was comfortable with litigation, and after his father's death he sued his stepfather. He knew about property and the law.

His deposition against the Burbages was damning. Three months later, he was called again to depose, by the Burbage faction. Their interrogatories were wild. In one run of questions, they alleged that Robert Miles had claimed the Theatre was rightly his, and threatened to pull the Burbages out of it by their ears. Alleyn coolly denied it. 'There hath passed at no time any such speech between the said Robert Miles or Ralph his son to this deponent,' he said. His powerful testimony was also his quiet revenge, and it might have brought the long legal drama to a close. But the court moved slowly. In April 1593, while waiting to hear a verdict, Margaret Brayne died. This was one version of the Burbage long game: wait until your enemies or creditors die.

There is a small discrepancy between John Alleyn's two depositions. In February 1592 he described himself as 'of the parish of St Botolph's without Bishopsgate, London, innholder'. Three months later, when he was called by the Burbages to answer their interrogatories, he described himself as 'late of the parish of St Botolph's without Bishopsgate, London, free of the company of Innholders of London'. Such distinctions mattered in late Elizabethan London. In March or April of 1592 John Alleyn was made free of the Company of Innholders by patrimony. He therefore became a citizen. He also moved to a new house in the richer parish, a little to the south-west, of Holborn.

In moving away from Bishopsgate, Alleyn not only left the neighbourhood where he grew up, but he also left a district that was increasingly inhabited by those in the growing theatre profession. The player John Dutton and the playwright Robert Wilson lived in St Botolph's without Bishopsgate; Marlowe lived in Norton Folgate, just off Bishopsgate, with his fellow playwright Thomas Watson. But for as long as Alleyn had been connected to the players he had also been a businessman, investing in the hospitality industry, which was also concentrated along Bishopsgate. This was the great thoroughfare for those travelling out to Lincolnshire or to Norfolk, and those making the journey needed places to stay when they arrived or before they departed. By investing in taverns and lodging houses Alleyn established one future source of income.

In January 1589, Alleyn and his younger brother jointly bought a share in the Admiral's Men, who were then playing at the Theatre. John soon became the business manager of the company. In the early 1590s, the brothers invested in costumes and props. A holding of stage properties was another revenue stream, as these could be hired out. The Alleyn brothers had been around for long enough to know that the industry had its seasons, and that one way to weather these was to hedge. In October 1592 Edward Alleyn married Joan Woodward, the stepdaughter of Philip Henslowe, the owner of the Rose playhouse. Edward Alleyn and the Admiral's Men had been playing here for the past two years, and it is perhaps not too cynical to see the marriage as part of a wider and distinctively Alleyn pattern. He was securing his own standing.

The behaviour of the Alleyn brothers – pragmatic, cautious, with one foot in the world of playing and the other in the closely related world of property investment – made them true characters of the industry. It also made them rich. 1591 and the following year were for some in the playing world a golden moment. Later economic historians would call it a bull market. Put simply: John Alleyn could afford to pick a fight with James Burbage. As the historian

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Terence Schoone-Jongen observes, after 1588 there were eight venues in London available to the players. There were the four inns in the City, as well as the four commercial playhouses in the suburbs. The Curtain in Shoreditch was open, as was a playhouse to the east called Newington Butts, about which we know little. In 1592, Henslowe spent the huge sum of £105 on improvements at the Rose, moving the stage and increasing the capacity of the yard. The renovated playhouse could hold as many as 2,500 spectators. Later that same year James Burbage did more modest improvements – to a total of about £40 – at the Theatre, where he added new stage machinery. Burbage and Henslowe were confident in the market, and that the crowds would come.

To fill these playhouses, players were needed. Old aristocratic companies, which had formed a generation before and then vanished from view during the years of the Queen's Men, were brought back together. Sussex's Men, who had played for the queen in the 1570s and then spent the following decades touring the provinces, returned to court in January 1592. Strange's Men were at the Rose, perhaps in combination with the Admiral's Men, likely with Edward Alleyn. He was a star and the times were good. The combined company were called to play six times at court over the winter of 1591–2, and soon renamed themselves as Derby's Men. Along with Hereford's Men, and Sussex's Men, they also played regularly at the Rose.

Volatility is one of the characteristics of a bull market, and for the playing companies, it was a volatile moment. They formed and re-formed; actors passed between them, as did plays. According to a few brief records, a new company called Pembroke's Men was formed. It remains slightly mysterious. The Earl of Pembroke who was later a famous patron of the arts – and who may be the dedicatee of Shakespeare's sonnets – was only eleven. His father, the first earl, was also known for his ties to writers; it seems perfectly likely he might have sponsored a company of players. They played at court, twice, over the season of 1592–3, and they toured over the following summer.

According to the title pages of later printed plays, the company was linked to Shakespeare. They performed *Titus Andronicus*, the two plays about *Henry VI* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

But who were Pembroke's Men? We are forced to speculate from the few traces we have. In 1591, after the departure of the Admiral's Men, James Burbage found himself with a playhouse and no players. He brought together a handful of actors he knew and formed a new, temporary company. They had three unusual assets. They were housed at the Theatre, which Burbage controlled. Here, Richard Burbage – we must assume he stayed loyal to his father, and it was an excellent opportunity for him – played the lead in plays written or co-written by Shakespeare. As such, they had two good seasons at the Theatre.

The key characteristic of the new company, and what set it apart from others, is that it was housed at a specific playhouse. There was a financial logic: a simple insight that would not have been lost on James Burbage. At the end of a performance, the day's takings were divided between the playhouse owner and the sharers of the playing company. Therefore, as Chambers observes: 'If a man was a sharer as well as a housekeeper, he claimed under both heads.' So: two portions instead of one, as well as the opportunity for greater control.

'The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were periods of experimentation in business form,' note the business historians Ann M. Carlos and Stephen Nicholas, and they observe that the chartered trading companies of the period – where they find the origins of modern multinational corporations – all shared a specific organisational innovation. 'They chose to become vertically integrated forms rather than to conduct their business through the market,' they write: 'They chose this route not because a private market did not exist, but because operating by managerial fiat inside the hierarchical firm was less costly than using the market.' The market might provide you, as a business owner, with the goods and services you need. But it is more efficient, and ultimately more profitable, to bring these

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in-house. Such vertical integration was famously the method used by the Hollywood studios of the mid-twentieth century, as they sought to control not only the contracts of the actors, writers and craftsmen who built the sets, but also the cinemas where the films were screened.

In the tiring house, with money upon the table, John Alleyn and James Burbage were fighting over a simple question: who gets a bigger share, the actors or the playhouse owner? Alleyn gave one answer. He insisted that the market was for players, who had an equal footing to playhouse owners. James Burbage answered differently. Instead of the obvious claim, that the playhouse owner is king, he brought the playing company into and under the playhouse. He was vertically integrating.

Here are the things you could do to make a living if you were a playwright in late Elizabethan London. You could write a pageant to celebrate the election of a new Lord Mayor and hope to be rewarded with an annual pension. You could become secretary to a great earl, live in his household and tutor his children. You could assist a torturer in his grim work. You could follow your father into the scrivener trade, copying out legal documents like a human Xerox machine, or you could help your father in his workshop building coaches for the rich. You could go off on a sea voyage to the Americas. You could become a pirate in the notorious crew of the *Fly*, out of Cork, raiding Flemish merchant vessels in the Channel. You could go looking for El Dorado with Sir Walter Raleigh. MP, doctor, spy: if it is all too much you could go to prison for debt. The one thing you could not do to earn a living was to write plays.

The impossible condition of being a playwright became starkly evident in the boom years of 1591–2. It looked like a golden moment. There were eight or ten major playwrights at work in London. There was Robert Greene, bold in his red beard which he brushed out to such a spike that a man might hang a jewel upon it. He was famous for his bestselling courtly romances and his lowbrow ‘coney-catching’

pamphlets about London's criminal lowlife. That year he was writing a comedy with Thomas Lodge, *A Looking Glass for London and England*. There was John Lyly, the earl's secretary, who had had massive success with the prose satire *Euphues* a decade before, writing innovative, satirical plays for the boys' companies playing at St Paul's. Thomas Watson and Thomas Kyd were translating classical sources into experimental new tragedies. Anthony Munday, the torturer's apprentice and author of vicious anti-Catholic pamphlets, was translating from the Italian plays about popular folklore and magic. The satirist Thomas Nashe was writing a play about Henry VI, in collaboration with Christopher Marlowe.

Nashe's Henry VI play was probably performed at the Rose in March and April 1592, and in a nifty bit of self-promotion Nashe wrote an account of how it was a magnet for the crowds. The play's hero was the long-dead John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury. Now, Nashe writes, Talbot 'should triumph again on the Stage, and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least (at several times) who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding'. The reign of this medieval king, with the bloodbaths and dynastic wrestles of the Wars of the Roses, was a familiar stretch of English history. Shakespeare also wrote about Henry VI, again in collaboration with Marlowe, in their plays performed at the Theatre. The writers were busy, collaborating, attuned to what was fashionable, to what drew the crowds.

With the profusion of playhouses and playing companies to fill them came another need. When the companies went on tour, they could do so with a small handful of plays. At each new town or great lord's hall they might offer the same play they had performed the previous day. But with the profusion of playhouses in London, the playing companies began to settle into longer runs, which in turn meant that the same play could not be performed day after day. Martin Wiggins has collected all the evidence we have from all plays from the period, and his eleven-volume

*British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue* lists an average of thirty new plays a year from the period 1588–92. This was an unusual uptick. Between 1584 and 1587, the average was eleven per year.

However: the majority of plays from the period do not survive. Estimates vary, for a lost play might well leave no trace at all, but perhaps 60 per cent of the drama has been lost. For many plays we have only a title, or a mention, like ‘Dead Man’s Fortune’ which was played at the Theatre in 1591. But even these evoke the richness of what was on stage. There were Marlovian knock-offs, about the Great Cham and Tartars, exotic and Eastern. There were topical satires: ‘A Fig for a Spaniard’. For many, we can only guess: a play called ‘Cloris and Orgasto’; another about Heliogabalus, the mad priest of the sun; one about the tanner, or perhaps the tamer, or even the drummer, of Denmark, which was played in 1592. ‘Pope Joan’ was at the Rose in March 1592, and Strange’s Men played ‘Machiavel’ in the same season. The titles are colourful and evocative, but we have only those. For none of these do we know the name of the playwright.

The market needed plays but did not value playwrights. The common practice was that the playwright sold the playbook to the playing company, for a one-off payment of perhaps £7 or a little less. The physical object and the play within it became the property of the playing company. Seven pounds was not a negligible sum. A respectable annual wage might be £20. But for collaborative plays, the fee was divided, so it might become £2, or £3. By contrast, John Alleyn deposed that he believed James Burbage was making £100 each year.

There is profit and, connected but not the same, there is ownership. As Bart van Es notes, ‘Once a playwright submitted a manuscript, control over that copy ceased.’ Once the play was sold it was orphaned from the playwright and adopted by others. The company might do what it liked with it. The play existed in a single, authorised version. ‘This was the manuscript that had on its final page the official “allowance” and signature from the Master of Revels,’ Andrew Gurr explains. ‘Such “allowed books” of plays were the company’s



most valued asset.' While they might be sold or traded between companies, they were 'far too valuable ever to be passed into the destructive hands of a printer'. Just as it was in the interest of the Company of Carpenters to supervise who was trained up in the secrets and skills of carpentry, so was it a commercial advantage for the playing company to keep the playbook private. The publication of plays only began to rise in the mid-1590s. Printed title pages tend to list the name of the company, but not the playwright. Where we might expect them to say, beneath the title, 'by Christopher Marlowe', instead they announce 'as played by the Lord Admiral's Men'. Shakespeare's name did not appear on a title page until 1598.

Modern copyright secures the link between creator and artwork, or between writer and book. But modern authorial copyright was not established in England until the Statute of Anne of 1709. The full title of the act suggests its scope and innovation: 'An Act for the Encouragement of Learning, by Vesting the Copies of Printed Books in the Authors or Purchasers of such Copies'. Prior to this, the right to make a profit from the sale of printed copies belonged to printers, not authors. Copyright was a little monopoly regulated by the Stationers' Company. By 1577, a company ordinance instructed that before printing and selling a book, a Stationer – a freeman of the company – had to show it to the company wardens, who entered it in a register. A trip to Stationers' Hall and a small fee to pay granted the exclusive right to print that book.

'This simple arrangement which gave a form of copyright protection, not of course to authors or translators but to printers and book-sellers,' writes Cyprian Blagden in the official history of the Stationers' Company, 'was a great step forward in the organisation of the book trade.' A great step forward for some: his breezy story is a booksellers' history, and it inevitably leaves out those we might assume should deserve reward for the creation of a book. But the age did not offer credit – in either of its senses – to playwrights, and much of the drama of the 1580s is anonymous. The play was not the playwright's

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property. It could not be left to his heirs, could not be controlled or retrieved. In a world of vertical integrations, of companies and playhouses, the playwrights were cast out.

Boom times for some, and for others: dead man's fortune. On 3 September 1592, in the garret of a shoemaker's house in Dowgate, in the City, Robert Greene died. He had been ill for a while. His body was brought back to Bishopsgate and he was buried near the Bethlem hospital the following day. Greene had written for the Theatre. He was probably behind the anti-Marpelate plays. His play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* was performed there in 1589. The Burbages certainly knew him, and Shakespeare likely did. Or rather, everybody knew him, as he was a celebrity.

Greene's life was a quarrel with the dominant market conditions for playwrights. He raged against the limitations of his economic moment with some pathos, as he was also the perfect creature of those conditions. He furiously watched actors get rich – rich enough to buy a windmill, he said, a lovely image of the freedom afforded by being able to engage in capital investment – while writers did not. What irked him was others making money off his words. But he welcomed it too. Greene wrote pastoral romances when they were fashionable. He turned to pamphlets about street crime in London, and in 1592 one of these went through six editions. This was excellent for the booksellers. Greene hated the hamster wheel within which he revelled. 'He that cometh in print, setteth himself up as a common mark for everyone to shoot at,' he wrote, which was then printed. He knew the market and that was his curse. In 1591 Greene wrote a play called *Orlando Furioso*, after Ariosto, and sold it to the Queen's Men for a little less than £7. This was the standard rate. It was not enough. So once the Queen's Men went on tour Greene sold it again, to the Admiral's Men, who played it at the Rose in February 1592. A pamphlet mocked him for being a pickpocket like those London lowlifes he had written about, but that is backwards. He made

money for others: for booksellers, for the playhouses, for the actors he called 'men that measured honesty by profit, and that regarded their authors not by desert but by necessity of time'. He was brilliant, in his own way. The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits him with the first usage of the word 'apple pie'; before him there was a dish of stewed spiced apples, called an apple moyse. None of his plays was published in his lifetime.

W.H. Auden wrote, about a very different poet, that in his death 'he became his admirers'. Robert Greene, in his death, became his retorts: his mockery and snobbery and condescension. Immediately after he died a literary industry sprang up around his dying words. One account, by the gossipy Gabriel Harvey, described the deathbed of a rotten man, this king of the paper stage, this emperor of shifters, lying in squalor in a prostitute's den after an excess of sweet wine and pickled herring. Published within a month, another pamphlet, called *The Repentance of Robert Greene*, covered the same ground in a wholly different tone. It told of the pleading letter Greene sent his wife from his deathbed, written on the back of a creditor's note, and a prayer he wrote during his final sickness. For London in 1592, Greene's deathbed encapsulated all the contradictions of the moment: the commercially successful playhouses, the rising actors, the impossibly straitened writers, and the taint of trade and the closeness of corruption. Greene was a parable with different meanings. Harvey called him 'a very proverb of Infamy, and contempt'. We can see him as a writer in a moment essentially hostile to writers, and in which a writer's name meant nothing.

The most famous thing that Greene ever wrote was likely not written by him at all. A curious pamphlet, called *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit, bought with a million of Repentance*, was entered in the Stationers' Register on 20 September. It is a morality tale, of a scholar and playwright who falls on hard times and who entirely unsurprisingly turns out to be Greene himself. Although the pamphlet is in Greene's voice, it seems it was assembled by a bankrupt stationer and

playwright named Henry Chettle. Even if he did not write it, it does express something of Greene, for the pamphlet picked up and sharpened all his old snobberies about actors, about trade and about people who made money for nothing while the real artists suffered.

The pamphlet includes a letter, addressed to three gentlemen of his acquaintance. These are nicknamed 'thou famous gracer of Tragedians', a young satirist he calls 'Juvenal' and Saint George, and can safely be identified as Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe and George Peele. He warns them about actors, 'those Puppets . . . that speak from our mouths, those Anticks garnished in our colours', and goes on to specify one threat. There is, Greene laughs, 'an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a Player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you'. The phrase about the tiger's heart is a parody of a line from *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*, which is the play later known as *3 Henry VI*, written by Marlowe and Shakespeare. It comes from a scene identified as Shakespeare's and this brief description is widely accepted as an attack upon the rising young playwright he almost named in the following sentence: 'Shake-scene'.

What Marlowe, Nashe and Peele shared was that each had collaborated with the younger Shakespeare. And all three had, like Greene and Thomas Watson, studied at one or other of the universities, Oxford or Cambridge. They are sometimes nicknamed the 'university wits' and, Greene mocked, they were collaborating with one beneath their station, one who had not even gone to university. He was furious at this upstart, taking that which was properly theirs, taking a portion which did not belong to him.

That same September, while all the gossip of literary London was of Robert Greene, another playwright died. Nobody could have known it, but these were early signs of a coming catastrophe. Thomas Watson was buried at St Bartholomew the Less, in the City, on 26 September 1592. He is even more forgotten than Greene. It is easy to romanticise a vanished poet and to see in this generation of playwrights an early

and English bohemia, of brilliant poets and playwrights in their wildness. Shakespeare drew a different lesson. He knew these men. He wrote with them, wrote around them; he learned to write by writing like them until later when he did not write like anybody at all. We might see it as cold and we might see it as warm but in the following years he remembered them. More often than any of them would have liked, the only reason we think of the university wits at all now is because of their connection to Shakespeare.

Later, when Shakespeare thought of these playwrights, he pictured men writing for money: men addicted to the idea of it and struck down by the shortfall; men never able to square the demands of respectability and art; impoverished men, selling their words; broken men, dying in debt. There was the scruffy freelancer Thomas Nashe. Inventive, prolific, haunted by debt, Nashe was a man whose life was pitched at the uneasy meeting of greatness and the gutter. In *Love's Labours Lost* Shakespeare remembered him as the small pageboy Moth and mourns him in a lovely phrase: 'a halfpenny purse of wit'. There was Greene, the bestselling author of his day, which turned out to be the wrong day. In *A Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare remembered him as the ballad-selling rogue and pickpocket Autolycus. 'Come buy of me, come, come buy, come buy,' he sings: 'Buy, lads, or else your lasses cry.' There are certainly allusions to Thomas Watson in Shakespeare's plays, but we cannot identify these, as Watson's plays are lost.

Then there was Christopher Marlowe, the most brilliant playwright of the moment, and that moment was brief. After he was killed in a fight in a tavern by the river in May 1593 Shakespeare remembered him. 'When a man's verses cannot be understood,' observes the clown Touchstone in *As You Like It*, 'it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room.' The reckoning is the bill at the end of a meal and it is also the final judgement, and the little room is both the tavern where Marlowe died and an allusion to one of Marlowe's most famous lines. In his play *The Jew of Malta*, the

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villain dreams of 'infinite riches in a little room'. Luxury, excess, fame, wealth, power: all from words. When Shakespeare thought of these playwrights, later, he thought of the shortness of life and the consolations of art, but most of all he thought about money. How to make it; how to hold onto it; how to ensure that your name is known and that your works survive: he learned to do so from these men and by their negative example. He learned it by not being Greene.

In 1591, Shakespeare took something like a gap year, or a sabbatical from writing plays.

The exact chronology of when he wrote what is a vexed question. The editors of the *New Oxford Shakespeare* place the composition of *The Taming of the Shrew* – an early and surprisingly cruel comedy about a man schooling his wife into submission – in this year. But they do so, they acknowledge, only because he apparently wrote nothing else. Even this play may not be an original composition but Shakespeare's reworking of a different play with an equally uncertain date, very similar plot and almost identical title: the anonymous 'The Taming of a Shrew', which was published in 1594. We can follow the money. The rate for a new play was approximately £7, and less if the play was co-written or a revision of another play. If so, Shakespeare's income from writing was between £4 and £7 for the year. That was not even close to a living wage. Whatever else he was doing to earn a living, it was not writing plays.

By 1591, Shakespeare had spent the past five or so years in a play-writing apprenticeship. He had worked upon half a dozen plays, at least one them extremely successful. He had been working with older, more established playwrights, in a model of training familiar to the age. It was the pattern at the back of everyone's mind. In an orthodox company career, the next step for the rising apprentice was to complete his apprenticeship and become free of his master. He would do two or three years of work within his chosen trade. He usually stayed with the family or workshop he apprenticed in. But he was

paid for his labour. He was a skilled worker, no longer an apprentice, and he was known by a different name: as a journeyman. The average age for a journeyman to begin this phase of his career was 24.9 years, according to Steve Rappaport. Shakespeare was a little behind. In 1591 he was twenty-six and turning twenty-seven.

The apprenticeship system is the deep metaphor behind Shakespeare's early career. The vocabulary and structure of a company apprenticeship and its pathway into a full and well-paid working life were extremely common. It was a familiar pattern and it was shared by the livery companies, which regulated the trades, and the playing companies, which were modelled upon them. As the historian Gerald Eades Bentley observes, the playing companies relied upon a pool of hired labour: twenty or so men, sometimes known as hirelings, and sometimes referred to as journeymen. They worked as musicians, minor actors, looking after the props. These were paid a nominal weekly wage of six shillings, which was the same fixed weekly rate as a journeyman in one of the established trades would expect. So a hired man in a playing company was paid the same as a journeyman carpenter. This might have been Shakespeare's second revenue stream.

It is possible that he worked as an actor. In 1598, and 1603, his name appeared on lists of the cast in printed editions of Jonson's plays, and in the 1623 Folio of his own works he was honoured not only as the writer but also one of 'the Principal Actors in all these Plays'. There were later rumours of the roles he took – often small but resonant ones – but we do not know. If he was working as a journeyman actor, with Pembroke's Men at the Theatre, the extra income was surely welcome: six shillings a week gives £14 a year.

The problem is that it did not, really, give £14 a year. It would be so only if every week were good. The wage for a journeyman carpenter was set by statute. But such statutes did not exist to protect those who worked in the unlicensed, unregulated, suburban trade of playing. As actors and the hired men of the playing companies complained, their weekly wage was a mirage. 'Sometimes I have a shilling a day, and



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sometimes nothing, so that I live in great poverty,' lamented one actor in 1591. A couple of decades later, a group of actors began a lawsuit to collect arrears they felt they were owed. 'Divers times it fell out that the gettings of the company were so small,' grumbled one hired man, that 'they did pay unto the hired men or servant no wages and sometimes half-wages and sometimes less.' When the takings were small, the wages for hired men dipped; when they were on tour, it seems from a 1597 testimony, the actors were paid only a half wage. The playhouses could not be relied upon as a dependable income stream. Shakespeare was in effect a freelancer or gig worker, doing two full-time jobs, with a hard ceiling on his earnings.

Follow the money: who gets the credit, who takes the share, who is left out of the day in the tiring room when the takings are divided up. All were fighting for a slice of the pie in a zero-sum world in which one's man's profit meant another man's loss. For a man with a family this was not an abstract question. Robert Greene had a son, with the unlikely name of Fortunatus. In the days immediately following Greene's death, there were jokes that the boy should be named Infortunatus.

In 1591 Shakespeare must have taken stock of his standing in a precarious industry, which occasionally had good prospects but offered no obvious route to financial security. Back in Stratford, his family was growing. While he was mostly away, training up in London, Anne was left behind with their three children: Susanna, who was eight, and the twins, Judith and Hamnet, who were six. After the birth of the twins in February 1586, Shakespeare and Anne had no more children. This might be a sign that he was often away. Or it might suggest their financial worry, which led to a rational economic decision to have fewer children and therefore fewer mouths to feed. Either way, theirs was an unusually small family. It was common for a married couple to have six or seven children. Anne came from a larger family: she had six surviving siblings. Her own father had died in 1581, leaving the family farm – Newlands Farm, in Shotton, near

Stratford – to her brother Bartholomew. He lived there with their stepmother, his new wife, and perhaps two or three of their children; and perhaps a couple of their siblings, too, for the youngest of them was a twelve-year-old boy, and another was fifteen, a little too young to be sent off into work or service. So Anne could not have depended upon her own family for support.

This has so far been a London story. If we widen the frame, from Shoreditch to Stratford, it brings into focus a question of need. Anne lived with her in-laws, Shakespeare's parents, in the house on Henley Street in Stratford. Her family house at Shottery was simply too crowded. The Shakespeare house in Stratford contained both a living space and a workshop. Shakespeare's father John practised his trade of glove-making in a workshop connected to the main house. Living here were Shakespeare's brothers Richard, who was seventeen, Gilbert, who was fifteen, and Edmund, eleven, as well as his sister Joan, unmarried and twenty-two, along with both of Shakespeare's parents. This is a total of six, and this is before we count Anne and her three children. The Shakespeare house was a crowded one, as well as multi-generational. This was unusual, and a further sign of financial stress.

In the 1570s, John Shakespeare had been a successful man, with a prosperous career and a good standing in the community. But he suffered a run of financial setbacks. He began to mortgage his properties; he was summonsed for debt in 1585 and 1586. In autumn 1591, John's name appeared on a list of those not appearing at church. This is sometimes taken as proof of his adherence to the outlawed Catholic faith. It might be explained more simply. As Robert Bearman points out, one of John's creditors was pressing a suit against him in the Stratford Court of Common Pleas. The debt proceedings rumbled on into 1592, another humiliation for a man who found himself downwardly mobile. From shame or to avoid his creditors John remained at home, which meant that his income from glove-making would have shrunk. This is a brief audit of Shakespeare's

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standing in 1591 and 1592. He had possible fortune in London, but in an uncertain industry, and one that did not accommodate wider networks of need. He may have written a handful of plays we now celebrate, but we know how the story ends. He did not know, and in 1591 and 1592 the outlook was not good. Before it got better, it would get a whole lot worse.

What was Shakespeare doing to make money in 1591? He must have been doing something. Poor dead Robert Greene left a clue for us to follow.

When Greene attacked the Shake-scene Shakespeare as an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, he made a specific allegation: that he was taking credit for the work of others. Even worse, he appeared to believe that he could write as well as his betters. In Greene's phrase, he 'supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you'. Blank verse is unrhymed iambic pentameter, which is a rhythm we associate chiefly with Shakespeare but which had been brought into English half a century earlier by a handful of aristocratic poets and then repurposed for use as a metre for plays in the hands of Kyd and Marlowe. Greene's objection was born of snobbery about the man – a working man should not traffic in such elevated measures – but expressed also a prejudice about the style of work. For Shakespeare, Greene insisted, his art was only craft.

Greene was right about Shakespeare. He was indeed in many ways an upstart. He was less well educated than Marlowe and Watson and the university wits. He was less confident in translating from the classics; he was less well connected to the aristocracy. But he was, by 1591 and 1592, deeply familiar with the conditions of playing and the playhouses. He had a rare practical experience – partly adopted from the older playwrights with whom he had systematically worked, and partly from his activities as a hired man – of the mechanics of a play, what made it work and what did not. The Theatre had given him all of this. But he also had a gift of his own: of something like

mimicry, or something like parody, of being able to sound like nobody else in the world and yet all the world too. He could bombast out a blank verse with the best of them.

Luckily, this set of skills was extremely valuable. In the boom years of the 1580s, the fashion was for big plays with big casts, of perhaps eighteen actors, playing forty to fifty roles. The Queen's Men were most famous for these; and the Queen's Men could call on all the actors they wanted. Partly under the pressure of Marlowe's innovations, partly because they began to look old-fashioned and partly because actors were expensive, the fashion changed. And from the early 1590s, these plays were trimmed into shorter, quicker, more efficient versions. When these old plays came to be printed in the mid-1590s, they strikingly could be played by a smaller number of actors. It is not just that they had been cut. The plays were specifically redesigned to be played by fourteen actors. They had been expertly tailored.

Tailoring a play written for eighteen actors into one that could be played with fourteen would be 'an intricate task', write Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean in their study of the Queen's Men. 'The new and heavier doubling assignments would have been especially problematic.' What is needed to turn a play for eighteen actors into a play for fourteen? Sometimes you need to lose a character but keep the plot intact. Sometimes you need a bridge between scenes: a line of dialogue that explains what might otherwise appear a sudden leap or to cover a costume change. For plays to go on tour, there would be further demands. A touring company might only take six main actors and then a couple of apprentices and four hired men. They would have access to fewer props and, in a town hall or the great chamber of a lord's house, a limited stage. What the market called for was not new plays, but tailored versions of the old ones.

If collaboration was Shakespeare's apprenticeship, then reworking or tailoring made up his journeyman years. It seems like a lesser work, to fiddle with another man's play, and seeing it as only patching or

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repairing echoes Greene's contempt. Play-patching is the term sometimes used by literary historians, but we might also use a newer name and see Shakespeare in these journeyman years as a script doctor. The term originated in the 1930s and refers to the practice – most famously in Hollywood movies – of calling in a writer to do improvements to an existing screenplay. The way we name work changes over time as our understanding of it, and how highly we rate it, also change. The most celebrated script doctor was William Goldman, the novelist and playwright turned screenplay writer. He was the best-paid and most famous screenwriter in the world – author of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Marathon Man* – before he started working as a script doctor on Hollywood movies in the 1980s. His most famous phrase, from *All the President's Men*, is the command: 'Follow the money.'

Script doctoring has two characteristics. First: it sees writing as craft, not high art. Greene could not quite bear the idea. But as William Goldman once said in an interview: 'Screenplay writing is not an art form. It's a skill; it's carpentry; it's structure.' Second: the worker becomes invisible, as otherwise the seams and the joints where he has made changes would show. By definition, the script doctor goes uncredited on the film or TV show. There remains today doubt about exactly which Hollywood movies Goldman doctored. He might have touched up *A Few Good Men*, or *Good Will Hunting*. That we do not know means that he was good at his job. The art is to write as if you were not there at all. Skilled but uncredited: the apparent contradiction of script doctoring is equally the condition of being a good company worker.

'I am invisible,' declares Oberon in the third scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as the young Athenian lovers enter. Perhaps he puts on a costume. There is a record for 'a cloak for to go invisible' on the props list at Henslowe's Rose, so it seems likely that there would have been one at the Theatre. But it is equally a joke about what the stage can and cannot do, and about the power of words to force us to

imagine that which our eyes contradict. Oberon remains on stage, and we see him and we do not, as the workmen-actors enter: Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute and the rest. They are here to meet for their rehearsal but before they do so, they have a little work to do: on improving, patching up, the script.

‘There are things in this comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe that will never please,’ begins Bottom. Like the others, he has been supplied with his role and his lines by Quince, and like the others, he is worried that the play contains scenes of peril. A man draws a sword, kills himself. There is a lion on stage. They resolve to make some changes. They will add a prologue, like a content warning, to make the play safe by reminding the audience that it is only a play.

They refer to writing but there is no writer here. ‘Write me a prologue,’ orders Bottom. ‘We shall have a prologue; and it shall be written in eight and six,’ instructs Quince, for he wants it in what is known as common or ballad metre, with alternating lines of eight and six syllables. Snout adds ‘another prologue must tell he is not a lion’ and the passive voice and the gentle humour of the scene – an opportunity for some furrowed brows, a little over-acting – might distract us from the odd absence here. Later, we will see their play, and it does indeed have a prologue. It is not exactly as they requested: it is in an imperfect iambic pentameter which we might describe as a bombastic blank verse. But somebody wrote it. Somebody was listening to their instructions; somebody worked with the actors to tailor the script. Shakespeare in his journeyman years was invisible. He was going beyond credit. He was disappearing into the company and his work was vanishing like a raindrop, like a leaf in a forest fire. His capacity to work in this way enabled him to survive what came next.



## Two Masters

The day is hot: weather for brawling, as all the young men know. It is the middle of the afternoon, in the middle of July, in Verona, and Benvolio and Mercutio are lazing in the sunshine in the street. We know the date for the play has given us clues. The Nurse mentioned earlier that Juliet's birthday is Lammas Eve, which is 31 July, a fortnight and a couple of days away. Juliet has been waiting all morning. At midday, the Nurse returns to her and tells her to go to Friar Laurence's cell in the afternoon. She rushes there; meets Romeo; they marry offstage. All this immediately precedes the scene of the young men lazing in the sunny street. It happened so quickly, and so recently, that those young men do not know that Romeo and Juliet are married, and that households of Capulet and Montague are united. They simply have not had time to learn that the feud is done. 'The day is hot,' complains Benvolio, languidly: 'now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.' They scuff at the floor of the stage. They are waiting for something to happen, but for now there is a lull.



We cannot know the date of the first performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. But historians more or less agree that the play was ready for performance by the summer of 1595. The playhouses were, unusually, open this summer, and the play insists upon summertime, when young men idle in the lazy, hot streets. Let us imagine, then: at the Theatre in Shoreditch the audience, too, is waiting. From the mid-1590s, plays began at two in the afternoon. The scene is about halfway through the play, so when we reach it the time is perhaps half-past three, on a sunny day, in the summer of 1595. For a moment, time in the play and time in the world coincide.

The stillness cannot last. Soon, other men enter. Benvolio is Romeo's cousin, and Mercutio is his friend, so both are members of the household of the Montagues. Now Tybalt, of the Capulets, arrives. In some early editions of the play he is alone, and in others with followers. He is looking for Romeo. 'A word with one of you,' he asks Benvolio and Mercutio. Tybalt is polite but Mercutio is quick to retort. He is bored; he has been waiting; the day is hot. 'Couple it with something,' he mocks: 'make it a word and a blow.' He touches his sword. 'Here's my fiddlestick,' he says, with a laugh.

Just as the fight like a fire is about to catch, Romeo enters. Tybalt turns to him: 'Thou art a villain.' Romeo steps back. 'Be satisfied,' he tells Tybalt. But Mercutio draws his sword. He insults Tybalt: 'You ratcatcher.' Tybalt draws his sword and Romeo rushes in to try to part the two men – his friend and the cousin of his new wife – but doing so causes Mercutio to hold back and in the opening Tybalt stabs Mercutio. 'I am hurt,' he cries out, and curses: 'A plague o' both your houses.' Tybalt flees, and Benvolio helps Mercutio off, and Romeo is left alone. It is a hot day and the stage is still once more.

In 1595 the one thing that everybody knew was that a hot day brought plague. Plague was seasonal, rising with the temperature and falling again as the autumn came. Each summer, along with the threat, came calls from the City fathers to shut down the playhouses.

The annual pattern was particularly familiar to those whose livelihood depended upon an open playhouse. There had been a severe outbreak in 1563, within memory of some; the playhouses had closed for three months in the summer of 1586. 'A plague o' both your houses,' scorns Mercutio, and it is a chilly joke at any time. But in 1595 the line sounded even cooler as this was the first season you could even think of saying it aloud in a playhouse after three terrible years of crisis across the country and the city. For close to three years, there had been almost no playing.

The closures began in June 1592. A small thing started it. 11 June 1592 was the feast day of St Barnabas and the churches across the City were strewn with flowers. At around 8 p.m., in the long light of a summer evening, a crowd of young men gathered at Southwark. Many of them were feltworkers, or in the fabric trades, and they were angered both by rising immigration which threatened their jobs and by the recent arrest of one of their company brothers. The Lord Mayor – taking with him a sheriff, as a precaution – rushed down to Southwark, where he found a mob of increasingly restless apprentices. This had nothing to do with the playhouses – which were anyway closed at this late hour, and particularly so on a Sunday – but he saw an opportunity in the flourish of trouble. The Lord Mayor had been writing to the Archbishop of Canterbury all spring, bemoaning the daily disorder in the playhouses where the young were corrupted and apprentices drawn from their work. He wrote again, and more forcefully, about crowds of rowdy apprentices and the trouble they brought, and called again for the playing to be stopped.

The Privy Council deliberated and on Monday 19th it issued an order. In response to the recent troubles, and in anticipation of the upcoming midsummer festival, which was a time of disorder, the councillors decreed that playing should cease 'at the Theatre, Curtain, or other usual place where the same are commonly used' until Michaelmas, at the end of September. It was a blow for the playhouses, but it was hardly new. With a shrug, the players went on tour. Strange's Men, who had been

playing with moderate success at the Rose, headed north-east, and likely Pembroke's Men did, too. The Theatre was quiet in the sunshine.

It was a hot summer in Shoreditch, dry and still, and the plague began to rise. In the second week of August, the Privy Council took notice. Troops boarding a ship for France were ordered to muster down the river, further from the City. There were edicts to restrict movement between London and Portsmouth or Plymouth, ports on the south coast. As the summer ended there were hot winds and the temperature continued to rise. By the second week of September men could walk across the Thames at low tide and keep their feet dry. The beginning of the legal year was postponed, to keep the lawyers away from London. In Canterbury, Christopher Marlowe got into a street fight with a tailor. The Privy Council extended the ban on playing until Christmas.

Still, there were reasons to remain hopeful. Plague was seasonal and with the cooling weather the sickness should abate. By the end of November, the world seemed to be returning. The queen's Christmas revels went ahead, and Strange's Men played at Hampton Court. They were joined by Pembroke's Men, who performed on the day after Christmas and again on Twelfth Night. Shakespeare and Richard Burbage were likely with them. Having finished at court, Strange's Men seized their chance. They went to London, where they put on *The Jew of Malta* and then *The Massacre at Paris* at the Rose. The companies chose these plays because they were sure to draw a crowd. They were desperate to recoup some of the missed income from the past six months.

Although the movements of Pembroke's Men are less well documented, we can assume that they made a similar calculation. They returned to the Theatre, where they put on *The Taming of the Shrew* as well as a new play by Shakespeare, *Richard III*. Richard Burbage was the hunchback king. This was a huge role and a dazzling one. It shows, in Shakespeare, a new faith in and dependence upon his star actor. They played into January. 'Now is the winter of our discontent,' Richard roared on stage, but for the moment things looked good.

In the third week of January 1593 the news started to spread: plague had returned. Until this moment, it was reasonable to hope that the outbreak of 1592, terrible as it was, was only part of a common pattern, when plague rose in the early summer and fell as the weather cooled. But in cold January with rising plague figures, the old reassurance was gone.

On 28 January the Privy Council ordered that playing should again cease. 'All manner of concourse and public meetings of the people at plays, bear-baitings, bowlings, and other like assemblies for sports be forbidden,' it decreed, and instructed special observers to keep watch at the playhouses, both inside the City walls and the surrounding suburbs. The councillors made an exception for one type of gathering. 'Preaching and divine service at church excepted,' the order added, 'whereby no occasion be offered to increase the infection within the city.' On the Wednesday of Easter week, at the Spital just to the south-east of Holywell, Thomas Playfere preached. Perfection was his theme: how we must strive towards it. 'Labour, I say, we must,' he instructed, with our eyes upon God. 'He that serves two masters, if he please the one, he will displease the other,' he went on. 'No man can serve two masters.' In this dark time we must dedicate ourselves to good holy work. 'Shall we be like those antics or monsters, which are half men and half beasts?' the preacher asked. 'We must always increase and go on till we get the reward.'

Summer began with rain and floods. Eighty-five plague deaths were recorded in a week in the middle of June; then ninety-one; then 149 in the first week of July. That month there were special prayers of deliverance read out in London churches and red crosses painted upon the doors of houses where the infected lived. There were 500 recorded deaths per week, then a leap to 1,100. By August it was forbidden to circulate the figures, but there were rumours of 1,500 or more. Late in the summer, corn prices spiked. This triggered a general inflation in the cost of basic foodstuffs. The rich, who could, fled for their country seats.

By October the City was a hollow shell where hungry beggars wandered the streets. 'Now pleasure's dearth our city doth possess, / Our Theatres are filled with emptiness,' wrote the young lawyer John Donne: 'As lank and thin is every street and way / As woman delivered yesterday.' In October a Catholic and goldsmith named Richard Verstegen wrote a letter to his Catholic compatriots. 'The City of London, as presently it standeth,' he reported, 'may be compared to a foughten field, where the people are for the most part dead or fled away.' 'Foughten' is an old word and a strange past participle, but for him London felt as though a battle had just finished, leaving the field strewn with corpses. We do not know the exact figure of plague deaths from 1592-3, but estimates began to circulate: perhaps 12,000 or more from a population of 150,000, or something between 8 and 10 per cent. London had been decimated.

Playing resumed at the end of the year. On 27 December, the Rose opened and remained so into January 1594; it is likely that the Theatre was, too. But by now, nobody could have believed that they were safe. At the start of February there were signs of a new outbreak, followed promptly by a new order to close the playhouses. These remained closed through March and into April, and that month, if one were to be keeping accounts, a stark reckoning: in the previous twenty-two months there had been sixty-eight days of playing in London and there was no sign of a change to come. Somewhere in this terrible time, with nothing but silence echoing round the wooden walls of their empty playhouse, James Burbage and his sons must have felt that they were at the end. Perhaps they sensibly fled, as so many others did – perhaps to their family in Northampton. There simply are no mentions of them. Apart from the tolling of bells at the parish church, Shoreditch was quiet.

On 20 October 1593 Brian Ellam, who built the Theatre, made his will. He was dead by the end of the year. Mary Tylte, the daughter of Oliver, who worked as a security guard for the Burbages, was buried on 7 October 1593 at the local parish church of St Leonard's.

She was a few weeks short of three years old. Rhys Morris, a silk-weaver and master in the Company of Clothworkers and another tenant on the Holywell property, buried his sons Brian, who was two and a half, and Richard, who was ten, in the same churchyard. There were so many others. The burial records from the parish church of St Leonard's track its vicious speed. There were about a hundred burials each year in 1588, 1589, 1590 and 1591. In 1592, this doubled, and then more than doubled again in 1593, so that there were more than ten funerals each week in one small church alone.

While the playhouse was quiet the parish church five minutes' walk away was busy. Divine service, including funerals, was permitted, and these tried to offer some hope. 'I know that my redeemer liveth, and that I shall rise out of the earth in the last days,' said the priest, as each body was laid down in the graveyard. The plague was indifferent but it did discriminate. It was worst for the elderly, like Brian Ellam, and children, like Mary Tylte, and at St Leonard's they were laying children in the earth.

*Romeo and Juliet* remembers all this. When the suitor Paris comes to Capulet to press his suit to marry Juliet, Capulet notes in an aside that she is not an only child, but her siblings are dead. 'The earth hath swallowed all my hopes but she,' he says, and in an odd phrase, repeats: 'She's the hopeful lady of my earth.' The play measures time by the memory of dead children. Like Capulet, the Nurse recalls her own daughter, of Juliet's age. 'Well, Susan is with God,' says the Nurse. 'God rest all Christian souls.' If you were watching the play in 1595, on a hot summer's day, in a playhouse miraculously open but which might close at any time, in a suburb of a city that had been decimated by the plague, less than half a mile from a churchyard full of dead children in the earth, you might pause at the line. A plague on both your houses, says Mercutio, and there is a chill.

In a plague, not everyone dies at the same rate. Demographers call it 'selective mortality', and this is why a plague is a tragedy. In the

Black Death – an earlier outbreak of the same plague – mortality rates increased with age for males between the ages of twenty and fifty-nine, and then tended to decrease for those beyond the age of sixty. By sixty, other things would kill you. Children between the ages of ten and fifteen were at a lower risk of dying. Any younger was a danger.

In London an older generation was being killed off at a faster rate than the younger. It was safer to be a young man: an apprentice or a journeyman, not a master. That would not keep you unscathed, however. Steve Rappaport observes that from the late summer of 1593 ‘the deaths of thousands of householders left many apprentices and journeymen without not only work but also homes’. Even if you were young, and fit, the plague might strip your livelihood; might destroy the structures within which your work was arranged; might leave you homeless. Among its other terrible effects, the plague caused a crisis in work.

For one specific industry – in which the product was intangible, and the revenue stream depended upon people gathering together – it was a catastrophe. But even within the playing industry the risk was not equally distributed, or felt, or at least not at first. The playhouses were named in the plague orders – ‘the Theatre, Curtain, or other usual place’ – so for James Burbage the collapse was immediate. His playhouse closed. But for the players and the playing companies it was not so bad, at least at first. They could go on tour, out to Norfolk, the Midlands, and there were still revels to play at court. There were the remnants of the older world.

Soon enough, these other avenues began to close. From October 1592, the court restricted access. There were complaints, by local authorities, in the market towns where the players went. At the end of September 1593, Philip Henslowe wrote to his son-in-law, the actor Edward Alleyn. Alleyn had been on tour with Strange’s Men while Henslowe remained in London. It was an affectionate letter, despite the gloom of the times. Henslowe had been looking after



Alley's garden and carrying out small errands. The plague was close. Almost all of his neighbours were dead, he wrote, and two maids in his household. He added a piece of business news, perhaps to lighten the terror. Pembroke's Men, he reported, 'are all at home and have been this v or six weeks for they can not save their charges with travel'. Even touring could not save the companies. Henslowe added that Pembroke's Men had been driven to sell off their 'apparel', their costumes.

Once it had begun the collapse cascaded on. Alongside the costumes, a company's most valuable asset was its collection of playbooks: the authorised copy of a play-text, with the licence which permitted it to be played. In the summer of 1593, Pembroke's Men started to sell their playbooks. Marlowe's *Edward II* was soon in the hands of the stationers and was registered to be printed in early July 1593. It was followed by *Titus Andronicus*, which was registered early the following year, then the two plays about Henry VI partly written by Shakespeare, and finally *The Taming of a Shrew*, which was not the play we know as Shakespeare's but its mysterious double.

This was extremely unusual. The Queen's Men were the most solid company of the 1580s and early 1590s. As Chambers notes, they only permitted a single play of theirs to be printed during their long years: in 1591. But in May 1594, as Henslowe reported, the Queen's Men 'broke & went into the country to play', and in the following year they dumped all the assets they could. The plays they sold to publishers included *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, *The True Tragedy of Richard III* and *Selimus*, as well as *The Pedlar's Prophecy*, one of Robert Wilson's plays, *James IV* and *Lochrine*.

A licensed playbook was the essential precondition for future performances. For a dependably popular play, such as *Titus Andronicus*, it was therefore extremely valuable. But that value derived from the faith that there would be future performances. A playbook's value, that is, depended upon a promise. Now there was no future and the promise was gone. Shorn of an ongoing life on stage, the playbooks

became only commodities. In selling them on, the playing companies engaged in what later business analysts nickname a fire sale: the dumping of goods once highly valued but the marketability of which has now vanished, for what modest sums of cash might be quickly liquidated. Playbooks likely sold for no more than £2 or £3 each. It was rational to grab what profits they could. We may laugh at the idea, but the extremity of the moment was such that the playing companies were closing out on future Shakespeare performances. Such were the economics of plague in the year of 1593.

It is hard to take yourself seriously as an artist when artworks are being dumped onto the market. For a playwright, the news that Pembroke's and the Queen's Men were jettisoning playbooks for small fees must have been chilling. But everything was running against playwrights, and soon enough the terrible cascade of plague effects reached them. It was bad enough for playwrights when the playing companies went on tour, for a travelling company needs fewer plays. But now even the idea that one might make a living from writing plays tumbled into crisis. It was not plague alone that caused the crisis, but it did intensify the existing contradictions and limitations of the financial model. In what had been a fragile but just about surviving ecosystem all was blackening to ash.

The deaths of Robert Greene and Thomas Watson in September 1592 were a warning sign. The cause of Watson's death is unknown. It was rumoured that Greene died from over-indulgence in wine and pickled herring but it seems more likely, given the timing and location, that the cause of both deaths was plague. Soon enough, plague deaths were commonplace – as were ruined playwrights. When Christopher Marlowe was killed in a knife fight in Deptford in May 1593, it must have been a surprise that he did not die of plague. The following August, the brilliant Thomas Kyd died. He had been tortured in prison, which had ruined his health. It might or might not have been plague that finally killed him. George Peele, who had

collaborated with Shakespeare on *Titus Andronicus*, and had found success with a series of big, nationalistic chronicle plays – *The Battle of Alcazar*, *Edward I* – abandoned writing in 1592. He fell into debt; tried to find work as an actor; died in penury in 1596.

From 1593 Thomas Nashe turned from plays to increasingly religious, visionary prose. Thomas Lodge, who had collaborated with Greene, also abandoned plays for prose in these years. John Lyly had spent the second half of the 1580s writing satirical and innovative plays for the boys' companies. In 1590 his playhouse, Paul's, closed down. His end may have had little to do with plague. His plays – classically organised scholastic comedies – looked a little old-fashioned in the age of Marlowe. But in this moment, playwrights found themselves in an entirely hostile environment. Lyly stopped writing plays. His biographer notes: 'The only expression of Lyly's literary talent in the last sixteen years of his life appears in the begging letters he wrote.' He died in 1606.

The plague hastened the end of a generation of playwrights. Those who had been beginning to make a career in playwriting, in the busy bull market of 1591–2, vanished. These were the masters, dying off or silenced. It had been hard enough to write for a living before. Then the plague came along and turned a challenge into a canyon. As Greene wrote of himself and of playwrights generally in 1592, these were men 'driven to extreme shifts'. Now there was simply no way to make a life.

After the boom years and the bull market of 1591–2, a bear market followed. These are the characteristics of a bear market: confidence falls, prices fall, supply is greater than demand. Martin Wiggins, in his catalogue of British drama, lists twenty-six new plays for 1594. That does not sound too bad. Of these, however, three were royal entertainments, and two were jigs. Two were by, or connected to, Shakespeare – *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Taming of a Shrew* – and scholars date the composition of these earlier. One was a translation of a French tragedy by Kyd, done two years earlier. The

others – *The Merchant of Emden*, *The Venetian Comedy*, *Palamon and Arcite* – are both anonymous and lost to us, except one, *A Knack to Know an Honest Man*. It does survive but we do not know its author, for it was printed without the name of its playwright.

The point is less that playwrights stopped writing: this is obvious, for the playhouses were closed. The point is that the idea of being a playwright, as a career or a living, vanished. We may put this more simply. Before 1592 there was in London a generation of playwrights we can name. They were struggling but coherent. After the plague, a new generation would rise, and playwriting would return. But it was exceedingly rare for a playwright to have produced plays, and to be known for doing so, both before and after the plague years. For a playwright to have a career that survived the plague: that was close to an impossibility. There was one notable exception.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the plague surfaces. Once Tybalt is dead and Romeo banished, Friar Laurence devises a plan. Juliet will take a sleeping draught, to fool her family into thinking that she is dead, and he will send a message to Romeo in Mantua, to let him know that she is only sleeping. But the friar who is to deliver the message is waylaid. He set off on his errand, he recounts, with another from their holy order, his ‘barefoot brother’, but they are stopped by the local authorities, ‘the searchers of the town’ who,

Suspecting that we both were in a house  
Where the infectious pestilence did reign,  
Sealed up the doors, and would not let us forth.

Locked down, in quarantine, they cannot deliver their message.

*Romeo and Juliet* is the only play of Shakespeare’s in which plague makes an appearance. He uses the word elsewhere, but as a curse or metaphor. He did not invent the plot detail, for pestilence stops the messenger in Shakespeare’s source. But Brooke’s ‘Romeus and Juliet’

was a poem written a generation earlier. Shakespeare transported it into the playhouse that plague had so long closed. For him, the plague was not only an interruption. It was also a new master. Shakespeare's career was formed by the experience of plague: its cascades, its unseen effects. He was a creature of this dark time.

For Shakespeare, the plague was a map. It showed him where to go and also how to get there. He learned from it just as he had learned from older playwrights: from their style as much as from their precarity. In the autumn of 1592, when it was not yet clear how long it would last, nor when the playhouses would reopen, he surely stayed in London. Playing was supposed to resume at the end of September, but the ban was extended until Christmas. Others, such as Marlowe, left, and the players went on tour. Perhaps Shakespeare went with them. The playhouses reopened at Christmas and stayed open into January. At the start of February there was the terrible news of a new outbreak, and Shakespeare began to seek alternative ways to make money through writing. He started work on a poem in a fashionable form: an Ovidian short epic, classical, stylish, sexy.

The decision was pragmatic. While the poem we know as 'Venus and Adonis' was composed in a form designed to attract all the fashionable readers and therefore to sell copies, it was really only addressed to one. Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton, was young and unmarried, and his father was dead. He looked like he was richer than he turned out to be, but for a while he appeared to a generation of hungry writers to be exactly right. Many writers dedicated their works to Southampton: sonnets, plays, a dictionary. 'A dear lover and cherisher you are,' Thomas Nashe wrote to him in a dedication this same year, 'as well of the lovers of poets themselves.' It was a little shameful. Elsewhere, Nashe wrote: 'I prostitute my pen in hope of gain.'

Shakespeare dedicated his new poem to the young earl. The small volume opens with a flourish: 'To the Right Honorable Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, and Baron Titchfield.' The earl's

name is set in large type. 'Only if your honour seem but pleased,' Shakespeare scrapes: 'I account myself highly praised.' That word 'account' is a nice reminder that this is as much about business as love. Shakespeare's name, set in a smaller size, appears at the end of the dedication.

Patronage was one way to make money from a poem; another was to publish it. In early April Shakespeare handed the new poem to the printer Richard Field. Field was a Stratford boy and a contemporary. He had moved to London to apprentice in the printing trade, and Field registered the poem with the Stationers' Company on 18 April 1593. It was soon printed and put on sale at John Harrison's stall at the sign of the White Greyhound in St Paul's churchyard. On Tuesday, 12 June 1593, just as plague was hotting up along with the weather, a book collector who worked for the Exchequer stopped by the stall. Later that day he made a note of his purchase of two books: a survey of France, for which he did not mention the name of the author, and 'the Venus and Adonihay per Shakespeare'. He paid twelve pence, a shilling, for the pair: an expensive purchase. The same day, he spent the same amount on a dozen Scottish buttons for his new trousers.

This is the first recorded purchase of a work by Shakespeare, and 'Venus and Adonis' also marks Shakespeare's first named appearance in print. There was a lesson in that shilling, as it slipped from a banker's fingers into a bookseller's purse. It did not go into Shakespeare's pocket. In selling the manuscript of the poem, Shakespeare had relinquished the rights to it: the right, specifically, to make profit from sales of copies.

Shakespeare was in Stratford that summer, and stayed into the autumn of 1593. The twins were eight and Susanna, his eldest, was ten. Sometime in the autumn, a schoolteacher named Alexander Aspinall offered him a modest commission. He asked Shakespeare to write a poem for him, to accompany a gift he planned to give to

## TWO MASTERS

his future wife, Anne Shaw. While undated, this must have taken place shortly after July 1593, as until then she was mourning her dead first husband. The motto is preserved in an early seventeenth-century commonplace book:

The gift is small,  
The will is all:  
Alexander Aspinall.

After it is the attribution: 'Shakespeare upon a pair of gloves that master sent to his mistress.' Perhaps those gloves were made by Shakespeare's father.

The small poem was the work of a dried-up time. It neatly places Shakespeare. He was known as a writer and was perfectly skilled at it. But the poem is a slight thing, scarcely work at all, and built upon the easiest of poetic devices: rhyme. Shakespeare was twenty-nine, no longer so young. He had returned to Stratford and – almost – the trade of his father, the glovemaking. Without the Theatre, writing looked for Shakespeare so tentative, so meagre. In the rainy summer of 1593 playwriting was a closed avenue. It was possible to make money from Shakespeare's writings. But it was not apparently possible for Shakespeare himself to do so.

That Christmas, the playhouses opened again, for the winter season. In January 1594, Sussex's Men performed *Titus Andronicus* at the Rose. Shakespeare had no monopoly on the performance of his own plays; whatever their takings, he would have earned nothing. It is likely that the Theatre reopened, but not for long. At the start of February the playhouses closed again. The plague could not any longer be relied upon to leave, so the playhouses could not be relied upon to open, at least for any significant time. That year, his poem was selling well. 'Venus and Adonis' went quickly through a run of editions and reprints over the following decade. It was soon imitated by other poets. Phrases from it were copied into commonplace books.



It was, note the editors of the *New Oxford Shakespeare*, ‘in terms of number of editions, the most frequently published English poem in the early modern period’.

At each step, Shakespeare was learning. He responded adeptly to the demands and conditions of the moment; he may have had a small success but the broader weather was against him. In February and March and into April of 1594, while the playhouses remained quiet, he wrote a second long poem, again on classical themes, again dedicated to Southampton. ‘What I have done is yours, what I have to do is yours,’ Shakespeare flattered the earl in the dedication: ‘being part in all I have, devoted yours.’ The new poem, ‘The Rape of Lucrece’, was almost twice as long as ‘Venus and Adonis’. It was a little more serious in its choice of topic. Again, Shakespeare handed the poem over to Field, for it to be entered in the Stationers’ Register, and Field assigned the copyright to a printer named Harrison, who then printed both: ‘Venus and Adonis’ for the second time, and ‘The Rape of Lucrece’ for the first. Together, the poems sold well. But sales did not translate into income for Shakespeare, only for the booksellers. Robert Bearman, who has written the most thorough account of Shakespeare’s income, suggests that Shakespeare missed an opportunity. ‘We might wonder,’ he writes, ‘whether Shakespeare would have been able to negotiate a better price for “Lucrece” if he had waited for the commercial value of “Venus and Adonis” to have become fully apparent.’ Perhaps so; or perhaps Shakespeare simply saw a colder truth. The industry of bookselling was not set up to benefit poets any more than the playhouses were arranged to profit playwrights.

There is a wider lesson here about the marketplace and its reception of poetry. Shakespeare’s other celebrated set of poems illuminates by contrast that he learned this lesson and further reveals the pragmatic – and in one sense fruitless – approach behind the two short epics.

We do not know exactly when Shakespeare wrote his sonnets. Their chronology is even more vexed than that of any of the plays.

He wrote, it seems, the first of them as early as 1582, when he was courting his wife, and then a rush of them in the mid-1590s, during a relatively short-lived sonnet craze which had been sparked off by the publication in 1591 of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. Many poets – perhaps too many – were writing sonnets in these years. Shakespeare then went on adding to or amending them until close to their publication as a collection in 1609. He certainly could have printed them sooner, but he chose not to. He did not keep them secret, however. In 1598, a clergyman named Francis Meres noted the discussion of Shakespeare's 'sugared Sonnets among his private friends', which suggests that the sonnets circulated in manuscript. This was one way for a poet to release his work but not monetise it. The 154 sonnets published in the 1609 quarto are not all the poems he wrote in the strict form. In *Romeo and Juliet*, when the young lovers first meet, their exchange falls exactly into the pattern – three quatrains and a rhyming couplet – of a Shakespearean sonnet. It is tempting to read into his tangled treatment of sonnets a simple idea: that poems written only for the joy of poems would never make his fortune. This thankfully does not mean that he decided against writing poems. But it does mean that he was faced with the simple question of how to earn a living.

In the spring of 1594 Shakespeare looked upon an uncertain future. Southampton soon turned out to be less rich than he had seemed. The lives of Elizabethan courtiers were colourful swirls. They did not worry about money and who would feed the children. Following an ill-advised secret marriage to one of the queen's ladies in waiting, without royal permission, Southampton fell out with the queen. He lost money gambling, joined the Earl of Essex on a military expedition in Ireland and was sentenced to death for rebellion against the queen. This is one way to live a life; it was not Shakespeare's.

Other poets did make a success of the pursuit of patronage. But they were those, like Samuel Daniel, who stuck with it. Daniel spent the 1590s in fawning pursuit of a daisy chain of noble households

and lordly patrons, until at last under the new king James he was attached to the royal household, writing masques for huge sums, writing history books dedicated to the queen. This is one way to arrange a career; it was not Shakespeare's.

Instead, the plague years revealed something else. They forced into the light his pragmatism and his chameleon capacity to suit himself to what the times demanded. 'No man sitteth upon two seats together,' preached Thomas Playfere at the Spital in April 1593, just as the plague was rushing back into the City. A plague brings chaos. It scrambles all your systems, runs havoc through the arrangements of society, disorders your ordered world. It shreds the bonds, teaches you to turn upon your fellows or to reimagine work as solitary. But the preacher insisted: 'No man writeth with two pens together. No man hunteth two games together. No man jousteth with two spears together.' We must choose one path, said the preacher, and in the crowd somebody was listening. Playfere: 'A double hearted man is inconstant in all his ways. He that hath two tongues, if he tell the truth with the one, he will lie with the other.' Shakespeare in the plague years was writing with two pens. He was serving two masters.

The plague poems of 1593 and 1594 began to make Shakespeare famous but more valuable was the lesson he took from them. The way forward would have to be a return: to playwriting, and to the Theatre.



## The Fellows

On stage at the Theatre, Romeo is alone. Tybalt has fled, and Benvolio too, taking with him the wounded Mercutio, and Romeo starts to speak. 'My very friend', he says, 'hath got this mortal hurt / In my behalf.' The blow came from Tybalt, who is now – since his marriage to Juliet – also Romeo's cousin. It is all too close; there is no way to untie this knot. Soon enough, the world floods back in. Benvolio is first, with the terrible news: 'O Romeo, Romeo, brave Mercutio is dead!' Then Tybalt returns with a curse: 'Thou wretched boy.' Now Romeo and Tybalt fight. It is quick. Tybalt falls without a word. As Romeo flees the citizens enter, in dismay, and then the Montagues, the Capulets and Verona's Prince. 'Benvolio, who began this bloody fray?' he demands, and what was a quick sharp fight starts to become a story. Benvolio tells what he has seen but is cut off by Lady Capulet, Tybalt's aunt. 'Affection makes him false,' she says: 'he speaks not true.' Each is loyal to only one side and Romeo, even in his absence, is banished.

If we take a single line to represent a speaking character on stage, the scene looks like this:

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The number of bodies on stage swells and shrinks, only to swell again. 'My bounty is as boundless as the sea,' says Juliet, but all must rise and fall. Like a wave, or a letter: R. 'His name is Romeo, and a Montague,' says the Nurse. 'O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo,' says Juliet. 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.'

The scene is the play in paraphrase. Like the play the scene begins with young men standing in the street and ends with the Prince standing over corpses, trying to bring order. It is the play's heart. In the first printed editions there are no act breaks, only scenes, and this is scene thirteen of twenty-four. Unlucky numbers, the hours of the day: if you keep a running count of the play's lines, the middle line of the play falls within the scene. Like a wave it is a repetition. Juliet does not appear in the scene but when Benvolio laments 'O Romeo, Romeo, brave Mercutio is dead,' he picks up her earlier line, 'O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo.' Like a wave it is inevitable. 'The day is hot,' sighs Benvolio as it begins, and the four-word phrase echoes through the play. 'Wilt thou be gone?' Juliet asks Romeo, soon enough, as he leaves for his banishment. 'Give me the light,' Romeo instructs his servant as he opens the tomb. 'Thy lips are warm,' Juliet tells the dead Romeo.

The scene follows a deep wavelike motion: it swells and surges to swell again. The first fight, between Mercutio and Tybalt, is then fought over again, between Tybalt and Romeo. They are two halves of the same scuffle. They are also, a little like a fight itself, a mismatched pair. The first is a dance. It is choreographed, exact and awful. Like all the idle young men of Verona, who have time on their hands, Mercutio and Tybalt have been reading the manuals of fighting. Mercutio mocks Tybalt as one 'that fights by the book of arithmetic' but what he means, it seems, is one specific handbook of the fencing arts.

Vincentio Saviolo was a fencing master from Padua, and his manual *The Practice of Honorable Quarrels* was published in 1595. While Italian fencing with rapiers had been a fashion among the brash courtiers of 1580s London, the specific terms for this style of duelling are only given in this handbook. 'Come, sir, your passado,' says Mercutio to Tybalt: the *passado* is a step, forwards to attack, or sideways to deflect. 'Alla stoccado carries it away,' he cries: the *stoccata* is a quick thrust, up and under your opponent's hand or sword. These are the taught gestures of fighting; this is how it may be done with some foreign flair and grace, imported from the continent, learned from a book. And the leisurely, verbal, high rhetorical squabble is then repeated, but differently, in the brutal stabbing of Tybalt by Romeo.

Shakespeare certainly read Saviolo's book; he likely knew the man. Saviolo had been teaching for the past half decade in a college run by the Italian fencing master Rocco Bonetti, who held classes in a leased hall inside the old Blackfriars monastery. Bonetti in turn had the lease from the playwright John Lyly, who until 1590 ran children's troupes there. Less than a year from this point, in early 1596, James Burbage began discussions with Bonetti to take over the lease on the hall, where he planned to open his own indoor playhouse. The worlds of commercial theatre and fencing instruction were close. Saviolo likely had given some instruction in stage combat to the actors, and therefore when Mercutio spoofs with these high phrases and fancy

continental gestures he is teasing his old teacher. He is laughing, and the others are too, and it is all games until somebody is dead.

This scene in *Romeo and Juliet* was scarcely the first staged fight at the Theatre. But it is categorically different. The Queen's Men's plays of their 1580s heyday were celebrated for their scenes of large-scale combat. These were grand and violent and, apart from the clash of stage weapons, silent. The Queen's Men performed 'wordless battles set apart from moments of speech', write Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean in their study of the troupe, 'as though the battles were thought of as having a text of their own'. Their fights were almost ballet. In *Romeo and Juliet*, nobody stays silent. 'Couple it with something,' Mercutio mocks: 'make it a word and a blow.' One fight is repeated in a second and then told as a story and the story is told again. Taken together they are a mechanism through which Shakespeare is reflecting upon a simple question: how to turn a quarrel into a work of art.

A pandemic ends twice. The first ending is when the number of infections or deaths falls to an acceptable, or less alarming, figure. Although plague did not vanish from London – indeed, there would be another terrible plague year a little less than a decade later – the number of infections dropped rapidly in the spring of 1594, and it did not rise again. At St Leonard's one tenth as many people were buried in that year as had been the year before. The outbreak had reached its virological, or medical, ending.

The second is of a different type. In May 2020, in the midst of another pandemic, the *New York Times* observed that the medical ending of a plague, 'which occurs when the incidence and death rates plummet', need not necessarily coincide with its second type of ending, which it called 'the social, when the epidemic of fear about the disease wanes'. The second ending is psychological, and it comes when people have had enough. It is narrative as much as it is medical. It is when people start to tell stories about the pandemic.



Historians have, for the past thirty or so years, liked to tell a clean story about the ending of the plague of 1593–4 and its effect upon the playhouses and playing companies of late Elizabethan London. They present it as a triumphal moment, and 1594 is taken as one of the totemic years of the history of the period. As with 1574, and the licensing of playing companies under aristocratic patrons, or 1576, and the construction of the Theatre, or 1583, and the formation of the Queen's Men, it is a story about the regulation of the unruly industry of playing. As with each of these dates it is also, in part, a story about James Burbage and the Theatre.

In May 1594, the story runs, the pandemic rolled back like a retreating wave and the opening of the playhouses was imminent. The Privy Council, on orders from the queen, decreed that there should be two officially licensed playing companies, and allocated a playhouse to each. The Lord Admiral's Men took up residence at the Rose playhouse, on Bankside. The Rose was owned by Philip Henslowe, and his son-in-law Edward Alleyn was a member of the Admiral's Men. At the Theatre, a new company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men found a home. Among the players of the Chamberlain's Men was Richard Burbage, housed at his own father's playhouse. As well as a playhouse, each company acquired also a playwright. 'The Admiral's acquired all of Marlowe's plays,' writes Andrew Gurr, 'while the Chamberlain's took all of Shakespeare's along with the man himself as a player.' Historians call the arrangement 'the duopoly'. It is routinely described by Shakespeare's biographers. Park Honan, for example, in his scrupulous biography of Shakespeare, follows exactly the story, and draws out the neat parallels: family, playhouse, playwright, two households.

The advantage of this story is its elegance. It builds neatly upon an architecture of opposites. Its first disadvantage is what the scholar Holger Schott Syme calls the 'near-total absence of documentary evidence'. Its second disadvantage is that it in assuming triumph it

overlooks how fragile the moment was. The pandemic had not quite reached its second ending.

After their long plague closures, neither the Rose nor the Theatre was ready for players in the spring of 1594. In early June, Henslowe hired a playhouse at Newington Butts, where the Chamberlain's and Admiral's Men combined to play together. During their ten-day run, they offered what looks like a pretty dreadful repertory. There was the biblical story of *Hester and Abasuerus*, about a tyrannical king and a goodly Jewish maiden. They played it twice, as they did Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. Also performed twice was *Titus Andronicus*, which was reliably popular, although now very well known, and the proto-*Hamlet*, once. Another play, *Cutlack*, might have been about a prince who became a hermit or about a Danish king. We cannot know as this, like *Hester and Abasuerus*, is lost. The most successful was *Bellendon*, a new play likely about a famous thief: also lost. Lastly there was *The Taming of a Shrew*, which is the alternative version of Shakespeare's more famous play.

It was not a successful run. Henslowe kept accounts. The play that did best was the new *Bellendon*. But it only made seventeen shillings, less than half of what Henslowe might have hoped for a successful performance. Perhaps the problem was that the playhouse was distant. It stood at the southern end of Southwark, a mile to the south of London Bridge. Perhaps it was the weather: a cold and wet spring, and then June was rainy, and into July. Perhaps people were wary of gathering, after the past three years. Perhaps it was something simpler. The repertory was entirely representative of the popular fare of late 1580s and early 1590s drama: biblical stories, folkish plays, Marlowe, and Shakespeare at his most Marlovian. But these were looking old, and the players were uncertain of what new material to offer.

In mid-June the Admiral's Men moved back to the Rose, where they began a long and settled run. For their first season there, they performed Marlowe's plays 19 per cent of the time. This is far more

than any other playwright. Marlowe was familiar and in some markets familiarity is a draw. In others it is a liability, and Marlowe's popularity was dropping. Syme has crunched the numbers: that season, Marlowe's plays took on average 30.7 shillings per performance, while those by other playwrights took 33 shillings. Marlowe was dead. Now he was looking old.

In this uncertain time the Chamberlain's Men were homeless. No record places them at the Theatre in July or August 1594. In September, they were touring in Wiltshire. On 8 October their patron Lord Hunsdon, the Lord Chamberlain, wrote a letter to the Lord Mayor. He noted that the sickness had passed, thanks to God, and reminded the Mayor that his players had, in years gone by, performed at one of the inns in the City. He asked for permission to do so again. For a City inn, and not a suburban playhouse, he needed the Mayor's permission. In return, he promised that his players would begin their shows earlier, at two, and be done by four or five. They would not use drums and trumpets to announce their shows, he added, and would contribute a share of their takings towards the poor of the parish. It is a strikingly meek letter. When he refers to the players he describes them as 'my now company of players': as if they are only for now, and might vanish again.

In the summer of 1594, and through the rainy winter, and into the following spring, the Theatre looked like an extremely uncertain bet. It had been largely unused for two and then the best part of three years. Its owner, James Burbage, was sixty-three and then sixty-four. The playhouse was elderly, too: it had been standing for eighteen years with some limited renovations. The lease on it had only two and a half years left to run, and there was little expectation that it might be renewed. None of this is good. Others noticed, and in the Theatre's distress saw an opportunity. In the autumn, a moneylender and speculator called Francis Langley was putting together the plans and funding for a new playhouse, the Swan, on Bankside.

In November, a haberdasher and financier named Oliver Woodcliffe signed a twenty-one-year lease on an old inn called the Boar's Head in Whitechapel. The new lease specified that Woodcliffe planned to construct a playhouse in the yard.

The construction of new playhouses was both a vindication of the idea behind the Theatre and a sign that the Theatre was a thing of the past. This mismatch – between the idea of the Theatre, and the Theatre itself – was why it continued to generate the endless litigation and counter-litigation that it did. It looked at even the most adverse moments like it might just be a secret silver mine. In the autumn of 1593 – as the playing companies were breaking up and the playhouses were closed and there were still 300 dying each week in London – Robert Miles took up again the slow-burning legal suits between the Burbages and the Braynes. In the terminology of the time, he ‘exhibited a Bill and served process upon the defendants’, the Burbages, in Chancery. It sounds like a more dramatic step than it was. Really, Miles simply revived an old and dormant suit.

Like so many other things, the new round of legal activity was indirectly prompted by the plague. In April 1593, dying of plague, Margaret Brayne signed her will, in which she left her share and interest in the Theatre to Robert Miles. In it she expresses her indebtedness, or her love, or both. The wording is unusual for the formulaic wills of the time. ‘I am greatly indebted unto him in such great sum and sums of money that all the goods I have in the whole world will nothing countervail the same,’ she says, and for a moment she is Juliet, dreaming of a bounty which is boundless as the sea. The bequest came with a condition. The interest in the Theatre was given upon the understanding ‘that the said Robert Miles shall keep, educate and bring up Katherine Brayne, my husband's daughter’.

Katherine was buried at Whitechapel in July 1593, three months after her mother. We can assume that both were victims of the plague. If Katherine was John Brayne's daughter, then she must have been seven years old when she died. Seven was a dangerous age for a child in the

plague. To see it coldly, the girl's death meant that Miles had the interest in the Theatre for free. But the Burbages insisted that her real father was Miles. So Miles, in the midst of a plague, and either in grief at the death of his daughter, or in a spasm of greed, launched back into litigation.

By this point, the lawsuits and what they pursue had moved into an abstracted dreamworld in which each suit had only a self-perpetuating logic of its own and scant attachment to the facts surrounding the case. The playhouse was closed, so there were no profits coming in. Miles's only claim to a share of those imaginary profits was founded upon Margaret's bequest. But Margaret's own claim to possession of the Theatre had been shut down by Cuthbert's repossession of the lease from Hyde in 1589. This was a neat legal trick, facilitated by Sir Walter Cope, and Cuthbert and the Burbages simply repeated it, with a slight twist. In 1594, the Burbages responded to Miles's claim by reverting to an older ruling. There was, they noted, already a prior arrangement in place: the arbitrament, between Burbage and Brayne, of 1578, when both parties had agreed to a profit-sharing arrangement. That the Burbages had categorically never kept to it was irrelevant, they proposed, and a separate legal question. In early March 1595, the Burbages petitioned the Court of Chancery. They reminded the Court that there was a long and tangled set of suits and counter-suits behind the current situation, and argued that all these should be viewed as a single legal question. On 14 March 1595, the Court of Chancery agreed to combine the suits.

On 23 May, after two months of deliberation, Chancery ruled. The ruling simply restated the Burbage position: that the plaintiff, Miles, had in effect inherited both the profits from the Theatre and the profit-sharing arbitrament from 1578; and therefore 'the plaintiff had no need of the Aid of this Court for the said lease and profits'. If he wished to seek further remedy, the court concluded, he could do so through the courts of common law. Common law was administered by the royal courts: the Court of King's Bench, the Court of Common Pleas and the Exchequer. Bound by precedent, these courts

had a restricted authority. This was why Miles and the Brayne faction had for so long pursued the Burbages through the courts of equity, such as Chancery, which were far more flexible in their solutions. Miles had no chance of success here. He had inherited an old financial agreement, formulated nearly two decades before, between one man who hated him and another who had been dead for nearly a decade, concerning a building that was legally in the sole possession of somebody else.

Beneath the tangles of litigation and the flurries of suits, this was an elegant thing. It was also, in its beautiful misdirection and cool logic, entirely characteristic of Cuthbert Burbage. He was a master of the most bureaucratic structures. But he was not working alone. The powerful Sir Walter Cope had intervened on Cuthbert's behalf earlier, and here, in the Chancery ruling of May 1595, perhaps another quiet word was spoken. Cuthbert returned the favour. By the summer of 1595, Cuthbert had been married for almost a year. His first child was born a month after the Chancery ruling, and when he was baptised at St Leonard's Shoreditch on 22 June 1595, he was given the name Walter, after his godfather.

On 15 March 1595 three men crossed London on a happy errand. All three were sharers in the newly formed company of the Lord Chamberlain's players. The oldest, Will Kemp, was famous for his clowning, his wild jigs. Kemp's early career is obscure. He had likely been among Leicester's Men in the early 1580s, which is perhaps how he had first met the Burbages, but he soon became known as a solo performer. The youngest, Richard Burbage, was already noted as an actor. The third – and least celebrated – was Shakespeare. If they started their journey in Shoreditch – and it is tempting to assume they did, for all three were, in one way or another, Shoreditch men – they had two possible routes. One was to stroll round the City's northern edge, keeping the wall to their left and green fields to their right. The other was to head south into the tight furl of the City and then turn west, past

St Paul's. Either way, it was a good hour's walk; and either way there came a certain point when they must have felt like they were leaving the crowded City, of merchants and tradesmen, behind them. They walked along the wide, well-paved Strand, lined with the palaces of noble families: Essex House, Bedford House, Leicester House. A German tourist in London visited London a couple of years later, and he described it: 'In the suburb to the west, joined to the city by a continual row of palaces belonging to the chief nobility, of a mile in length, and lying on the side next to the Thames, is the small town of Westminster.' Westminster was then a separate city from the City of London, and the home of national government. The three men had as their destination the sprawling palace of Whitehall. It was a jumble of styles and buildings all patched onto one another, a little decaying but glorious. On one side was the Thames, filled with swans, and on the other a great park, filled with deer. In all it was a vision: regal animals, jostling courtiers, power. The three men arrived at the office of the treasurer of the household, where they were paid the huge sum of £20.

The record of the payment is dry, a little arch, snobbish and resonant. On a large parchment roll in a neat secretary hand a clerk serving Sir Thomas Heneage, treasurer of the queen's chamber, noted the fee paid 'To William Kemp, William Shakespeare, and Richard Burbage' for their performance of two plays at court at Christmas. He did not specify which plays. Another payment was made the same day to the Admiral's Men, for their performances before the queen in the Christmas revels at Greenwich.

The payment's significance is threefold. It confirms the existence of the Chamberlain's Men, as equivalent to the Admiral's Men, and that these were the two favoured playing companies. It shows Shakespeare's own position, as a sharer in the Chamberlain's Men. For the first time, the record ties Shakespeare directly to a dramatic performance, and is also the first record of a payment to Shakespeare. The payment was collective, for a joint activity, and the three men were representatives of the company. But two of the men were



performers and we can assume that they were being paid for acting. Shakespeare was never a distinguished actor. That he was accorded an equal status as these two stars suggests that what he was here being paid for – and what the company valued him for – was writing.

We do not know with complete certainty the original group of sharers in the Chamberlain's Men. But it is fairly sure that they included another four men, all actors who, like Kemp, were drawn from Strange's Men: Thomas Pope, John Heminges, Augustine Phillips and George Bryan. William Sly joined then or soon after. Henry Condell soon replaced Bryan. They came from other companies: the Queen's Men, Strange's. They had toured with one another, with Leicester's Men. They shared the familiarity born of working alongside each other, over time, through the uncertainties of the playing world. The term they would have used is 'fellows'. A 1601 play featured a stage dialogue between William Kemp and Richard Burbage, and referred twice to 'our fellow Shakespeare'. The company would change its name but Shakespeare would remain with this fellowship of men for his working life.

The company was a mechanism for money-making. No longer would Shakespeare expect £7 for a single play. Instead, he would receive a share in the total profits. As Robert Bearman estimates, that was perhaps £50 a year from now on, the kind of income upon which one could build a life.

The company was a mechanism for the creation of plays. For the rest of his career, Shakespeare wrote plays only for this company. This was extremely unusual. As Bart van Es notes: 'The phenomenon of the attached poetic playwright (writing for only one company) was initiated by Shakespeare.'

The company was a mechanism for survival. Most of the plays produced in the period do not survive. We have perhaps 20 per cent of all those that were written, with some knowledge of a further 25 per cent: titles, allusions, mentions. Estimates vary, for the truly lost leaves no trace. In some cases, as for Thomas Watson, whole careers

have vanished. Books do not survive in libraries; they survive by being copied. This was as true for the classical world as it was for Shakespeare's contemporaries. Shakespeare's fellows oversaw the production of the First Folio of his plays in 1624. Without the Folio, almost half of his known plays would not have survived. There were certainly other plays that did not make it into the Folio. 'An early play written or co-written by Shakespeare may have made it into the Folio only if, for one reason or another, it made the leap into the repertory of the Chamberlain's Men in the mid-1590s,' note Gary Taylor and Rory Loughnane. 'We cannot assume that all, or even most, of his pre-1594 plays made that leap.' It was only the plays collected by the company that could be certain of survival.

The company was a mechanism for immortality. In the livery companies there was an expectation that when one freeman died, all the others would attend his funeral. In his will Augustine Phillips made a bequest to 'my fellow William Shakespeare', along with other members of the company. Shakespeare in his will left 'to my fellows John Heminges, Richard Burbage, & Henry Condell viii d A piece to buy them Rings'.

But Shakespeare was never entirely a company man. His career was driven by one impulse, pushing him towards company; a second impulse pushed him to be alone. These are the two halves of an artist at work. Following the end of the plague and his return to London, Shakespeare settled in a new neighbourhood. The list of assessments for a national subsidy, raising money for an expensive war in Ireland, survives, and Shakespeare's name appears on it among the residents of the parish of St Helen's, Bishopsgate. There were a hundred houses in the parish. It sat just inside the City walls and was dominated by the old priory of St Helen's, which was then the headquarters of the Worshipful Company of Leathersellers. It was conveniently close to Bishopsgate, lined with inns for travellers, where luxury goods were for sale. Here, Shakespeare was assessed as having property worth £5, and tax was levied at a rate of 13.3 per cent. It seems he did not pay

it, and the figure anyway would only have been a rough estimate. But it reveals something about his standing. He was a solid figure in a wealthy City parish. He was rated below the men of the grand companies, the wealthy haberdashers, grocers, merchants, and above an armourer, a cordwainer, a plumber. He was surrounded by men who had made fortunes in trade and were buried in the local church.

Geoffrey Marsh, in an extraordinary bit of detective work, suggests convincingly that Shakespeare lodged as a tenant in a small apartment in the fine medium-sized house belonging to a man named John Prynne. Prynne was a grocer who lived with his wife, and their only son was dead. He had also acted as broker when Burbage and Brayne mortgaged the lease to John Hyde, another grocer, in 1579. Prynne knew the Burbages, which is perhaps why Shakespeare chose to lodge with him.

But it is hard to escape the impression that Shakespeare settled in St Helen's precisely because it was not Shoreditch. It was a twenty-minute walk from his new lodging to the Theatre. It was not too great a distance, but it was the other side of the wall, and perhaps it was enough: a walk to work and then a walk home again, the simple rhythm of a settled working life. Here, he could be anonymous. He never served as a churchwarden or in a parish office. It was quiet. The close of St Helen's was gated and there was no passing traffic. Here was a room of his own.

That year Shakespeare became the master of his craft. The word 'master' is a little troubling to modern ears, but it had a specific meaning within the world of work in Elizabethan London. We might see mastery as a solo thing, but Shakespeare's contemporaries understood the term and status as derived from the individual's membership within a company. After the long years of apprenticeship, a young man training up in a trade spent two years as a journeyman. He lived and worked in the household of a master of the trade. Once he had completed his time as a journeyman he became a

master. This meant, most importantly, that he might set up a household of his own; and householder was another term for his status. Until this point he had been working for others. From now, he worked for himself. He also became a full member of the company.

Of course, there never has been a Worshipful Company of Playwrights or Players, an official trade or craft guild for those in the business of playing. The only company, for Shakespeare and his fellows, was the Lord Chamberlain's Men. But the playing companies were developed upon the model of the livery companies, with apprentices, hired men and masters. They shared a vocabulary and a structure. The average age for a journeyman to become a master was just over twenty-eight years old. In the spring of 1595, Shakespeare was thirty, turning thirty-one.

Two expectations attended a rising journeyman's change of status. The first was a financial proof. In the Weavers', Clothworkers' and Pewterers' companies, the journeyman had to show that he was worth at least £10. This was enough capital to set up a shop of his own: to buy the tools and supplies, the materials of the trade. He was also required to pay a small fee to the company for his licence. This ranged from three shillings up to thirteen or so.

In each of these details, the playing companies and the livery companies were strikingly analogous. To become a sharer in a playing company the actor – or in this case, playwright – had to purchase his share. In the case of existing companies, this might be bought from, say, the widow of a deceased sharer. In the case of a new company, the cash would be pooled as part of the operating capital of the company. The price of a share varied, but it was significant: £30 or £40. At some point in the winter of 1594–5, Shakespeare acquired a full share in the Lord Chamberlain's Men. He must have done so before the treasury payment; it seems likely he was a full sharer by the time of the 1594 Christmas revels. There has long been speculation as to how Shakespeare raised this sum. It was for a time fashionable to suggest that the rich earl whom he had flattered in the dedications to his

poems might have lent him the money. But that is an old-world story, and there is no evidence for it. Perhaps simpler: in lieu of a direct payment, Shakespeare offered something else of value, or another form of currency.

One effect of the crisis of the plague years, and the rapidly dissolving companies, was that playbooks themselves – the physical copies of the play texts, which were given specific authorisation to be played – began to be traded as commodities. When sold to a stationer to be printed, a playbook might only raise £2 or £3. This was a small sum, almost laughably so when we consider that what was being bought here was the rights to a play by Shakespeare, but the transformation of a playbook into a commodity suggested an opportunity. By the end of 1594, there were perhaps eight or nine plays largely by Shakespeare in circulation in London. These passed between different playing companies. *Titus Andronicus* was performed by Pembroke's, Strange's and Sussex's Men, and possibly by other companies.

After 1595 this play, along with Shakespeare's other early plays – the *Henry VI* plays, *The Taming of the Shrew*, possibly the proto-*Hamlet* – passed into the repertory of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Perhaps 'Shakespeare himself was adroit enough as an entrepreneur to keep their ownership from the various companies he worked for through the "lost years", retaining them himself,' speculates Andrew Gurr, until 'he eventually handed them over to the Chamberlain's, perhaps as the price of his "share" in the new company.' If so, Shakespeare had neatly learned the bookseller's lesson, and the lesson of his bestselling poems. He who controls the circulation of a literary work turns a profit from it.

The buy-in was Shakespeare's financial proof. The second requirement was that the rising journeyman was called to demonstrate his skill in his trade or craft. Again, it varied by company. For a journeyman brewer to become a master of his trade he had to show that he was capable of running a brewhouse, while a journeyman cloth-worker qualified by demonstrating that he knew how to teach the

key skills of his craft. Other companies expected a more tangible proof. The 1594 ordinances of the Company of Weavers stated 'that every man of our Guild shall make a proof of his workmanship before he be admitted a Master', and the Weavers also demanded the production of what they called a 'Proof piece'. The Armourers and Brasiers' Company worked in armour and fine metals, particularly brass, and according to its records a journeyman went to company hall on 31 January 1576 and 'brought in for his masterpiece a pair of copper shears, a pair of tailor's shears, and a pair of fletcher's shears'. The three pairs of fine shears – oversized scissors, each for a specific purpose, the third of them for making arrows – were then judged by elder members of the company.

There is a trace of high theatre: those shining shears, laid out before the company elders, gleaming in the January gloom. Sometimes the journeyman had to perform the work in person, while an audience watched on. A 1606 treatise on the art of goldsmiths reported that a journeyman was summoned to Goldsmiths' Hall. Here, before four wardens and two skilled workmen of the company, he was expected to create 'a complete piece of work commonly called a masterpiece to be begun and finished by himself'.

The proof was both the object and what it demonstrated. In order to become a master he had to perform his mastery. What the goldsmiths made explicit but what was implicit in each of these masterpieces was that the work had to be both solo and realised within the company. These were the requirements set by the craft and trade companies which handed down the old skills. And they were fulfilled, in a slightly different fashion, by another rising journeyman in the spring of 1595. He was not so young, but he was at another new beginning. He had been trained up in a craft. He was paid up and bought in and ready to write his masterpiece.

In the spring and early summer of 1595, Shakespeare finished work on two plays: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

They are so different. One is a tragedy, quick and sad; the other a comedy, strange and free. We do not know the exact order in which he wrote them. Perhaps he tidied up the lighter play then turned to darker things; perhaps first the tragedy, which was then sweetened and resolved in a comedy. Perhaps he wrote them at the same time, scene by scene, line by line. There are examples of a rising journeyman producing several objects as his proof piece: those three sets of perfect shears, made at the Armourers' Company in 1576. Taken together, these two plays are Shakespeare's masterpiece.

In choosing to write about the two doomed young lovers Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare returned to a book he had looked at in the very early years of his career. In 1587 or early 1588 he had written a slight comedy called *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a play that is distinctive for its small cast. It can be performed by eight men, two boys and a musician, which suggests that it was designed for touring, likely by one of the branches of the Queen's Men. In his early years Shakespeare wrote plays for companies that had no definite home and for players he likely did not know. It was a self-consciously fashionable play. It drew from the balanced verse forms made popular by John Lyly; it has a role for the famous clown Richard Tarlton and his dog. A small number of plot details, and at least one specific phrase, are borrowed from a stolid but popular poem, twenty years old but still doing the rounds, called 'The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet' and written by Arthur Brooke.

The story was an old one. Xenophon of Ephesus told of a wife who drank poison to escape marriage to a kidnapper and woke in a tomb. The skeleton elements of a couple married in secret, a sleeping potion and a tomb were popular in Renaissance tales. In the early sixteenth century Luigi da Porto added the names and the setting: Verona, the Montecchi, the Cappeletti, Romeo and Giulietta, Marcuccio, Thebaldo and the friar Lorenzo. Along the way it gained pirates, who interrupted the crucial message sent to Romeo; then the pirates vanished, and an outbreak of the plague caused the delay. It moved from Italian into French, gained the apothecary and his greed,



and then in 1562 Arthur Brooke turned the French novella into a turgid English poem which disapproved of the disobedient young lovers. Little is known of Brooke other than that he seems to have been a moralising lawyer and was soon to die in a shipwreck. His poem set off a fashion in England. There were other versions of it in the 1560s and 1570s.

In Brooke's version the young love was wrong but it also had plenty of time. 'The summer of their bliss, doth last a month or twain,' he writes, and the brawl in the street between the warring families takes place the day after Easter, in the springtime. 'The furious fray is long, on each side stoutly fought,' writes Brooke, and like the brawl each line is long, alternating twelve and fourteen syllables:

That whether part had got the worst full doubtful were the  
thought.

The noise hereof anon, throughout the two doth fly

And parts are taken on every side, both kindreds thither lie.

It might take an hour or two to itemise the failings of this flat-footed verse. All is congestion; there are too many people in the street and too many syllables in the line. Now Romeus, hearing the mob, rushes in to separate the brawling men. Now Tybalt attacks him and Romeus, enraged, kills Tybalt.

What for Brooke was long and vague was turned by Shakespeare quick and sharp. Where for Brooke 'a month or twain' has passed between the marriage and the death of Tybalt, Shakespeare made them follow immediately upon each other. The events collide, spark one another into life, and Shakespeare is at work. He is cutting, tightening, drawing close; the metaphors of a blade are irresistible and if we wish to imagine a tool in his hands it is a shining pair of shears. He had learned this in his journeyman years: to narrow down into a story, to pare away all but the core of it and then to draw from that core a new whole. In Brooke, Mercutio was a cold-handed

courtier, scarcely there. Shakespeare saw something in him. In Brooke, Romeo was simply violent. When he fought with Tybalt he killed him with a single blow. What looked to another like a pile of sand or a bargeful of stout beams was Shakespeare's raw material.

A long-standing critical cliché holds that in working upon his sources Shakespeare performed something close to alchemy. 'Brooke's poem was leaden work which Shakespeare transmuted to gold,' writes the editor Geoffrey Bullough in his sprawling compendium of Shakespeare's sources. It is certainly tempting to see it this way, as an almost metaphysical encounter. But to do so is also to miss that here is not magic but work. This was his craft.

Before, Shakespeare had sounded like others, deliberately so. Learning to do so had been his apprenticeship. But he grew beyond this, so that when his characters sound like someone else it is not because they must but because he could make such allusions and echoes reveal something about the character. Upon meeting Juliet, the young Romeo finds himself with a mouth full of Marlowe. She shines 'as a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear', he says. It is a wonderfully exotic image, all longing and distance and contrast. Faced with such a lovely thing Romeo asks himself, 'Did my heart love till now?' He says: 'I ne'er saw beauty till this night.' Each of these phrases is drawn from Marlowe's long poem *Hero and Leander*, which was circulating in manuscript. Of course Romeo has been reading the fashionable love poems. That is all he knows about love. 'You kiss by th' book,' Juliet teases him.

Where *Romeo and Juliet* draws from a direct narrative source, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comes from nowhere and everywhere. Where we might picture Shakespeare, in composing *Romeo and Juliet*, as sitting with a copy of Brooke by his side, when it comes to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he is a mad child running loose in a library, ripping books from the shelves. The wedding celebration of Theseus – the play's framing device – comes from Chaucer, as do a

couple of the minor names. Oberon is from French romance and Titania is from classical legend; Puck is old English folklore. Men turn into asses in myth while the rude actors are drawn from the working men Shakespeare knew and saw on the streets of London. The play layers these strands. None of them is new except in the combination.

He was recycling with a smile. Shakespeare's handling of one unlikely minor source suggests this style of work. A doctor and naturalist named Thomas Mouffet wrote in around 1593 a terrible poem called 'The Silkworms and Their Flies' which advocated for the cultivation of silkworms, in part to foster the English silk industry. It is a poem scarcely read, and only printed in 1599, but Shakespeare was thinking about weavers. A bottom is a term for part of a loom and it is also used by Mouffet to describe a silkworm's cocoon: he pictures 'many silken bottoms hanged in piles', and the absurd image might make us smile, just as it did Shakespeare. So he took the name and gave it to a weaver. In Mouffet's sincere and deadly poem Shakespeare found, as Kenneth Muir notes, 'a fit subject for ridicule, and he read the poem with care'. From Mouffet Shakespeare took a handful of words, and placed these in the mouths of his absurd actors. 'Quail, crush, conclude, and quell,' wails Bottom, as Pyramus, upon finding that his lover is dead. 'Come, blade, my breast imbrue,' wails Flute, as Thisbe, as she stabs herself in grief. The words 'quell' and 'imbrue' are lifted from Mouffet.

Picture Shakespeare writing. He is laughing as he works; he is working as he laughs; the laughter is the work. He spots a lofty word in Mouffet – 'chink', 'grisly' – and he picks it up and places it in the mouth of one of his own leaden actors, struggling with their verse. Mouffet's poem matters less as a specific source than as a clue to the whole world of late Elizabethan poetry – second-rate lyrics, weak sonnets, overloaded conceits, classical episodes – which stands just behind these plays. 'Romeo!' calls Mercutio with a grin: 'Speak but one rhyme and I am satisfied. / Cry but "Ay me!" Pronounce but

“love” and “dove”.’ He is teasing his friend: not alluding to any particular B-list Elizabethan sonneteer who used such obvious rhymes but laughing at Romeo as one who likely might.

Teasing stands behind these plays’ most ambitious gesture. He was laughing at his sources and laughing at himself. As Roslyn Knutson has argued, the repertories of the playing companies were carefully arranged. The company for which we have the best data is the Admiral’s Men, and at the Rose in 1595, the Admiral’s Men were offering a patterned repertory. They alternated old plays, which they were confident could draw a crowd, with new works, which were riskier but which potentially drew a larger crowd. They performed two-part plays, about legendary figures, Tamburlaine or Hercules, on consecutive afternoons, to draw a repeat crowd. They duplicated by genre: magician plays, for example, or strongman leaders, or plays about pairs of lovers.

This is good business. A crowd likes what it knows. A sequel to a known hit is dependable box office, and it is easier to sell a story about a famous character, or one that has as a hook some familiar element. In 1595, Shakespeare’s two new plays were oddly familiar. They are joined, like twins or a diptych. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* – young, doomed lovers, dead by suicide – is echoed in the play within a play staged by the workmen actors in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Their Pyramus and Thisbe are stand-ins for Romeo and Juliet. Both were drawn from old stories but in opposite ways. This was his twinned masterpiece, his pair of shining shears. It is a rare show of talent, and a gesture of the highest craft. Watch me do it one way, he says. And now watch me do it backwards.

Before, his fellows had been the other writers: the playwrights he learned from, the books that he read. That was Greene’s objection. The young Shakespeare dressed in borrowed feathers, he said, and took too much from those to whom he should have bowed. It changed. Until now Shakespeare had collaborated with other playwrights. Later, very late in his career, he would again write plays

jointly with another playwright. But once he joined the Chamberlain's Men, and for the next decade or more, he wrote his plays alone.

But really, he never worked alone, and we might see this moment as one in which he left one set of fellows for another. Bringing a new character to life in a new play was work done jointly by playwright and actor. It matters, then, who first played these roles. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* are the first of Shakespeare's plays for which we can, with some confidence, work out the identities of the original cast.

Richard Burbage was the first Romeo. In 1595 he was twenty-eight years old, so a little older than the Romeo we imagine. He had broad shoulders, which explains why Juliet's father observes that the young lover 'bears him like a portly gentleman'. For Juliet, they needed a boy actor. Burbage had an apprentice named Nicholas Tooley, and they were close. In 1595 he was about thirteen, which is Juliet's age, and a young actor in the role might draw out her vulnerability, her solitude. Bart van Es notes that in Shakespeare's plays written after 1594 the hero often has a distinctive opposite: another character who is the same age and something more than a friend, offering a balance. In *Romeo and Juliet* this is Mercutio, which Van Es proposes was a role for Henry Condell. In the second printed version of the play, which was likely set from Shakespeare's own working papers, one stage direction runs 'Enter Will Kemp,' and then Peter, the garrulous servant, enters. Shakespeare was writing for a man he knew.

Textual history is such dry stuff until it lets us catch Shakespeare at work: writing, arranging, dreaming. There is an apothecary in early versions of the story, for Romeo has to get the poison from somewhere. But in picking up the minor character Shakespeare both shrank him and drew him out. 'Meagre were his looks,' observes Romeo in an aside. 'Sharp misery had worn him to the bones.' The detail is not in the sources, but Shakespeare had a specific actor in mind. John Sincklo was a hired man of the Chamberlain's Men, and he was notoriously skinny, and with Sincklo in the role on stage a

thin apothecary meets stout Romeo. Tailors were proverbially poor. If John Sincklo played the tailor Starveling in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we have a perfect visual gag: a thin actor playing a poor tailor with a hungry name.

For Shakespeare the names and bodies of specific actors became raw material to jest and spoof with, all to bring the scene to life. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* features another matched pair in Lysander and Demetrius, and another pair of roles for Richard Burbage and Henry Condell. 'Demetrius is a worthy gentleman,' says Theseus, instructing Hermia to marry him, and she replies: 'So is Lysander.' One young Athenian gentleman is as good as another and they might simply swap. The joke depends upon familiarity: resemblance between the actor and the role, and the audience's own recognition of both. Will Kemp was famous before Shakespeare wrote a word. In one of his celebrated skits he appeared as a drunken innkeeper who loved to re-enact famous battles in which he claimed he had fought and this is the laughter of Bottom: boasting, self-regarding, undercut. 'I could play 'Erc'les rarely, or a part to tear a cat in,' Bottom announces, and declaims eight lines of terrible verse. 'This was lofty.' We laugh and we come to love the small man inside the grand role.

Kemp, Burbage, Condell and the rest: these are Shakespeare's fellows. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* nine characters are each given more than a thousand words to speak, and the one who speaks most is Bottom, but he is not given many more than the second, or third, or even the fourth most talkative. Here, as in its twin *Romeo and Juliet*, the structural focus of the play is upon the whole company. In her edition, Hester Lees-Jeffries calls it an 'ensemble play': the two young lovers speak most but four other characters each speak more than 2,000 words. This is unusual for Shakespeare. In his later and most celebrated plays there is a single character who talks and talks, twice or three times as much as anyone else on stage. Hamlet, Rosalind, Henry V, Lear: these are great monsters of language. But in 1595 Shakespeare

was newly – and joyfully – part of a company of fellows working together, and his plays of this moment register a new, hard-won sense of communal achievement even in their structures.

In the Verona sunshine, on the stage at Shoreditch, men are quarrelling, fighting, falling out, falling dead. The brilliance and agony of the scene in *Romeo and Juliet* is that it is company work and at the same time vexed by a terrible insight. How men are bound together can also tear them apart; it is possible to be too close. Here is Mercutio, friend to Romeo, friend to the Montagues; here is Benvolio, Romeo's cousin; to them enters Tybalt of the Capulets; and the young men josh one another as young men will. It starts with a simple question. Tybalt is looking for Romeo, and he addresses Mercutio: 'Mercutio, thou consort'st with Romeo.' But the word he uses is an awkward one, and Mercutio jumps on it. 'Consort?' he mocks. 'What, dost thou make us minstrels?'

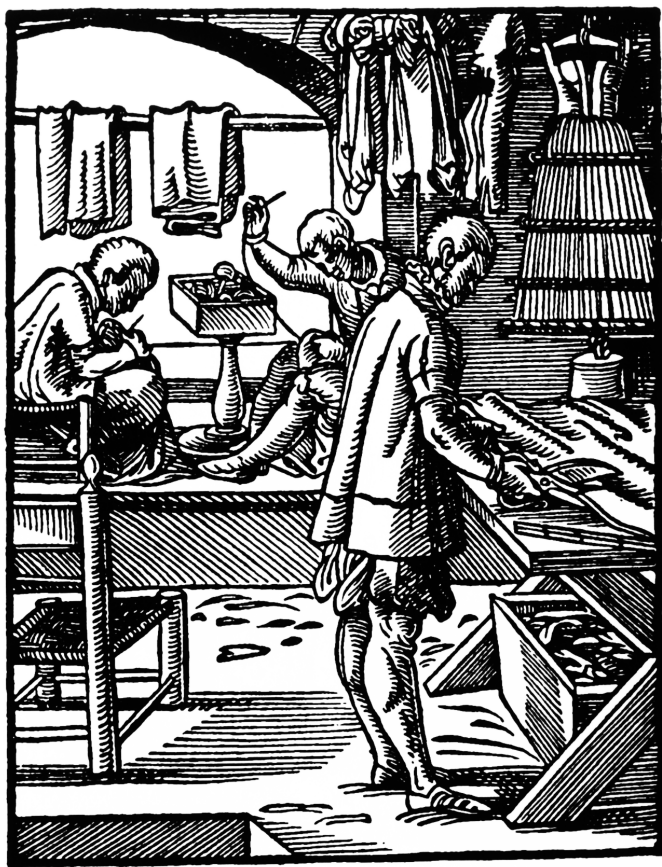
A consort can mean an acquaintance or ally and it can also mean a troupe of musicians. It hints at the ways that men may be joined – by friendship, love, work – and beneath it lies a homophobic slur. Neither Mercutio nor Tybalt quite says it, but what flickers here is an idea, an insult: that Mercutio is Romeo's boyfriend. Young men quarrelling in the sunshine: it will lead to no good. Romeo enters, and Tybalt sees him. 'Here comes my man,' he declares, and Mercutio, looking for a fight, will not let it go. 'I'll be hanged,' he counters, 'if he wear your livery.' There is another terrible pun here, for a 'man' can mean a servant, a member of the household, and even as they joke about being 'fellows' – and Mercutio uses the word early in the scene, teasing Benvolio – they are about to murder one another. Burbage, Condell, the fellows: even as they play this agonising division, which riffs upon fellowship, they are also men joined in the livery – blue, with the crest of a swan – of the Lord Chamberlain.

At the Theatre the audience was standing in the sunshine, watching on. The stage was at the west side of the playhouse, which



was unusual. At the Curtain the stage was on the east side, as it was at the later Globe, which is sensible, for a stage in the east catches the afternoon sun. But on a summer's afternoon at the Theatre the stage fell into shade sooner than the yard. The audience was watching, then, as a shadow sank upon the stage, upon the fight. It was not only here, of course. For plays go elsewhere, on and on.

## *Epilogue*





## The Confederacy

At Michaelmas 1598 Cuthbert Burbage meets Giles Allen at a tavern called the George. It is the end of September, a gentle late summer's day, and Cuthbert has not had to go far, for the George sits on a row of tenements on the west side of the high road, just to the south of Holywell Lane. It is a short brisk walk from the Theatre or from his childhood home, where he is living with his wife and son. In the years ahead he and his brother will buy these tenements and this will be one more sign that they see the neighbourhood as their playground and their principedom.

The George is where Allen lodges when he comes into London from his home in Essex to check on his rental properties. Allen owns many tenements around Holywell Lane and the high road. At the George today are a few men Allen knows. They are his tenants, a silkweaver and a Merchant Taylor: good company men who marry and bury their children at St Leonard's. The scene is set for his encounter with Cuthbert. The stage is an inn. The audience is made

## EPILOGUE

up of local men; they will later depose about what they see here today. The actors are a landowner and a businessman. Here are all the materials for a quarrel that will look, almost throughout, like the sweetest of agreements.

Giles Allen is an old man: a little frail, a little querulous. He has had twenty years and more of dealing with the Burbages. He never liked playhouses. In his depositions he speaks an old-fashioned language in which acting is bad, conscience and law are the same, and a man's credit means his character and not his worth. One of his favourite turns of phrase is to say that something has 'colour', by which he means it has a trace of something else in it or is a little other than it looks. In Allen's estimation, the Burbages were techni-colour and James was the worst of them. But James Burbage is dead. He died quickly the previous year and was buried at St Leonard's. Then in March 1597 the lease on the Holywell site expired. Since then there has been a temporary arrangement between Allen and Cuthbert. The Burbages have been paying the old rent while they try to settle the terms for a new lease. Allen trusts Cuthbert a little more. They are of the same type, he thinks: black-and-white men who can do business. Allen believes that Cuthbert, despite his family, has no colour of the player.

The Theatre was closed in September. This puts Allen in what looks like a strong position as the Burbages must, he assumes, be desperate to open it once more. Cuthbert knows something else. He knows that it will not reopen, ever again. And because Cuthbert knows, it will be so. But what happens today depends upon Cuthbert knowing one thing and Allen believing the possibility of another.

Cuthbert came to Allen in a role. At the George he plays what one later witness calls 'an earnest suitor'. He indicates that he seeks to renew the lease. Allen is, according to that same witness, 'contented' to hear it. He agrees to a new lease, but with new conditions. Like the original lease, it would run for twenty-one years, but instead of £14 the rent would be £24 each year. Allen also demands arrears of rent

he claims he is owed and that the Theatre will be permitted to function as a playhouse only for five years.

So much of the history of the Theatre has depended upon the idea that a lease is also a kind of fiction or perhaps even a performance. Every lease, that is, has some colour to it, or some trace of something just beyond what first appears. Allen's terms are so extreme that we might doubt that he really wants Cuthbert to accept them. The rent increase alone is 72 per cent. According to some later depositions, Allen throws in a few insults while laying out the terms. 'Pay me the arrearages of rent which your father owed me when he died,' he says, 'and then we will talk of a new lease.' Allen goes on to hint that James Burbage left his widow in poverty. This is bluster. Allen is, despite himself, engaging in a little show of his own, to pressure Cuthbert into agreeing.

But Cuthbert does not want this new lease, or any other. He wants something else from Allen. Each time Cuthbert has appeared in this story, something unexpected has happened. Often it is an odd swerve which appears at first not to benefit him at all. Hinting at his general agreement to Allen's terms, Cuthbert adds one further thought. Allen had asked for some guarantee. Cuthbert suggests that they add his brother Richard to the lease as a counter-signatory. That will, he suggests, be as effective as a surety. Now, Cuthbert knows that Allen hates and distrusts players. He is hardly a man who wants a player's name on his contract. So Allen refuses. The men leave. The contract sits unsigned. And Cuthbert gets what he wants: a little time to fulfil his plan. Although the Theatre is closed, it has one more performance in it.

English common law holds that a building constructed by a tenant on leasehold land remains the property of the landowner. The principle is as old as Roman law: *quicquid plantatur solo, solo cedit*, or that which is affixed to the soil belongs to the soil. It establishes a distinction between fixtures and chattels which still exists today. It also

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explains a surprising clause written into each version of the lease between Allen and the Burbages.

Upon the condition that they carry out repairs to the value of £200 on the buildings on the site, the clause runs, James Burbage or his heirs or executors were permitted 'to have take down & Carry away to his & their own proper use for ever all such buildings & other things as are already builded erected or set up & which hereafter shall be builded erected or set up . . . either for a Theatre or playing place or for any other lawful use'. In narrowly legal terms the function of the clause was to establish conditions under which a fixture – a building, say, clearly affixed to the land upon which it stood – might be converted back into a chattel: an item of personal property, fit to be carried away. But we might see it slightly differently: it anticipated the day when the playhouse might be torn down and carried away. The destruction of the Theatre was written into its foundations.

The clause was unusual enough to be memorable. Miles mentioned it in one of his suits. It is impossible to know whether Allen or the Burbages inserted the clause into the lease. On one hand, it apparently benefited Allen, for it gave further encouragement to the Burbages to carry out repairs upon the site which would in turn increase the value of the land. But on the other hand, it gave the Burbages an opportunity: a narrow one, but one that might be useful. The clause stood behind all the manoeuvres of Cuthbert in 1598. He had inherited much from his father but his scheme of this moment was his alone.

The implications of this small clause were apparently not evident to James Burbage. The previous four or five years had been a challenge for him, with the plague followed by the return of the old lawsuits. He was elderly, and the endless trouble was tiring. He had not given up; instead, entirely in character, he had created a new approach to the old problem. On 4 February 1596, James Burbage purchased a great hall known as the Parliament Chamber which



comprised part of the old complex occupied by the Dominican friars in London, just to the south of Ludgate Hill. The complex was known as the Blackfriars and, like the Holywell site, was an old monastic liberty. Although it sat inside the City walls it was therefore outside the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor. The hall was huge, more than 3,000 square feet, sixty-six feet north to south, forty-six feet east to west. It had been divided into seven rooms. Burbage hired a carpenter named Peter Street, whose family he knew from his teenage years in his former parish, to convert it back into a single grand hall. That year, Street moved to Bridewell, which was close to Blackfriars, and leased a wharf on the Thames. Work began that summer.

In many ways, the Blackfriars scheme was the opposite of the Theatre. It was converted, not custom-built; an old medieval structure, not a new one; and with a history of playing, for elsewhere in the same monastic complex had been a smaller hall, known as the first Blackfriars, used by boy companies and a fencing school. It was indoors, not open to the sky; it was enclosed, private, expensive. Burbage bought it outright, for the enormous sum of £600. There were no other backers, so this must have been all the capital he had or could possibly raise. It was a huge investment, and Burbage and his wife Ellen soon moved out of Shoreditch and to the neighbourhood. A small sad piece of evidence places them there. Their twenty-two-year-old daughter, named Ellen for her mother, was buried at St Ann's parish church by Blackfriars on 13 December 1596.

Although the Blackfriars was in a liberty, and outside the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor, it had powerful local residents. These lobbied against the opening of the new playhouse on their doorstep. By November, their petitions were successful, and the Privy Council forbade the use of the hall for staging plays. This was a disaster. James Burbage died at the end of January 1597. His sons brought his body back to St Leonard's, Shoreditch, for burial at the parish church that had so long been theirs. That July, Cuthbert buried his second son, James, at St Leonard's. There is no record of the boy's baptism, so

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perhaps he was still-born. He was named for his recently departed grandfather.

In this black time – following the deaths of an Ellen Burbage, named for her mother; followed by James Burbage; followed by a second James Burbage – the two Burbage sons, Cuthbert and Richard, did what Burbages always did when fortune ran against them. They devised a complex new plan, for yet another new playhouse. If there was a single Burbage tendency that was admirable – amid their scheming, their tricks, their double deals – it was their iron drive to pursue that which other men thought was worth nothing.

Perhaps the best way to see the plan, devised by Cuthbert and Richard, is as a set of lessons drawn from the experience of the Theatre. The brothers – with an expiring lease and a building they could not use; short of working capital, but with close ties to one of the major playing companies of the country – embarked upon a reading of the Theatre and its tangled history. They looked at what had worked and what had not. They tracked the points of weakness and the avenues for growth. The first lesson they drew was about land. Shoreditch had been far enough, but not too far, from the City. But by the late 1590s, the fashionable playhouses had moved to the south side of the river, to Bankside in the Liberty of the Clink. The Rose playhouse was here, so they knew that the area might welcome the players. At Holywell, their landlord Giles Allen had never smiled upon the players, and even his own claim to the site was contested. At some point in early 1598, Cuthbert quietly identified a new landlord, a man named Nicholas Brend, who had a secure claim to a patch of land on Bankside. He offered a thirty-one-year lease on the site. This was notably longer than the old lease and removed some of its uncertainty.

The second lesson was about money. At the Theatre, the Burbages had to depend upon a string of external backers, notably John Brayne, whose fecklessness brought in trouble. For the new playhouse, Cuthbert raised working capital by creating a syndicate of six parts.

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The construction was financed by the sale of shares: one half-interest in the whole was held by Cuthbert and Richard Burbage; and the other half-interest was divided into five equal shares. These shares were purchased by Shakespeare, Heminges, Phillips, Pope and Kemp. They were, along with Burbage, almost all the fellows of the Chamberlain's Men. Until now, playing companies and playhouses had been separate entities, which meant that depending upon the market, one could abandon the other. Now the playhouse owners were tied to the actors who performed in it and – again, an innovation – a writer was tied to them. They were further bound in an extremely unusual joint-equity structure. The sharers joined the lease as individuals. They then assigned their personal shares to a third party, who returned the ownership to the sharers as holders of a tenancy in common. No individual could mortgage his share of the joint asset.

The final strand of Cuthbert's dream was the most tangible and the most audacious. According to that clause in the lease he could – at least, arguably – carry off the timbers, and timbers were valuable while labour was cheap. So Cuthbert decided to create the new playhouse from those same timbers. The new playhouse then being dreamed up would be the Globe. The Colosseum, the Wiener Staatsoper, Yankee Stadium: beyond all these the Globe on Bankside is the most significant performance or cultural space in western history. But it was constructed from the skeleton of the Theatre. It was not a perfect replica. The Globe was slightly larger than the Theatre, and its roof was straw, which was slightly cheaper than the tiles used at the Theatre. Each of its design choices has a rational economic explanation. But the gesture was also so flamboyant, so wild, that there must have been at least some trace of sentimentality in it. The Burbages never left the Theatre behind.

To pull this off, they had to raise a large amount of new capital, invent a new financial structure in which to arrange that capital and co-ordinate a group of men in secret. All this took time. The only way to gain that time was by either keeping the Theatre open or, perhaps better,

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keeping alive the idea that the Theatre might reopen. It all depended upon keeping Allen close, but not so close that they signed a new lease.

Cuthbert's silent plan explains a small curiosity of the immediately preceding years. For in 1596 and 1597 Cuthbert and Allen had partnered in a series of irritating and trivial legal suits. Late Elizabethan London was a litigious society and here were two litigious men. But now, and for the first time, instead of opponents they were temporary brothers in litigation.

The first concerned a scruffy area of open ground on the Holywell site, sitting to the south of the Great Barn and between a smaller barn and a stable. This was technically part of Allen's holding. But it had been used for decades by members of the household of the Rutland family, who held the lease to the southern portion of the old priory site. By 1596, the plot was being managed by the Earl of Rutland's steward Thomas Screvin, who leased the buildings to a couple of men named Powell and Robinson. They used the barn for the smelly, noxious business of making saltpetre in manure beds. On May Day 1596 Powell and Robinson, helped by a local labourer, built a low mud wall around the open ground. Cuthbert, aided by an attorney who did regular work for Giles Allen, promptly sued for trespass. As his suit petulantly puts it, the men entered the patch of land 'while the grass was growing, and trampled and consumed it to the loss of the said Cuthbert of 40 shillings'. Screvin then counter-sued, which stopped Cuthbert's suit.

It was nothing more than a neighbourly skirmish. But the episode suggests that Cuthbert saw some advantage to allying himself with Allen. His own lease was just about to expire. The end of March 1597 was twenty-one years since the start of the lease between James Burbage and Giles Allen and therefore also its finish date. Others were aware that this might change the standing of the Theatre and the Burbages. In April 1597 the tenacious Robert Miles filed yet another suit. It rehearsed yet again the old picaresque of the slippery Burbages and what he called their 'cunning practices.' He mentions

£500 owed, and then £600. Knowing that the lease was ending, Miles was desperate: for if a new lease were to be signed, then he would have no more claim to the site. For the first time, he also included Giles Allen and his wife Sara among the defendants. The court heard it; it went nowhere; it was never going to.

In the spring, Allen and Cuthbert reached a quiet gentleman's agreement: that the Burbages could stay on at the Holywell site for a year or two, paying the current rent until a new contract was settled. Then that October, 1597, Cuthbert and Allen resumed their suit against the rowdy tenants to the south of the Great Barn. Like so many of these suits and counter-suits, this one led to nothing. Or rather: to nothing obvious, or explicit. More noise, perhaps, as the voices of 400 years ago rise for a moment, heard thinly as from another room, pressing their claims. Beneath the noise is something else, something subtler, for the Elizabethan age was an era both of deals that sometimes fell apart and of quiet negotiations that put them back together again.

One man takes and another man objects and it is the oldest story of them all. But London in 1596 and 1597 was a hungry city, and these minor legal squabbles were tinged with desperation. The summer of 1596 had been rainy enough to cause fear that the harvest might fail. This led to an uncertain market in which some might try to profit. At the end of July, a royal injunction censured those 'sellers of Corne, as rich farmers, and Ingrossers' – an old word for hoarders – that 'do pretend to raise their prices by Colour of the unseasonableness of the season'. A combination of human greed and bad weather soon caused what became known as the Great Dearth. In late 1596 a cookbook – *Sundry new and Artificial remedies against Famine by H.P. Esq* – gave advice on how to feed oneself in these famine times. Begin with prayer, it counselled, then went on to give recipes on how to prepare a meal from beechmast or acorns. If these are unavailable, it recommends 'a fresh turf or clod of earth' to keep from starving, and adds that 'a man may live 10 or 12 days by sucking of his own blood'. In

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December, heavy rains day and night waterlogged the ground. Shoreditch was a marsh. In the middle of February 1597, the banking house of the Fuggers reported that flour prices had quadrupled in London. That spring there was a rash of bankruptcies across the City.

This year when men were thinking of eating mud or blood was also the last year of the Theatre. The area immediately surrounding it was shabby, close to derelict. There were squatters making foul-smelling saltpetre and the water rose in puddles from the ground. In July 1597, following the death of Cuthbert's infant son, a controversial new satire staged at the Swan kicked off a new round of bans and restrictions, and the Theatre, along with all London's playhouses, was closed again. It must have looked like the long-imagined end.

But somehow, for a while, in the autumn, and the following spring, the Theatre reopened. And despite the strain of the hungry city, it was a golden time for Shakespeare. There had been allusions to Shakespeare before. There was the jealous mockery by Greene in 1592. From 1594, Shakespeare was regularly praised in print as a poet, for his 'Venus and Adonis' and 'The Rape of Lucrece'. But from 1596 there were for the first time literary allusions to his plays by other dramatists: they began to borrow and to imitate phrases. As the early twentieth-century editors of *The Shakespeare Allusion Book* observe: 'It was about 1597 that play-goers and readers of plays began to talk about him.' From 1598, Shakespeare's name appeared on the title pages of his printed plays. And they did so because his plays were staged at the Theatre. He had a great run: *The Merchant of Venice*, sometime in 1597; *Love's Labours Lost*; and the first and second parts of *Henry IV*.

So much of the dating is conjecture, but we know this because a slightly over-educated and under-employed cleric and translator named Francis Meres saw a handful of Shakespeare plays in London in 1597 and early 1598. He listed them, with brief commentaries, in a book called *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury*. Meres's volume is

arranged like a commonplace book and includes long collections of similes and comparisons between things grouped into thematic chapters. Among them he notes the poets and playwrights of London as well as, most famously, a dozen plays by Shakespeare, divided into comedies and tragedies.

Meres mentions one play that no longer survives: 'Love's Labours Won'. He misses some which we know were written by now. But six of the plays he names had not yet been printed so he must have seen them on stage or been informed by somebody who had. He also knew who had written them, which he could not have learned from printed copies. Meres might have been in London since 1593, when he graduated from Oxford. He could not have seen any performances during the plague closures. Some he might have seen before the plague years: *Titus Andronicus*, for example, or *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. But this leaves at least four or five, which he must have seen at the Theatre: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Love's Labours Lost*, *The Merchant of Venice* and the two parts of *Henry IV*, which he thought of as one play.

One of the many paradoxes of the Theatre is that this most uncertain of buildings gave Shakespeare solid foundations. They were both financial and literary: it gave him a living and a name. Meres is the starting point of all subsequent criticism and study of Shakespeare. His book also testifies that Shakespeare is a named playwright, known for a string of plays. Shakespeare has become Shakespeare.

Francis Meres published his *Palladis Tamia* in September 1598. The same month, Cuthbert met Allen at the George. The Theatre was closed. Even so it was still a spectacle. 'See yonder,' instructed a satirical poem by Everard Guilpin: 'One, like the unfrequented Theatre, / Walks in dark silence and vast solitude.' The poem, in the satirical volume *Skiaetheia or a Shadow of Truth*, was entered in the Stationers' Register in mid-September 1598. That month, the Chamberlain's Men were playing at the Curtain, likely *Romeo and Juliet*. They never returned to the Theatre.



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The Theatre had been torn down a thousand times in the mind. Abraham Fleming, after the earthquake of 1580, imagined the Theatre hit by another earthquake. 'O how glorious a work should that be! How happy a day! How blessed an hour! Wherein the people of God might see all such abominable places,' he gloated: 'utterly torn up from the foundations, rent in pieces the timber from the stone, wasted with fire, laid even with the ground, and no appearance thereof remaining.' His fantasy was echoed in regular cries by the Lord Mayor. In June 1584: calling for 'the suppressing and pulling down of the Theatre and the Curtain'. On 28 July 1597: hoping that 'those play houses that are erected and built only for such purposes shall be plucked down, namely the Curtain and the Theatre near to Shoreditch'. Its destruction had long been dreamed.

On 28 December 1598 a group of men gathered at the Theatre. It was a quiet, cold day in Christmas week. The revels were elsewhere. The men had a specific task to do. In the hands of a team of well-trained company workers, it should not take more than a week, and they did not have a lot of time.

Peter Street oversaw the job. He was forty-five years old, a master carpenter, and serving as second warden of the company. He knew the Burbages. He had been hired by James Burbage to begin work on the short-lived Blackfriars. As a master carpenter, he had apprentices beneath him, and he brought some of them with him. One, William Blackborne, had just been bound as an apprentice. He later did some playhouse work under Street for Henslowe. Another, Augustine Dry, was twenty-eight. He had just been freed from his seven-year apprenticeship under Street, so he was a journeyman. His was a usefully skilled pair of hands. The task before them was not easy or quick. Heavy timbers needed to be lowered from three storeys and then to be remarked with carpenter's signs so that they could later be reassembled. It is likely that Richard Hudson, who had trained at the Theatre, was present, along with another carpenter, Thomas Osborne, who lived nearby and had built Burbage's house. These men were

skilled carpenters and they were loyal to the Burbages. They planned to take the timbers but leave the foundations and brickwork, so they only needed carpenters for the task.

The problem was that at a quiet time they were immediately obvious. The carpenters crawling all over the Theatre could not hide what they were doing for long. Two of Allen's tenants on the Holywell site soon noticed. John Golborne, who had been at the meeting at the George between Cuthbert and Allen, went to see what they were doing. He recognised Cuthbert and a man he knew named Thomas Smith. Smith was another tenant on the Holywell site and a silk-weaver. There were others here too, but Golborne did not know them. As he later deposed: 'Th'other that were there were labourers and such as wrought for wages whose names he perfectly remembreth not.' These other labourers were Street's apprentices.

The same day another tenant of Allen's went to see the men at work at the Theatre. His name was Henry Johnson and he too recognised Thomas Smith, for not only was he a neighbour, but they were also both silkweavers. He later deposed that Richard Burbage had been there too. That seems likely, in part because of a small piece of play-acting that then took place. When Johnson asked what was going on, the carpenters gave him the perfect reply: that they were not tearing down the Theatre at all but in fact only doing repairs on it. 'They took it down but to set it upon the premises in an other form,' they said and as proof, in a nicely workmanlike gesture, they pointed him towards some signs of decay on the old building.

Golborne and Johnson had been warned that the Burbages might try something. Both had been present at the meeting at the George with Cuthbert. Golborne later explained that he had been given 'a letter of Attorney' by Allen in preparation for this exact eventuality. But Allen was notably not present. He was at home in Essex, celebrating Christmas, which is why the Burbages chose this week. Almost three years later, Allen brought a suit against Peter Street for

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trespass, and during it he gave a colourful account of the tearing down of the Theatre.

Allen was already planning, he then insisted, to tear down the Theatre 'and to convert the wood and timber thereof to some better use'. But surely he was bitter at being second to see the value of what had stood here. In his account, Allen rounded up to a neat dozen the men assembled at the Theatre, and included both Burbage brothers, Street and another man named William Smith. This was the name of an acquaintance of the Burbages, a gentleman who later acted as a character witness for Cuthbert. But Allen was not present and it seems likely he simply mistook one Smith for another. That the extra or unknown man was named Smith is a nice reminder that a trade or occupation can give an identity, and that it shapes the ways we may be known or recognised. Or equally, that such working men may be overlooked, or become invisible: it is so tempting to imagine here another William, whose working life depended upon the reconstruction of the Theatre. But there is no evidence to place Shakespeare on the scene.

Allen told a lively tale, revealing in its confusions. He named this dirty dozen 'the Confederacy' and described how they did 'riotously assemble themselves and then and there armed themselves with divers and many unlawful and offensive weapons'. He listed them: swords, daggers and axes. The Theatre did have a storeroom full of weapons. But a carpenter does not work with a sword or a dagger. The men that day at the Theatre were carrying tools: a carpenter's square, chisels for the sign-marks, saws, hammers, all of which might look like a weapon if you did not know what you were looking at.

Here were a dozen armed men, up to high mischief; or a small team of trained carpenters, at work. It depends upon how you tell the story. Allen saw it as a fight. He recounted how some loyal citizens attempted to resist but were beaten off by those 'said riotous persons'. This must have been Golborne and Johnson, scared into flight. Then the rioters returned to work or, as Allen put it, 'pulling and breaking

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down the said Theatre in very outrageous violent and riotous sort'. Once the timbers were down they loaded them onto carts and took them off into London.

This is how the Theatre ended. What looks to one man like a riot is another's paid, skilled, careful craft. Golborne gave the clue: they were 'labourers and such as wrought for wages'. They were carpenters and actors, here at the end as at the beginning. It is sometimes hard to see the difference, after all these years. At the Theatre, in its very final moments, one man's play was another man's work.

## Timeline of Shakespeare's Writing and the Theatre

The dating of Shakespeare's plays – when exactly he wrote what, and, in the cases of collaborative plays, with whom – remains uncertain. For some of his poems, we can be fairly certain; for others, notably the sonnets, we can only guess. I largely have followed the dates given in *The New Oxford Shakespeare*, with the notable exception of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For reasons given throughout this book, I place the composition of this play in 1595.

### 1576

On 13 April a lease is agreed between Giles Allen and James Burbage for a plot of land within the old priory of Holywell, including several falling-down buildings. The lease is backdated to begin on 25 March 1576, which is Lady Day.

### 1577

In June, the Theatre opens.

On 1 August, the Privy Council bans playing in London, 'for the avoiding of the sickness likely to happen through the heat of the weather', until at least the end of September.

At Christmas, the Thames freezes.

## TIMELINE OF SHAKESPEARE'S WRITING

### 1578

For the first half of this year, the Theatre's two owners worry and quarrel over the Theatre's income. In July, they come to blows.

On 10 November, the playhouses are closed until Christmas.

### 1579

On 13 March, the playhouses are closed again.

On 17 September, James Burbage mortgages the property around the Theatre to John Hyde for one year and a day. The lease will not return to the Burbage family for a decade.

In October, heavy rain turns to snow.

### 1580

On 6 April, an earthquake hits London at shortly before 6 p.m.

On 10 April, two actors brawl with young gentlemen from the Inns of Court at the Theatre.

On 17 April, the playhouses are ordered to close due to plague and general disorder. They will not reopen until the end of October.

It is a rowdy, unsettled year. In Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare – possibly – steals a deer and then writes a poem about it.

### 1581

In the spring, the Earl of Leicester's Men are performing *The Three Ladies of London* at the Theatre.

On 10 July, the playhouses are closed due to plague. They will reopen in December.

### 1582

This spring, James Burbage does repairs and improvements on the buildings on the Holywell site, including the construction of a house for his family, and Edmund Peckham starts sending his heavies to threaten the actors.

## TIMELINE OF SHAKESPEARE'S WRITING

In Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare writes the first of his sonnets.

### 1583

On 13 January, a scaffold collapses at the Paris Garden, and eight people are killed. It looks to pretty much everyone like a sign from God.

On 10 March, the Queen's Men are licensed.

On 26 May, Susanna Shakespeare is baptised in Stratford-upon-Avon.

This year, Richard Burbage starts acting.

### 1584

In June, apprentices brawl outside the Theatre and James Burbage is summonsed.

On 17 August, Robert Burbage is buried at St Giles Cripplegate.

### 1585

This year, the playing industry is developing across London. James Burbage begins a profit-sharing arrangement with Henry Lanman, owner of the Curtain, and Philip Henslowe takes a twenty-year lease on the Little Rose estate on Bankside. He plans to build a playhouse.

On 2 February, Hamnet and Judith Shakespeare are baptised in Stratford-upon-Avon.

On 1 November, the Burbages draw up a new lease on the Holywell site and present it to their landlord Giles Allen. He defers signing it.

### 1586

On 7 May, the playhouses are ordered to close due to an outbreak of the plague. They reopen at the end of August.

In the second week of June, John Brayne dies. This sets off a new round of legal proceedings, brought by his widow Margaret and



## TIMELINE OF SHAKESPEARE'S WRITING

Robert Miles, against the Burbages. These will rumble on for fifteen years.

### 1587

This year, the London playhouses are showing two hugely successful and influential new plays: *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd and *Tamburlaine* by Christopher Marlowe, possibly at the Theatre. These will influence all English playwriting for at least the next decade.

### 1588

This year, *Dr Faustus* by Marlowe is being performed in London, possibly at the Theatre.

Shakespeare writes *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and collaborates on *Arden of Faversham*.

On 3 September, Richard Tarlton is buried at St Leonard's, shortly followed by the death of the Earl of Leicester.

### 1589

In June, John Hyde returns the lease of the Theatre to Cuthbert Burbage.

In the autumn, Shakespeare writes *Titus Andronicus* with George Peele.

### 1590

This year, Shakespeare is collaborating with Marlowe on two plays about King Henry VI, while *Titus Andronicus* is performed at the Theatre.

On 4 November, the Court of Chancery hears pleadings in the suit brought by Margaret Brayne against the Burbages.

On 13 November, the court rules in her favour.

On 16 November, Margaret Brayne comes to the Theatre to claim her share but receives only abuse.

## TIMELINE OF SHAKESPEARE'S WRITING

### 1591

This year, Shakespeare is – perhaps – writing *The Taming of the Shrew*.

In May, Edward Allen quarrels with James Burbage, which leads James Burbage to set up a new company of players: Pembroke's Men.

### 1592

This year, a promise of success, and a more settled arrangement: Richard Burbage is acting in Shakespeare's plays at the Theatre. Shakespeare is collaborating with Marlowe on *Edward III* and writing *Richard III*. The peace is short-lived.

In early June, disorder breaks out, as apprentices begin to riot in anger at foreign weavers.

On 23 June, the playhouses are closed due to fears of the ongoing disturbances. This closure is then extended until December due to fears of plague.

### 1593

This is a plague year. For much of this year, Shakespeare is likely back in Stratford, and writing poems, not plays. The rainy summer only adds to the general air of gloom and impossibility.

On 13 April, *Venus and Adonis* is registered for publication.

On 30 May, Marlowe dies.

On 26 December, the London playhouses reopen, but not for long.

### 1594

This year begins with Shakespeare writing 'The Rape of Lucrece' and ends with him writing *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labours Lost*. He might, too, start work on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. It is a busy year, to make up for lost time. Some of the activity, at least in the world of playwriting, takes a new focus: on printed drama.

## TIMELINE OF SHAKESPEARE'S WRITING

On 3 February the playhouses close again, due to the return of plague.

On 6 February, *Titus Andronicus* is registered at Stationers' Hall.

On 12 March, 'The First Part of the Contention of York and Lancaster' (subsequently known as *2 Henry VI*) is registered at Stationers' Hall.

At the start of May, the Lord Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men are licensed as two quasi-official playing companies, and 'The Rape of Lucrece' is registered for publication.

### 1595

This year, Shakespeare completes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. He begins work on *Richard II* and revises three plays about Henry VI.

At Easter, Thomas Playfere preaches at the Spital.

In June, apprentices riot at Tower Hill.

In December, the Thames freezes.

### 1596

This year, Shakespeare writes *King John* and many sonnets, and begins work on *The Merchant of Venice*.

In February, James Burbage starts buying properties at Blackfriars, planning to construct an indoor playhouse.

In May, Chancery rules on the Brayne-Burbage suits.

From 22 July to 27 October, the playhouses are closed due to plague.

### 1597

Shakespeare is writing *The Merchant of Venice* and then *1 Henry IV*. *Romeo and Juliet* is published, in an unreliable quarto edition, and Shakespeare becomes known as a playwright.

At the end of January, James Burbage dies. He is buried at St Leonard's on 2 February.

## TIMELINE OF SHAKESPEARE'S WRITING

In April, the lease on the Theatre expires.

In July, the playhouses are closed due to the staging of a controversial play at the Swan.

### 1598

This year, Shakespeare writes 2 *Henry IV* then *Much Ado About Nothing*.

In September, Francis Meres praises Shakespeare's plays and Cuthbert Burbage meets Giles Allen to try to renew the lease.

At Christmas, the Theatre is dismantled. Its timbers are stored for a couple of months and then used to construct the new Globe playhouse, which in turn 'burned down to the ground', according to a witness, at the end of June 1613.

# Bibliographic Essay

All quotations from Shakespeare's works are taken from *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Modern Critical Edition*, ed. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus and Gabriel Egan (Oxford University Press, 2016). For the chronology and collaborative authorship of Shakespeare's plays, I have drawn from the incredibly rich and useful discussion given in 'The Canon and Chronology of Shakespeare's Works' by Taylor and Rory Loughnane, which is included in *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Authorship Companion*, ed. Taylor and Egan (Oxford University Press, 2017).

For discussion of, and identification of buildings within, the panorama titled 'The View of the Cittye of London from the North towards the Sowth' (c. 1579), which is now held in the library of the University of Utrecht, I have learned from James P. Lusardi's 'The Pictured Playhouse: Reading the Utrecht Engraving of Shakespeare's London' in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3 (1993).

## Prologue: The Dreamers and the Dream

The collections of suits and complaints known to theatre historians as 'the Sharers' Papers' have been reprinted in 'Dramatic Records: The Lord Chamberlain's Office', *Malone Society Collections*, vol. 2, part 3 (London, 1931). These are contextualised by John Quincy Adams in 'The Housekeepers of the Globe', *Modern Philology*, vol. 17, no. 1 (May 1919) and more recently by Gerald Eades Bentley in *The Profession of Player in Shakespeare's Time, 1590–1642* (Princeton University Press, 1984).

Bentley's account of the business of playing in the early modern period stands as a deep background to the whole of my book. But the deepest background of all is that given in the parish registers of St Leonard's church, Shoreditch. These have been transcribed into a stark but dazzlingly useful database by Alan H. Nelson, which is available on his website: <https://www.leadbetter.cc/nelson/PARISH/Leonard.html>

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(accessed November 2024). An hour or two spent with this database is perhaps the quickest way to catch the human drama of this period: the shortness of life, the closeness of community, the terrible effect of the plague and the great roll of time. As noted in these brief entries of baptisms, marriages and burials, everything changes but so much perseveres. If I were a novelist this is where I would begin.

The origins of James Burbage and his family are discussed by William Ingram in his article 'The Early Career of James Burbage' in *The Elizabethan Theatre X: Papers Given at the Tenth International Conference on Elizabethan Theatre Held at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, in July 1983*, ed. C.E. McGee (P.D. Meany, 1988) and his book *The Business of Playing: The Beginnings of the Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London* (Cornell University Press, 1992). Alongside Bentley, Ingram's work has been richly useful in my development of this book.

Throughout the book I have drawn from the mass of legal suits and depositions sparked by the never-ending controversies surrounding the Theatre. The majority – although, crucially, not all of them – have been transcribed by Charles William Wallace and published as *The First London Theatre: Materials for a History* (University of Nebraska, 1913; reprinted by Benjamin Blom, 1969). This book is a mountain of scholarship and Wallace was a towering figure. He later claimed that he and his wife looked at five million records in the old Public Record Office in London. My book would not have been possible without their labour.

Some of Wallace's transcriptions are corrected in Herbert Berry's *The First Public Playhouse: The Theatre in Shoreditch 1576–1598* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979). In quoting from the depositions and legal suits – whether those transcribed by Wallace, corrected by Berry, or unexamined by both and therefore here discussed for the first time – I have lightly modernised the spelling but kept the original, and often eccentric, capitalisation. I have also regularised the spelling of names.

In *The Elizabethan Stage* (Clarendon Press, 1923), E.K. Chambers discusses the surviving records and helpfully divides them into four categories. Category A are those suits, mainly between the Peckhams and Giles Allen, over who owns the land. Category B includes a set of suits from 1596 and 1597, brought by Cuthbert Burbage and Giles Allen, against a group they believed to be infringing upon their property; Wallace was not interested in these, and did not include them. Category C are the suits conducted back and forth between the Burbage and Brayne families, or factions, and these make up the majority of Wallace's book. Category D's depositions detail the tearing down of the Theatre and the subsequent litigation.

Wallace is discussed in a useful short chapter in S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Clarendon Press, 1991), as is his nemesis, Charlotte Carmichael Stopes. Wallace and Stopes first met at the PRO in October 1905. They were hunting for the same treasure and immediate rivals and they squabbled in footnotes for the following decade. Wallace claimed Stopes had stolen his find by rushing an article into print in the *Fortnightly Review* in July 1909. Stopes claimed Wallace had hidden documents and thwarted her research. In 1913, they both published: his transcriptions, in the January, April and July issues of *University Studies (Nebraska)*,

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and her analysis, in *Burbage and Shakespeare's Stage* (Alexander Moring, 1913). Schoenbaum sides with Wallace and coolly condescends towards Stopes, who he suggests was driven by 'feminist ardour': 'Lacking the discipline of the professional scholar, Stopes has her own eccentric strength. She did an heroic amount of archaeological burrowing, and found bits and pieces of new information which enhance the record.' But her book is better than that. It has narrative drive and teases out the continuities in Burbage's long life; Stopes pays attention to records neglected by Wallace. Her story draws our attention to what gets left out or silenced and this is valuable in a history which so often turns upon men making loud claims about their property while silent women watch on.

At the heart of all the clashes about and around the Theatre is a payment: something owed or the penny paid for admission to see a play. The parliamentary statute, passed on 12 May 1576, which set the rate for an Elizabethan workman at three shillings and four pence a week with food and drink included is reprinted in *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (Yale University Press, 1964). The wider economic context of the period has been described by Craig Muldrew in *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Palgrave, 1998) and Keith Wrightson in *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470–1750* (Penguin, 2002). 'Perceptions of the sixteenth century as a time of disruption, challenging conventional values concerning the proper ordering of economic affairs, were characteristic of the age,' observes Wrightson. The Elizabethans felt that the world was crumbling; perhaps this is what makes their stories worth telling again today. A single statistic suggests in miniature the way this society was arranged around new forms of credit and debt. Eric Kerridge in *Trade and Banking in Early Modern England* (Manchester University Press, 1988) estimates that the average testator in early modern England left nine times as much wealth in itemised debts as he did in coin.

### Chapter 1: The Carpenters

I have drawn so much from the wonderful records of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters. The originals of these are held by the company, and many have been reproduced in the seven volumes of *Records of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters*, ed. Bower Marsh et al. (Oxford University Press and Phillimore, 1913–68). The details of the complaint brought by Robert Burbage against Henry Lugg, for example, come from vol. 4, *Court Book 1573–1596*, p. 62, but all these volumes are impossibly stuffed with anecdote and texture. For details about the company's history, I learned a great deal from Edward Basil Jupp's *Historical Account of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters of the City of London* (Pickering & Chatto, 1887). For their relationship with the joiners, I learned from Henry Laverock Phillips's *Annals of the Worshipful Company of Joiners of the City of London* (privately printed, 1915). Mary Edmond's article 'Peter Street, 1553–1609: Builder of Playhouses' in *Shakespeare Survey*, vol. 45, gives a useful preliminary discussion of the intersection between the company and the construction of playhouses.



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I have drawn details from two recent discussions. In *Crafting Identities: Artisan Culture in London, c. 1550–1640* (Manchester University Press, 2021) Jasmine Kilburn-Toppin details the renovation of Carpenters' Hall as well as the wider working of the livery companies. A lecture by Professor Tracey Hill, on 'Citizen Players, Playgoing Citizens' as part of the Researching the Rose lecture series on 5 June 2023, helpfully clarified the role of the companies in civic life. But all historiography on the livery companies and their place in the social and political culture of late Elizabethan London owes a debt to Steve Rappaport's masterly *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). The system that Rappaport describes – tenacious yet flexible – is central to my analysis of Shakespeare's career.

I have also taken inspiration from two slightly older studies of very different time periods and places.

William H. Sewell, Jr's *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge University Press, 1980) observes, in mid-nineteenth-century France, 'an intriguing but little-noticed paradox: that the discourse of revolutionary workers in 1848 was laced with seemingly archaic terminology dating from the guild or corporate system of the old regime'. As I argue, something very similar was taking place in Elizabethan London. And I remain a great admirer of Studs Terkel's oral history *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about It* (Pantheon, 1974). Terkel defines work in quasi-liturgical terms as 'a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread', and the Burbage brothers and William Shakespeare would certainly have agreed. It is perhaps also worth observing that the workplace has been the setting for much of the most innovative TV drama of the past two decades: *Mad Men*, *The Office*, *The Bear*, *Succession*, perhaps even *Breaking Bad*, if we count a mobile meth lab as a workplace, and its spin-off *Better Call Saul* (although the hero hates a conventional office).

On the Red Lion, I have drawn from Janet S. Loengard, 'An Elizabethan Lawsuit: John Brayne, His Carpenter, and the Building of the Red Lion Theatre' in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1983). Details about the 'variance, discord & debate' between Brayne and Sylvester over the construction of the Red Lion appear in vol. 3, *Court Book 1533–1573*, of *Records of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters* and are discussed in the superb compendium *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660*, ed. Glynn Wickham, Herbert Berry and William Ingram (Cambridge University Press, 2000). On playing in London before 1576, I have also learned from the provocative discussion in Callan Davis, *What Is a Playhouse?* (Routledge, 2023), as well as the special issue of *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 45 (2017), on 'Drama of the 1580s', edited by Andy Kesson. Along with Callan Davis and Lucy Munro, Kesson is also one of the researchers behind the 2016–18 AHRC-funded research project 'Before Shakespeare'. This project and the research produced within it have valuably reshaped the profile of pre-Shakespearean drama, and I gratefully acknowledge its extraordinary richness as well as its role in inspiring much of my book.

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For details about the construction of playhouses, the great expert is John Orrell, who was the academic adviser on the reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe. I found particularly useful his article 'Building the Fortune', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 2 (1993), as well as Mary Edmond's 'Peter Street, 1553–1609: Builder of Playhouses', and Irwin Smith's account of Tudor joinery: 'Theatre into Globe', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1952. Brian Ellam's will is included – along with those of many of the characters in this history, including the Burbages – in *Playhouse Wills, 1558–1642: An Anthology of Wills by Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Manchester University Press, 1993).

I have quoted here from Michael Sandel's essay 'What Liberals Get Wrong about Work', published in the *Atlantic* (2 September 2020), which is excerpted from his book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Penguin/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020). But in thinking about the politics and ethics of work and its relation to craft and dignity I have also drawn inspiration from Richard Sennett's essayistic, contemplative *The Craftsman* (Yale University Press, 2008). Sennett rejects the view that 'the mind emerges once labor is done', instead proposing that 'thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making'. We need to think about materials, he argues, and to ask 'what the process of making concrete things reveals to us about ourselves'.

### Chapter 2: The Preachers

The old high thunder of the preachers is both entirely commonplace and highly evocative. In his *Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters* (London, 1580), the playwright and moralising pamphleteer Anthony Munday blasts 'that vain art of play-making', and anti-theatrical sermons and pamphlets such as this often contain surprisingly revealing discussion of the relation between playing and art, or work. Thomas White's sermon of 3 November 1577 was published as *A Sermon Preached at Pawles Cross on Sunday the thirds of November in the time of the plague by T.W.* (London, 1578). The sorcerers and witches, fairies and sprites appear in Ludwig Lavater's *Three Christian Sermons of Famine and Dearth of Victuals* (London, 1596). Thomas Drant tried to argue against money in *A frutefull and necessary Sermon, specially concerning Almes giving* (London, 1572). John Stockwood objected to the Theatre's name in *A Sermon preached at Paules Cross on Barthelmew day* (London, 1578). Thomas Playfere conjured up a hobgoblin at the Spital at Easter 1595 in *The meane in mourning* (London, 1596).

Mary C. Eccles has collected together many resonant sermons of the moment in her volume of *Records of Early English Drama: Ecclesiastical Drama* (University of Toronto Press, 2008). For Playfere and the relation between sermons and plays, I learned from the discussion by Brain Crockett in his book *The Play of Paradox: Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) and his article 'From Pulpit to Stage: Thomas Playfere's Influence on Shakespeare', *Notes and Queries*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2002).

On the Spital more broadly, I very much admire and drew a great deal from Chiz Harward and Nick Holder, *The Medieval Priory and Hospital St Mary Spital*

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(Museum of London Archaeology, 2019). The Museum of London monographs are wonderfully rich and I have drawn extensively from them in my discussion throughout the book, particularly, for the history of the old priory, Raoul Bull et al., *Holywell Priory and the Development of Shoreditch to c. 1600* (Museum of London Archaeology, 2011).

London's greatest, most eccentric historian is John Stow, and his methodology – part psychogeography, part shopping list – is irresistible, although he is equally interesting for what he overlooks and what he notices. His *Survey of London* exists in a fine edition by Charles Lethbridge Kingsford (Clarendon Press, 1908) which includes a useful introduction, notes and map. Ian Archer's 'The Nostalgia of John Stow', in *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre, and Politics in London, 1576–1649* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), ed. David L. Smith, David Bevington and Richard Strier, gives helpful context. David Mateer's 'New Light on the Early History of the Theatre in Shoreditch', *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2006), includes the texts of and a highly informative analysis of the Hind contract and the Blagrove loan.

### Chapter 3: The Servants of the Earl

The four volumes of *The Elizabethan Stage* (Clarendon Press, 1923), compiled and edited by the antiquarian scholar E.K. Chambers, are the cornerstone of any serious scholarly attention to the playing of the period. The accounts of the April 1580 quarrel are from vol. 4, pp. 279–80, although I have drawn gratefully and regularly from Chambers throughout this chapter and the whole book, notably his section on 'The Actor's Economics' and his short biographies of actors. William Ingram gives further details on the Duttons, including the coat of arms, in 'Lawrence Dutton, Stage Player: Missing and Presumed Lost', *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, vol. 14 (2001).

James C. Scott sets out his idea of legibility in his classic work *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998). I have been thinking about, and working through, Scott's ideas for my whole career. His rich, often gnomic concepts offer surprising ways to think anew about a world and academic discipline very separate from his: late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literature. Scott's great theme is what he calls 'the brittleness and fragility of state forms'. His more recent *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (Yale University Press, 2017) narrates a slightly speculative history of the earliest possible states, which he sees as a struggle between those who would settle in cities and those 'barbarians by design' who inhabit the unsettled edges. It has many echoes with, for example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which moves from a classic city-state to a wild wood around it, and it resonates with the history of the Theatre, another occasionally subversive institution established on the margins of a city. There is, to my mind, no richer, more provocative and more ethical thinker about politics and society – specifically governance – and it is with sadness that I note that Professor Scott died while I was writing this book.

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*Malone Society Collections*, vol. 3, *A Calendar of Dramatic Records in the Books of the Livery Companies of London, 1485–1640*, ed. F.P. Wilson (1954), includes a lengthy account of a pageant for the Lord Mayor sponsored by the Ironmongers' Company in the autumn of 1566. This suggests much about the world of English civic drama and its relation to the livery companies. It was an extravagant show: the total cost was a little over £210, including payments of £18 to a troupe of trumpeters and £5 to an ironmonger for 200 lbs of gunpowder. There were musicians in custom-made cassocks. The pageant was written by James Peele, whose son George later co-wrote a play with Shakespeare, and he was paid thirty shillings for his labour. That the playing companies emerged out of the livery companies is an argument made by M.C. Bradbrook in her classic study *The Rise of the Common Player: A Study of Actor and Society in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge University Press, 1979). On the Earl of Leicester's Men – the company which was Burbage's origin and also a striking counterpoint to the new world of entertainment which he devoted his life to creating – I have drawn from Laurie Johnson's serious and scholarly *Leicester's Men and Their Plays: An Early Elizabethan Playing Company and Its Legacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

On Tarlton, I learned from the excellent short biography by Peter Thomson in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; generally, the entries to this invaluable source are superb. And I quote John Lahr's essay 'Puzzled Puss' from the *London Review of Books*, 19 January 2023.

### Chapter 4: The Landlords

Susan Brigden's canonical *London and the Reformation* (Clarendon Press, 1989) is so rich and valuable on so much of the history of this period and its dizzying changes. That London was changing is implicit to so many of its literary works and is the core of Keith Wrightson's argument in his *Earthly Necessities*. I quote R.H. Tawney from *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (Longman, 1912). On the golden years and the profit inflation, I quote John Maynard Keynes, *A Treatise on Money*, vol. 2, *The Applied Theory of Money* (Macmillan, 1934). As Keynes goes on to note, 'We were just in a financial position to afford Shakespeare when he presented himself,' and this almost throwaway comment made me think more about the economic context to a work of art than any other.

London was changing but Shoreditch was changing even faster, and for me, the story of Shoreditch is told best in a single document: the 1612 indenture on the Holywell property, between Peckham and Dacres, which is held in the National Archives at C54/2128. This has been noticed by historians before – as in the *Survey of London*, vol. 8, *Parish of St Leonard*, Shoreditch, ed. Sir James Bird and Philip Norman (London County Council, 1922) – but never previously transcribed or analysed.

For the discussion of the immigrant communities of late sixteenth-century London, including details of the Returns, I have drawn upon the work of the great Huguenot historian Irene Scouloudi, including 'The Stranger Community in the Metropolis 1558–1640' in *Huguenots in Britain and Their French Background*,

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1550–1800, ed. Scouloudi (Palgrave Macmillan, 1987) and her *Returns of Strangers in the Metropolis 1593, 1627, 1635, 1639: A Study of an Active Minority* (Huguenot Society, 1985). I learned also from *Immigrants in Tudor and Early Stuart England*, ed. Nigel Goose and Lien Luu (Liverpool University Press, 2005); Robin Gwynn, *Huguenot Heritage: The History and Contribution of the Huguenots in Britain* (Sussex Academic Press, 2001); and Bernard Cottrett, *The Huguenots in England: Immigration and Settlement c. 1550–1700* (Cambridge University Press, 1991). For debates in the House of Commons, the transcriptions were printed by Simonds d'Ewes in *The Journals of All the Parliaments during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1682).

In his very useful chapter *The First Public Playhouse*, Herbert Berry estimates the Theatre's return on capital (ROC) at 29 per cent, and Glynne Wickham quotes the same figure in *English Professional Theatre*. In addition to my own discussion, it is worth making two comments. First: the methodology by which Berry reaches this figure is a little simplistic, which is inevitable, given that the figures he has to work with are so vague. Based upon his average of a series of wildly conflicting and highly interested guesses, Berry estimates income as about £200 per year, and building costs at £683. This makes the Theatre worth about three and a half years' purchase, or a return of 29 per cent per year. The figure – again, inevitably, and again, we are all working from the same highly dubious, partial figures – leaves out, for example, running costs which, as I have argued throughout, were also consistently and catastrophically underestimated by Burbage and Brayne. Second: 29 per cent ROC is a huge amount! The numbers change, of course, but this would make the Theatre as profitable, by percentage, as Apple, and more profitable than Nike. Today, an ROC of 10–15 per cent is generally considered healthy. This may explain why everyone looking at the Theatre saw dollar signs.

### Chapter 5: The Apprentices

On Stratford boys and the shape of a career which Shakespeare might have expected, I have learned much from Mark Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1963). James Halliwell-Phillipps reported the rumours of Shakespeare's apprenticeship in his *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* (Longman, 1885) and Chambers discusses both Aubrey and *King John* in his *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (Clarendon Press, 1930).

On apprenticeships: alongside Rappaport's *World within Worlds*, I have drawn much from Alan J. Drosdick's PhD thesis, 'In Danger of Undoing: The Literary Imagination of Apprentices in Early Modern London' (University of California, Berkeley, 2010), particularly on how apprentices were feared; and on their decline, I have learned and quoted from A.L. Beier's chapter 'Engine of Manufacture: The Trades of London' in *London 1550–1700: The Making of a Metropolis*, ed. Beier and Roger Finlay (Longman, 1986). The original of the apprentice indenture from the reign of Charles II – beginning 'This Indenture Witnesseth' – is in the British Library, and is reproduced in Early English Books Online, another invaluable database. I mention Catherine Belsey, *Romeo and Juliet: Language and Writing*



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(Arden Shakespeare, 2014). The rules governing apprenticeships are given in the 1563 statute of artificers and the 1573 memorandum, which are reprinted in *Tudor Economic Documents*, ed. R.H. Tawney and Eileen Power (Longman, 1951), while Richard Hudson's unorthodox apprenticeship is discussed in Mary Edmond's 'Hudson and the Burbages', in *Notes and Queries*, vol. 41, no. 4 (1994). Most valuable has been David Kathman's extraordinary work on the apprenticeship system within the playing companies, notably his article 'Grocers, Goldsmiths, and Drapers: Freeman and Apprentices in the Elizabethan Theater', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2004).

In this chapter, and those following, I have also drawn from Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

### Chapter 6: The Unbound Man

In this chapter, I draw my own speculations from a range of prompts, notably Bart van Es, *Shakespeare in Company* (Oxford University Press, 2013), whose book was also a huge assistance in my development of the subsequent chapters, as well as Bentley, *The Profession of Player*. The painters are discussed in William Herbert, *The History of the Twelve Great Livery Companies of London* (published by the author, 1838) and in Alan Borg's *History of the Worshipful Company of Painters otherwise Painter-Stainers* (Jeremy Mills, 2005). On the origins of companies, I draw from Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* (Penguin, 2008) and Ann M. Carlos and Stephen Nichols, 'Giants of an Earlier Capitalism: The Chartered Trading Companies as Modern Multinationals', *Business History Review*, vol. 62 (1988). Henry Lanman and the Curtain are discussed by William Ingram in Berry, *The First Public Playhouse*. Gary Taylor discusses Shakespeare's imaginary apprenticeship in 'Why Did Shakespeare Collaborate?' in *Shakespeare Survey*, vol. 67, *Shakespeare's Collaborative Work* (2014).

On Thomas Watson, I have learned much from the detective work of Ibrahim Alhiyari in an unpublished dissertation, 'Thomas Watson: New Biographical Evidence and His Translation of *Antigone*' (Texas Tech University, 2006); David McInnis and Matthew Steggle in *Lost Plays in Shakespeare's England* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and provocative discussion by Gary Taylor in 'Shakespeare, *Arden of Faversham*, and Four Forgotten Playwrights', *Review of English Studies*, vol. 71, no. 302 (2020).

### Chapter 7: The Money Man

Cuthbert's account of John Brayne's deathbed, given in a deposition to the Commissary Court in September 1597, is in the London Archives: DL/C/8/045/MS9065A/002, ff. 189–95. This is discussed by Bernard Capp in 'The Burbages at Law (Again)' in *Notes and Queries*, vol. 47, no. 4 (2000). Capp gives a summary of Cuthbert's extremely vivid deposition but it has not been fully transcribed or extensively analysed until now. Margaret Brayne's deposition about Robert Miles

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comes from National Archives, C2/Eliz/B13. As above, this has not been previously transcribed or discussed.

For Shakespeare's income more broadly, I have drawn ideas and details from Robert Bearman's excellent *Shakespeare's Money: How Much Did He Make and What Did This Mean?* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Bearman's book was one of the starting points for my thinking about money in the world of Elizabethan playhouses. On Cuthbert specifically, and what he stood for more generally, I have also drawn from Alexandra Mason, 'The Social Status of Theatrical People', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1967), and Tiffany Stern, "'Fill Thy Purse With Money": Financing Performance in Shakespearean England', *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, vol. 150 (2014).

The challenges faced by Elizabethan playwrights to make a decent income resonate in our present day, as writers, artists and musicians struggle. For a sensitive and often deeply sad discussion of the current landscape, I recommend William Deresiewicz's *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech* (Henry Holt, 2020). On Philip Henslowe's business model, I have drawn from Neil Carson's *Companion to Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Natasha Korda's 'Household Property/Stage Property: Henslowe as Pawnbroker', *Theatre Journal*, vol. 48, no. 2 (1996).

I have tried, in this book, to balance two impulses, or two ways of thinking about money: counting and dreaming. One comment, from a deposition given by a Shoreditch Merchant Taylor and neighbour to the Theatre in 1600, nicely catches the blur between the two. 'This Deponent saith he knoweth not what sums the Complainant [Cuthbert Burbage] and his father have gained in there several times by means of the Theatre,' it runs: 'but they have gained much: And more he Cannot depose.'

### Chapter 8: The Best Actor

My understanding of Richard Burbage has been shaped by an unpublished paper presented by Tanya Pollard at a session on 'Writing about Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama for a Broader Public' which I arranged for the Shakespeare Association of America in 2019. I quote Alexander Leggatt, 'Richard Burbage: A Dangerous Actor' in *Extraordinary Actors: Essays on Popular Performers*, ed. Martin Banham and Jane Milling (University of Exeter Press, 2004). Richard Flecknoe described Burbage in his 'Short Discourse on the English Stage', which was printed as part of *Love's Kingdom: A Pastoral Tragi-Comedy* (1664) and is excerpted in Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*.

Gary Taylor and Rory Loughnane discuss *Arden of Faversham* in their chapter on 'The Canon and Chronology of Shakespeare's Works' in *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Authorship Companion*, and this volume has been a hugely valuable source for much of my thinking about the chronology and co-authorship of the plays.

On actors and acting I have learned from Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford University Press, 2007). On props I have learned from



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Maiko Ichikawa, *The Shakespearean Stage Space* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). Virginia Woolf's 'Notes on an Elizabethan Play' is reprinted in her *Collected Essays*, vol. 1 (Hogarth Press, 1966). My understanding of Shakespeare's relationship with Marlowe has been deepened by James Shapiro's *Rival Playwrights: Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson* (Columbia University Press, 1991) and David Riggs's superb biography *The World of Christopher Marlowe* (Faber/Henry Holt, 2005).

### Chapter 9: The Journeyman

John Allevyn's squabble with James Burbage in the tiring house at the Theatre is described in two unusually colourful depositions, both transcribed by Wallace in *The First London Theatre*. That he deposed twice gives us additional details, as well as dramatic resonance; but it also introduces an ambiguity about the exact date that this took place. Wallace suggests that the two men clashed in November 1590, shortly after the Court of Chancery ruled in favour of Margaret Brayne, and one of Allevyn's testimonies appears to confirm this. However, the quarrel also gives an end-date to the Lord Admiral's run at the Theatre, which has been a point of interest to many subsequent scholars, and external evidence suggests that the Admiral's Men were at this playhouse until May 1591. And Allevyn's second testimony appears to confirm this later date. All the major studies of the playing companies, which I draw upon for this chapter, suggest that the quarrel and the departure of the Admiral's Men which it prompted took place in May 1591, so I have accepted this date.

My account therefore agrees with, and the chapter as a whole gratefully draws its discussion of the shifting playing companies of Shakespeare's early career from, Terence Schoone-Jongen, *Shakespeare's Companies: William Shakespeare's Early Career and the Acting Companies, 1577–1595* (Routledge, 2016); Rory Loughnane and Andrew J. Power, *Early Shakespeare, 1588–1595* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

How – and even whether – an artist might earn profit from his art remains a curiously unsettled question. When Pliny heard that his books were being sold in Lyon without his permission, he was pleased, as he writes in one of his letters, and this attitude remains with us in slightly different forms today as some say that art must remain unsullied by money. John Milton was paid two instalments of £5 for *Paradise Lost*; Alexander Pope made £5,000 from translating the *Iliad*. On intellectual property and the copyright of literary works, I have learned much from the discussions given by Doron Ben-Allan in *Trade Secrets: Intellectual Piracy and the Origins of American Industrial Power* (Yale University Press, 2004); Cyprian Blagden, *The Stationers' Company: A History, 1403–1959* (George Allen & Unwin, 1960); James H. Forse, *Art Imitates Business: Commercial and Political Influences in Elizabethan Theatre* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993). For detail about Shakespeare's own copyright – or lack of it – I have also drawn from Schoone-Jongen, *Shakespeare's Companies*, and Andrew Gurr, 'Did Shakespeare Own His Own Playbooks?', *Review of English Studies*, vol. 60, no. 244 (2009).

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Key to this chapter – and to the second half of the book – is Shakespeare’s work as a collaborator: as a co-writer, or play-patcher, writing with and alongside other playwrights. His co-authorship is discussed in many studies of the past two decades, and I have particularly drawn – here and throughout – from Will Sharpe’s chapter on ‘Collaboration and Shakespeare’s Early Career’ in Loughnane and Power, *Early Shakespeare, 1588–1594* and the special issue of *Shakespeare Studies on Shakespeare’s Collaborative Work* (2014). In this volume, Gary Taylor argues that Shakespeare found collaboration ‘stimulating, socially and imaginatively’; others take a more pragmatic view, as when Bart van Es in *Shakespeare in Company* suggests that Shakespeare was driven to collaborate due to the ‘working conditions’ of a system in which playwrights were in effect ‘employees of the acting companies’. Throughout this book I have suggested that both views are equally true, and in balance with one another.

### Chapter 10: Two Masters

That late Elizabethan London suffered terrible plagues, which had the direct effect of shutting down the playhouses, is not news. But the extent to which this formed Shakespeare has perhaps been underestimated. This is in part because he is still seen as exceptional, even aloof from his circumstance and moment; and in part because he appears to allude to the plague only in passing in his plays. The dynamic, difficult and unexpected impacts of a plague upon a working life – how it might cause us each to reimagine work and reinvent the work we do – became visible during our own recent pandemic: on social media, for example, in the widely shared observation that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* in lockdown while the rest of us were baking bread or home-schooling our children. An article by Gina Kolata published in the *New York Times* on 10 May 2020, called ‘How Pandemics End’, made me rethink the relationship between the epidemiological and the narrative progress of a plague. I quote from it in the following chapter, but it also informs this chapter.

I have drawn the details for the narrative of the plague from a range of sources, many of them only indirectly about the plague. In addition to those already mentioned, I have taken dates and details from *Henslowe’s Diary*, ed. R.A. Foakes (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Julian Bowsher, *Shakespeare’s London Theatreland: Archaeology, History and Drama* (Museum of London Archaeology, 2012); the *Analytical Index to the Series of Records Known as the Remembrancia 1579–1664*, ed. W.H. Overall and H.C. Overall (E.J. Francis & Co., 1878); *The Fugger News-Letters*, ed. Victor von Klarwill (London, 1924); the *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series*, along with the useful online version, *State Papers Online*; and the extremely useful archive of ‘The Elizabethan Court Day by Day’ which is available through the online encyclopaedia of the Folger Library (<https://folgerpedia.folger.edu>, accessed November 2024). This resource, known as the ‘Folgerpedia’, is extremely valuable to researchers for the period.

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### Chapter 11: The Fellows

That Shakespeare was a co-worker – collaborating with other playwrights, a member of a close company of actors – has been one of the most exciting insights into his work of the past two decades. In this book, I have tried to think through some of the consequences of this new vision of Shakespeare, as well as to extend what we might imagine as co-working, to suggest that we might see Brian Ellam as being as relevant to the development of Shakespeare’s art as George Peele or Christopher Marlowe.

For details about fencing instruction I have drawn from Joan Ozark Holmer, “‘Draw, If You Be Men’: Saviolo’s Significance for *Romeo and Juliet*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 2 (1994). The argument that 1594 saw the creation of a neat theatrical duopoly has been set out by Andrew Gurr in several books, most forcefully in his article ‘The Great Divide of 1594’ in *Words That Count: Essays on Early Modern Authorship in Honour of MacDonald P. Jackson* (University of Delaware Press, 2004). Gurr’s narrative has been critically discussed by Holger Schott Syme in ‘The Meaning of Success: Stories of 1594 and Its Aftermath’ and Roslyn L. Knutson in ‘What’s So Special about 1594?’, both published in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 4 (2010). Knutson’s chapter ‘What Was James Burbage Thinking?’ in *Thunder at a Playhouse: Essaying Shakespeare and the Early Modern Stage*, ed. Peter Kanelas and Matt Kozuska (Susquehanna University Press, 2010) is a thought-provoking discussion of playhouse repertory and the popularity of sequels.

My thinking about Will Kemp has been informed by David Wiles’s insightful critical biography, *Shakespeare’s Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge University Press, 1987). Geoffrey Marsh’s wonderfully rich account of St Helen’s, Bishopsgate, was published as *Living with Shakespeare: Saint Helen’s Parish, 1593–1598* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021). This is a micro-history that contains the material for a dozen novels.

The masterpiece is described in Francis Consitt’s *The London Weavers’ Company*, vol. 1: *From the Twelfth Century to the Close of the Sixteenth Century* (Clarendon Press, 1933); Henry Laverock Phillips, *Annals of the Worshipful Company of Joiners of the City of London*; and Jasmine Kilburn-Toppin’s PhD thesis, ‘Crafting Artisanal Identities in Early Modern London: The Spatial, Material and Social Practices of Guild Communities, c. 1560–1640’ (Royal College of Art, 2013). Hester Lees-Jeffries’ superb introduction to *Romeo and Juliet* was published in the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of the play, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

### Epilogue: The Confederacy

The meeting between Cuthbert Burbage and Giles Allen is detailed in the depositions given by John Golborne, Henry Johnson and Giles Allen, as is the subsequent tearing down of the Theatre. The Rutland vs Allen suits, which detail Cuthbert Burbage’s proxy battle with Thomas Screvin over a scruffy patch of

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ground close to the Theatre, were neglected by Wallace. These are held at the National Archives, in the Coram Rege Chief Justice's roll, 41 Elizabeth, Trinity term, and are excerpted with extensive commentary in Stopes, *Burbage and Shakespeare's Stage*.

The founding of the Globe was the sequel to and consequence of all that had happened at the Theatre. But that playhouse is another story.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Claire Noble for help at the National Archives and the London Archives, Emma Dwyer and Heather Knight at Museum of London Archaeology and Alice Pearson of the Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers. At Yale University Press, I am deeply grateful to the endlessly wise Julian Loose, and to Frazer Martin, Rachael Lonsdale and Lucy Buchan. At FSG, my very special thanks to Jonathan Galassi, and to Oona Holahan. At DGA, many thanks to my agent David Godwin for years of guidance and support. Thank you to Robert Sargant for a scrupulous copy-edit and to Ruth Killick for help with publicity. Two anonymous second readers offered valuable suggestions. Jonathan Tepper talked me through the wizardry of negative working capital; Mark Bearn gave a brilliant read; James Shapiro, who I have learned much from over many years, was characteristically generous. Thank you: Jessie, Martha, Turi, Josh, Allison, Leo, Stella. And my thanks to my colleagues at Northeastern University London, and to my teachers and students who have helped me to think about Shakespeare.

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