

The Place of Shakespeare's Stage in Elizabethan Culture

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In 1567, John Brayne went east of Aldgate to Stepney, where he erected a theater called the Red Lion. It was the first permanent building expressly designed for dramatic performances to be constructed in Europe since late antiquity, but the civic authorities of London, who were already unhappy with playing in the streets and inn-yards of the city proper, were not amused. Within two years they were complaining about the "great multitudes of people" gathering out in the "liberties and suburbs" of the city. In 1576 Brayne's brother-in-law, James Burbage, joined the family enterprise by erecting the Theatre in the liberty of Shoreditch (it was here that Shakespeare would find his first theatrical home when he came to London, sometime in the 1580's). The Theatre was joined by the Curtain in 1577, and in subsequent years the liberties across the Thames would also become sites of civic outrage, as they became host to the Rose (1587), the Swan (1595), and the Globe (1599), the latter fashioned from timbers of the original Theatre. By the turn of the century, when the Fortune had completed the scene, the city was ringed with playhouses posted strategically just outside its jurisdiction. "Houses of purpose built...and that without the Liberties," as John Stockwood remarked in a sermon delivered at Paul's Cross in 1578, "as who would say, 'There, let them say what they will say, we will play'."

We regard the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries as one of the supreme artistic achievements in literary history; in its own day, however, it was viewed as a scandal and an outrage--a hotly contested and controversial phenomenon that religious and civic authorities strenuously sought to outlaw. In 1572, in fact, players were defined as vagabonds--criminals subject to arrest, whipping,

and branding unless they were “liveried” servants of an aristocratic household; Burbage’s company and others used this loophole in the law to their advantage, persuading various lords to lend their name (and often little more) to their enterprise, thus becoming the Lord Chamberlain’s or the Lord Strange’s Men. Furthermore, “popular” drama, performed by professional acting companies for anyone who could afford the price of admission, was perceived as too vulgar in its appeal to be considered a form of art. Yet the animus of civic and religious authorities was rarely directed toward other forms of popular recreation, such as bear-baiting or the sword-fighting displays that the populace could see in open-air amphitheaters similar in construction to the Theatre and the Globe. The city regularly singled out the playhouses, and regularly petitioned the court for permission to shut them down--permission that was only granted temporarily, in times of plague, in part because Elizabeth I liked to see well-written and well-rehearsed plays at court during Christmas festivities, but declined to pay for the development and maintenance of the requisite repertory companies herself.

Attacks on professional, popular drama were variously motivated and sometimes tell us more about the accuser than the accused, yet they should not be discounted too readily, for they have a great deal to tell us about the cultural and historical terrain that Shakespeare’s theater occupied in its own day and time. Nowhere is this more the case than in one of the most consistent focal points of outrage, sounded regularly from the pulpit and in Lord Mayors’ petitions, toward these “Houses of purpose built...and that without the Liberties”--the place of the stage itself.

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The “liberties or suburbs” of early modern London bear little resemblance to modern suburbs in either a legal or cultural sense. They were a part of the city, extending up to three miles out from its ancient Roman wall, yet in crucial aspects were set apart from it; they were also an integral part of

a complex civic structure common to the walled medieval and Renaissance metropolis, a marginal geopolitical domain that was nonetheless central to the symbolic and material economy of the city. Free or “at liberty” from manorial rule or obligations to the crown, the liberties “belonged” to the city yet fell outside the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor, the sheriffs of London, and the Common Council, constituting an ambiguous geopolitical domain over which the city had authority but, paradoxically, almost no control. Liberties existed inside the city walls as well--it was in them that the so-called private or hall playhouses were to be found--but they too stood “outside” the city’s effective domain. Whatever their location, the liberties formed an equivocal territory that was at once internal and external to the city, neither contained by civic authority nor fully removed from it.

Clearly, the freedom from London’s legal jurisdiction was crucial to the survival of the playhouses in a pragmatic sense, but the city’s outrage and sense of scandal cannot be fully explained by jurisdictional frustration alone. The liberties had for centuries performed a necessary cultural and ideological function in the city’s symbolic economy, one that can only be briefly summarized here but that made them peculiarly apt ground for early modern drama to appropriate and turn to its own use and livelihood. Early modern cities were shaped, their common spaces inscribed with communal meaning and significance, by a wide variety of ritual, spectacle, and customary pastimes. Inside the city walls, ritual traditions were organized around central figures of authority, emblems of cultural coherence; the marginal traditions of the liberties, by contrast, were organized around emblems of anomaly and ambivalence. What could not be contained within the strict order of the community, or exceeded its bounds in a symbolic or moral sense, resided here, and it was a strikingly heterogeneous zone. In close proximity to brothels and hospitals stood monasteries--markers, in a sense, of the space between this life and the next--until such Church holdings were seized by the crown, following Henry VIII’s break with Rome; gaming houses, taverns, and bear-baiting arenas nestled beside sites

for public execution, marketplaces, and, at the extreme verge of the liberties, the city's leprosariums. Viewed from a religious perspective, the liberties were marked as a place of the sacred, or of sacred pollution in the case of the city's lepers, made at once holy and hopelessly contaminated by their affliction. From a political perspective, the liberties were the place where criminals were conveyed for public execution, well-attended and sometimes festive rituals that served to mark the boundary between this life and the next in a more secular fashion. From a more general point of view, the margins of the city were places where forms of moral excess such as prostitution were granted license to exist beyond the bounds of a community that they had, by their incontinence, already exceeded.

This civic and social structure had been remarkably stable for centuries, primarily because it made room for what it could not contain. As the population of London underwent an explosive expansion in the sixteenth century, however, the structure could no longer hold, and the reigning hierarchy of London found the spectacle of its own limits thrust upon it. The dissolution of the monasteries had made real estate in the liberties available for private enterprises; the traditional sanctuary and freedom of the city's margins were thus opened up to new individuals and social practices. Victims of enclosure, masterless men, foreign tradesmen without Guild credentials, outlaws, and prostitutes joined radical Puritans and players in taking over and putting the liberties to their own uses, but it was the players who had the audacity to found a viable and highly visible institution of their own on the grounds of the city's well-maintained contradictions. And it was the players, too, who converted the traditional liberty of the suburbs into their own dramatic license, establishing a liberty that was at once moral, ideological, and topological--a "liberty" that gave the stage an impressive freedom to experiment with a wide range of perspectives on its own times.

Playhouses also existed within the city walls, but they operated on a more limited scale. Acting companies composed entirely of young boys performed sporadically in the city's intramural liberties from 1576 to 1608, when repeated offenses to the crown provoked James I to disband all boys' companies. After 1608, at Blackfriars, Whitefriars, and other hall playhouses, adult companies from the extramural liberties moved into the city as well, and regularly performed in both the hall and arena playhouses.

The boys' repertory was a highly specialized one: over 85 per cent of their dramatic offerings were comedies, largely satirical--a genre that was conversely rare on the arena stages. The difference is a significant one. Although satire frequently outraged its specific targets, its immediate topicality also limited its ideological range and its capacity to explore broad cultural issues. As dramatic genres, city comedy and satire were relatively contained forms of social criticism; in terms of repertory as well as topology, the hall playhouses produced what might be called an interstitial form of drama, one that was lodged, like the theaters themselves, in the gaps and seams of the social fabric.

In contrast to the hall theaters, the open-air playhouses outside the city walls evolved what Nicholas Woodroffe, Lord Mayor of London in 1580, regarded as an incontinent form of drama: "Some things have double the ill, both naturally in spreading the infection, and otherwise in drawing God's wrath and plague upon us, as the erecting and frequenting of houses very famous for incontinent rule [author's italics] out of our liberties and jurisdiction." Playhouses were not merely regarded as a breeding ground for the plague but as the thing itself, an infection "pestering the City" and contaminating the morals of London's apprentices. Theaters were viewed as Houses of Proteus, and in the metamorphic fears of the city it was not only the players who shifted shapes, confounded

categories, and counterfeited roles. Drama offered a form of “recreation” that drew out socially unsettling reverberations of the term, since playhouses offered a place “for all masterless men & vagabond persons that haunt the high ways, to meet together & to recreate themselves [author’s italics].” The fear was not that the spectators might be entertained but that they might incorporate theatrical means of impersonation and representation in their own lives--for example, by dressing beyond their station and thus confounding a social order reliant on sumptuary codes to distinguish one social rank from another.

What the city objected to was the sheer existence of the playhouses and the social consequences of any form of theatricality accessible to such a broad spectrum of the population. In contrast, religious anti-theatricality, whether Anglican or Puritan, extended to issues of content and the specific means of theatrical representation employed by acting companies. Puritans were particularly incensed by the transvestite character of all English companies prior to the Restoration. Women on stage would have outraged them as well, but the practice of having boys don women’s apparel to play female roles provoked a host of irate charges. Such cross-dressing was viewed by Puritans as a violation of biblical strictures that went far beyond issues of costuming. On the one hand, it was seen as a substantive transgression of gender boundaries; the adoption of women’s dress contaminated, or “adulterated”, one’s gender, producing a hybrid and effeminate man. On the other hand, transvestite acting was assumed to excite a sodomitical erotic desire in the audience, so that after the play “everyone brings another homeward of their way very friendly and in their secret enclaves they play sodomite or worse.”

Puritan charges tend to rather imaginative, to say the least; they do remind us, however, that the transvestite tradition in English acting was not without controversy. Until recently critics tended to explain it away, ascribing its origins to biblical prohibitions about women's public behavior and

regarding its significance as minimal, except when a particular play (such as As You Like It) made thematic use of cross-dressing. Otherwise (so the argument went) it was a convention that the audience was trained not to perceive; boys were taken for women on stage, and learned their craft by first serving such an apprenticeship. It now appears that male sexual practice in Renaissance England was often bisexual rather than strictly heterosexual, and that sexual relations with other males typically involved a disparity in age; in relations with the same as with the opposite sex, the sexual relationship was also a power relationship based on hierarchy and dominance by the (older) male. It is quite possible that boy actors were also the sexual partners of the adult actors in the company; when such boys played women, their fictive roles reproduced their social reality in terms of sexual status and subordination. To what degree the audience responded to the actor, the character portrayed, or an erotically charged hybrid of the two is impossible to say, but as Stephen Orgel has noted, transvestite actors must have appealed to both men and women, given the large number of the latter who attended the theater.

The drama that developed in the arena playhouses of early modern London was rich in its diversity, aesthetically complex and ideologically powerful in its far-reaching cultural and political resonance. And literacy was not the price of admission to Shakespeare's theater; consequently, the popular stage enjoyed a currency and accessibility that was rivaled only by the pulpit and that threatened to eclipse it. We do not normally think of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama primarily in terms of the information it disseminated, but it gave the illiterate among its audience an unprecedented access to ideas and ideologies, stories fictive and historical, all affectively embodied and drawn from an impressive repertoire that ranged from the classical to the contemporary. In its full context, then, the Renaissance stage combined with other forces (such as the rapid expansion of

print culture, and what we think was a slow but steady rise in literacy) to alter the structure of knowledge by redefining and expanding its boundaries. Born of the contradiction between court license and civic prohibition, popular theater emerged as a viable cultural institution only by materially embodying this contradiction, dislocating itself from the strict confines of the social order and taking up a place on its margins. From this vantage point, as contemporaneous fears and our own continuing fascination testify, the popular stage developed a remarkable capacity to explore and realize, in dramatic form, some of the fundamental controversies of its time. In effect, the stage translated London's social and civic margins, the liberties of the city, into margins in the textual sense: into places reserved for a "variety of senses" (as the translators of the 1611 Bible described their own margins) and for divergent points of view--for commentary upon and even contradiction of the main body of their text, which in this instance means the body politic itself.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Studies of the history of the Elizabethan playhouse and acting companies include Glynne Wickham, Early English Stages, 1300-1600, 3 vols. (1959-72) and Andrew Gurr, The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642, 3rd. ed. (1992); most readers will find the latter quite thorough but also more accessible and up-to-date. William Ingram, The Business of Playing: The Beginnings of The Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London (1992), offers a detailed account of pre-Shakespearean acting companies.

Many aspects of Elizabethan life and culture are presently thematically in Russ McDonald, The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: A Introduction with Documents, which also includes well-selected documents from the period. A more detailed account of the significance of the liberties and playhouses, as well as “new historical” readings of Shakespearean plays in their cultural context, is found in Steven Mullaney, The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England (1988, reissued 1995). Further “new historical” approaches to Elizabethan culture and drama include two indispensable studies by Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-fashioning : From More to Shakespeare (1980) and Shakespearean Negotiations : the Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England (1988), as well as Louis Adrian Montrose, The Purpose of Playing : Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theater (1996). Jean-Cristophe Agnew, Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750 (1986) provides a valuable study of early modern theater and emerging market economies. An influential materialist-feminist study of the stage is Jean E. Howard, The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern

England (1994), which includes her previously published and often cited work on cross-dressing; Janet Adelman, Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin from "Hamlet" to "The Tempest", combines feminism and psychoanalytic theory in a compelling argument about selected plays. Stephen Orgel provides a seminal study of gender, sexuality, and cross-dressing (both on and off stage) in Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England (1996).

Illustrations and media suggestions for EB Shakespeare Web Site

(Steven Mullaney)

I. My understanding is that we will be including a schematic drawing of London, showing the location of the playhouses and other sites of interest, with “hot spots” that will call up illustrations or other articles. In terms of such “hot spots,” the following would be nice to include:

1. The de Witt sketch of the Swan (xerox included below)
2. A photo of Rose foundations, keyed to the location of the Rose (xerox of one example, found in McDonald (see bibliography), p. 63)
3. Some version of the Globe, such as the 17th century watercolor based on Visscher’s View of London. This is reproduced in David Bevington, The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Chicago, 1980), in color plates following p. 22 (I’ve enclosed a xerox, but it will probably not show up well).
4. If you want to use the wonder-cabinet you mentioned, do you want to key this in? It’s not a London one; we don’t have any drawing of Walter Cope’s cabinet, nor do I know where he lived in London (in terms of a hot spot).
5. A bear-baiting illustration; I’ve got one around somewhere, but haven’t located it yet--keyed into the Garden. A later painting, if one can be located, would suffice; what I have seen but can’t relocate was a period woodcut.
6. A spot on the Thames, for the woodcut of the Eskimo in his kayak (see xerox); although this doesn’t show him on the Thames, Frobisher’s 1577 captive did (with Elizabeth’s permission) hunt royal swans on the Thames. I thought I’d seen a woodcut of him on the Thames, but perhaps confused it with the enclosed illustration.
7. There is a painting of Elizabeth in procession through a city street; I haven’t relocated it yet, but perhaps you can track it down, and key it to one of the streets she would have used.
8. Any other reconstructed versions of playhouses you can locate, or period illustrations.

II. In addition to the map “hot spots,” it seems we might want to include a portrait of Shakespeare-- but you’re probably planning this as part of the site anyway. We also mentioned the Hollar Panorama. You might also want to include the “Agas” map of London, which shows the house Shakespeare was living in c. 1604 (I enclose a xerox from McDonald, p. 34).