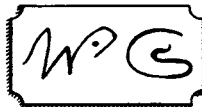


SHAKESPEARE
IN HIS OWN AGE

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

17

EDITED BY
ALLARDYCE NICOLL



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I

LONDON AND THE COURT

'Welcome to London'

'London, the Head and Metropolis of *England*. . . the seat of the *British* Empire, and the Chamber of the *English* Kings.' The description is that of a foreign traveller, Paul Hentzner, in 1598. Awestruck and not a little amazed, he noted that 'The Wealth of the World is wafted to it by the Thames'.¹ More briefly he noted his companion's loss of nine crowns to the skill of the London pickpockets. This London to which Shakespeare, the provincial, came in the 1590's, was already a magnet to people of all descriptions. A riverside town, it depended for its existence on trade by sea and river, and for its greatness on that trade plus its close links with the government of the realm. The centuries had seen its gradual growth from a leading town to a capital comparable with almost any in Europe. To the provincial, faced for the first time with its size, its bustle, its close-packed houses and its rush of traffic on road and river alike, it was alarming or electric.

To those sojourning in London it had all that a great capital can offer. Gresham's Royal Exchange had achieved its object as a centre for the merchant community. Whole streets were occupied by shops, the London artisan making up the raw materials of the provinces and the London shop-keeper selling the finished product. Wealth and talent were concentrated there—all the wit and wisdom of the Elizabethan age. There men of many tongues mingled, sermons were endowed and good preachers at a premium. The great cathedral of St Paul served both as a church and as a series of 'walks'. In it journeymen stood for hire and gossip ran unrestrained. Round the cathedral and the five-score parish churches lay the narrow-fronted houses, a cellar below, a shop or workshop on the ground floor, living quarters on the first and second floors and a garret above. The gables and steep-pitched roofs covered an urban people still wedded to the country, going Maying on May Day and finding open country within a mile of its street doors. Shakespeare could find there all that he needed, audiences, characters, encouragement and competition.

When able to assess what lay around him, he could begin, as all visitors began, to bring order to his impressions. The apparently endless streets stretching in ill-ordered fashion from the palace of Westminster and Petty France on the west to Poplar on the east, and from the north bank of the Thames to Clerkenwell and Whitechapel, could then be divided into their essential components. Their central core was the original walled city, running in a rough semi-circle from the Tower to the street now known as London Wall and then south-westwards to the River Fleet. Some of that wall remains to this day though its defensive ditch has long disappeared. Shakespeare, exploring his new home, would have found the ditch deep, the walls complete, and entry possible only at guarded gates and posterns. Less than forty years before his arrival, Wyatt's rebellion had seen it standing siege and in the 1590's the citizens were still regularly exercised in arms. But growth and prosperity had gradually taken the city's limits well

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beyond its walls, and then, as now, they ran from the site of Temple Bar, at the western end of Fleet Street, northwards to High Holborn and then east to include Smithfield, Moorfields and The Minories. These were the liberties of the city and in them its writ ran. Beyond lay other areas in which its citizens had rights but no complete authority.

Of these, the most important was Westminster. Here Tudor power had added to the little nucleus of buildings round the palace and the abbey an increasing number of streets and houses. Magnates, spiritual and lay, had long found it wise to have mansions near to the royal courts of justice and the centre of the administration. As Tudor statutes increased and Parliament sat more often and for more of the year, officialdom grew and with it the tide of houses spreading away from the Abbey and the river frontage below Charing Cross and the Strand. The result was to create on the very doorsteps of the royal palaces of Westminster, Whitehall and St James an area in which regulation was lacking and that prop of Tudor town government, the independent merchant or craftsman householder, in danger of being swamped by its most feared alternative, the poor, suspect, tenement-dweller. The year 1585 had brought a drastic remedy, the preamble to the 'act for the good government of . . . Westminster' summarizing the dilemma which then faced all London, including even the city itself.

Forasmuch as [it ran] by erection and new building of divers houses, and by the parting and dividing of divers tenements within the city and borough of Westminster and the liberties of the same, the people thereof are greatly increased and, being for the most part without trade or mystery, are become poor, and many of them given wholly to vice and idleness, living in contempt of all manner of officers within the said city, for that their power to correct and reform them is not sufficient in law as in that behalf were mete and requisite.¹

The statute's answer was authoritarian. The Dean of Westminster Abbey, or the High Steward—usually a man of weight in Court circles—yearly appointed from among the inhabitants twelve burgesses to continue in office from year to year during good behaviour, who, with twelve assistants similarly appointed, governed the city.

How effective these Westminster burgesses were, it is hard to say, but at least they tried, as their records surviving for the years 1610–15 plainly show.² Elsewhere on this north bank of the Thames the work fell on the Middlesex justices. On the Surrey bank, where the close-built area was smaller and poorer, the Surrey justices were in charge. There, opposite the palace of Westminster stood the palace of the archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth, itself a flourishing village. Downstream the marshes created a gap but in Southwark the needs of port and shipping were spreading the buildings on through Bermondsey towards the royal dockyard at Deptford. Yet the south bank in general was a poor relation, and Southwark the suspect home of the Marshalsea, Queen's Bench and Clink prisons, of the stews against which the preachers and the city fathers waged common war, the malodorous trades of the tanners, the soap and sugar boilers and the brewers, and the popular, morally dubious delights of the bull-ring and the theatre.

All through Shakespeare's sojourn in London this increase in its houses was a trouble to those in authority. Stow,³ citizen, chronicler and student of Tudor London, punctuates his descriptions with laments about alleys built and fields swallowed up, and every available record bears him out. Queen, Privy Council and City⁴ were doing all they could to prevent it. The City⁵ had

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been grumbling about it in Henry VIII's reign and Elizabeth, in July 1580, was moved to forbid both new buildings and the conversion of old houses into tenements. In 1590 she was ordering the Lord Mayor and the Master of the Rolls to report all infringements and to stay all building in progress.¹ In the intervening years the City had worked to the same end and in 1593 it was lobbying for a bill to make new houses and conversions illegal within the London area. The bill became an Act and the City instituted quarterly inquiries backed by presentments and prosecutions but the changes continued. James I followed the same policy, again with the City's active support, and with no greater success. The built-up area continued to grow. Reliable statistics do not exist, but in 1603 it contained between 200,000 and 250,000 people, perhaps four times the number of a century earlier.

The authorities' motives were sensible enough. They feared the problems of crowded alleys, the diseases they spread, the plague that was rife in them, the problems of cleanliness, sanitation and water-supply they created, the difficulty of maintaining law and order, the doubt whether food and fuel could be provided, the attraction they had for those daemons of Tudor administrators, the vagrants, the rogues and the idle and masterless men.

No sketch of Shakespearian London can afford to ignore these problems. As in every large West European town, the city fathers had both to safeguard the means which enabled the town to exist, and the standards of quality and production which protected its consumers against fraud. Water supplies, for example, were a constant and expensive anxiety. London citizens in their wills left money to the water carrier who daily brought them water tankards from the public conduits, and legacies for the maintenance of those conduits. In 1580 the City had adopted the suggestion of Peter Morris, a German engineer, for pumping supplies via tide-operated water wheels under London Bridge. In the 1590's it negotiated with Bevis Bulmer, gentleman, for engines to pump a further supply, and James I, with rare wisdom, rescued from failure Sir Hugh Myddleton's project for a supply from the springs of Hertfordshire—the New River which still helps to provide London with water.

Bread was an equally serious problem. In normal years London drew much of its corn from the valleys of the Thames and its tributaries. If harvests were good, all went well, but in a year or years of dearth, prices rose swiftly and the corn bodger became an object of execration. The problem grew as London grew and, in the 1520's, the City began to adopt a policy which by Shakespeare's day was standard. The companies governing the city's trades, the mercers, fishmongers, goldsmiths, clothworkers and others, were ordered to pay for stocks of corn to be held in the municipal granaries and sold at reasonable prices as the need arose. Six thousand quarters, for example, were demanded in the winter of 1590, one-third of it rye, and forty-nine of the companies were ordered to contribute their quotas, the merchant taylors 562 quarters, the grocers 525, the mercers 492 and so on, down the scale to the minimum assessment of 6 apiece from painter-stainers, carriers and plasterers.²

Fuel was also a problem, especially the coal which, as wood supplies dwindled, loomed ever more important to manufacturer and consumer alike. Here the difficulty was not dearth but combination by suppliers on the north-east coast to extract maximum prices. This the City fought with all its power, whilst continuing its normal practice of protecting the consumer against fraud and the poor against the consequences of their poverty. Stocks for sale to the latter were built up each year, with surveyors to supervise them. All supplies were measured

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by sworn measurers as they were unloaded, but a trade which has always suffered from the occasional fraudulent retailer produced many in Shakespearian times and dealt with them appropriately. In one fortnight in 1592 four sellers of charcoal, convicted of selling in sacks two bushels per sack short, were sentenced to two hours apiece in the pillory at Cheapside, London's greatest shopping street, their false sacks slowly burning below their noses. Half stifled by the smoke, and pelted by the passers-by, they returned to gaol until able to produce adequate sureties not to err again.

This supervision of quality and standards, which was one of the essentials of civic policy, dovetailed into that of the safeguarding of supplies. A handful of examples must typify a whole range. The aldermen annually appointed vintners to report both on the quantity of wine available in the city and the amount which was not wholesome. In 1593 that report listed 1068 tons 4 hogsheads of which two tons three hogsheads were not wholesome. Similarly, searchers of hops and of soap were appointed each year, the wardens of every trade were expected to maintain periodical searches of the shops of their members, and every trade could, in the public interest, be regulated as occasion demanded. The inn-holders in 1593 were threatened with prison if the hay they sold departed from a prescribed weight and cost, whilst the committee set to report on the number of barrels of strong and of double beer obtainable from a quarter of malt provoked such indignation, presumably from apprehensive brewers, that two of these were committed to Newgate for the abuse with which they greeted it. Yet the result was an acceptable scale of quality and prices plus a promise from the brewers that their carts would carry measures so that even the poor could be served at their doors and at the prescribed price.

Bread, both brown and white, was subjected to an almost continuous review, the weight of the penny loaf being prescribed on the basis of the price of grain with always a wary eye on the harvest reports. Thus in August 1593 the weight of the penny wheaten loaf was ordered to be 22 ounces. Five months later it was altered to 20 ounces and the City wrote to the Lord Treasurer asking that the transport of corn and grain overseas be prohibited. Twenty-five years later, when bread prices had risen alarmingly and the City and the Privy Council were successfully striving for reductions, the White Bakers' Company protested that they were being driven out of business, fortifying their complaint with not unreasonable figures for their costs.¹

Some civic legislation was part and parcel of royal orders or Acts of Parliament. The lenten restrictions on the eating of meat are one example. Whether these were inspired by the shortage of winter keep for animals, the wish to foster the fishing fleets or the injunctions of religion, much trouble was taken to enforce them. The City required from the Fishmongers' Company reports on the stocks in hand, and people caught eating meat without licence were treated with full publicity. Nor was this a short-lived unenforced policy. In the 1590's watch was kept at the city's gates for meat consigned to unlicensed consumers and licences were still being obtained by such eaters in St Margaret, Westminster, nearly a century after the four women recorded by Unwin as being sent to the stocks for eating meat in a tavern in 1563.²

Leather, almost as essential as food or drink, had been regulated anew by statute in 1562-3.³ In London the powers of search by the Curriers' Company were confirmed and the City itself given, and ordered to exercise, special supervision over made wares. This it did, sworn searchers reporting quarterly with lists of wares condemned. Shoes, girdles, girths and pillions, portmanteaux and even leather-based girdles of velvet and of gold twist appear in their lists, the

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makers ranging from Holborn to St Katherine's on the north bank and from Lambeth to Southwark on the south. After condemnation the wares were appraised by sworn appraisers and the searchers, bound in the high sum of £400 apiece, began again.

If the victualling and clothing trades were chief objects of statutory and civic regulation, public health and public order were a never-ending preoccupation of Crown and City alike. By all contemporary standards, London was well-provided with hospitals.¹ St Bartholomew's and St Thomas's were hospitals in the modern sense, served by physicians, barber-surgeons and the apothecaries who, in 1617, gained a charter of their own. Bethlehem Hospital provided for the lunatics—that Bethlehem whence Shakespeare drew material for *Lear* and Dekker for *The Bellman*, and Christ's Hospital received a steady stream typified by the orphan of John Fippes 'sadler' 'who died a very poor man' and whose daughter Elizabeth, aged three or thereabouts, was 'sent to Christ's Hospital there to be virtuously brought up'. The difficulty lay, not in those well-organized sectors, but in the sectors of ill-organization and of calamity. Tales of the filthy streets and sanitary horrors of Elizabethan London are only true in part and cannot compete in scale or nausea with the days either of Fielding or Chadwick. The organization of scavenger and raker worked reasonably well. The trouble came, as always, in places of uncertain jurisdiction, in Whitefriars, the Alsatia of *The Fortunes of Nigel*, and in other places where the immunities of the former monasteries were proclaimed defiantly in the tenements and back alleys built over their former precincts. The City could, at intervals, repeat its orders to the unpaid ward officers, that the streets and lanes be cleansed and swept daily and the filth and dung taken away at least thrice weekly by the raker, and the results were at least as effective as modern orders about speed limits in built-up areas. Hentzner noted that 'the streets in this City are very handsome and clean'² but he did not visit the Alsatias and it was with Water Lane in Whitefriars that the City was then struggling. The dock at its river end was much used by brewers' and innkeepers' drays fetching water, by barges with cargo and by woodmongers for coals. All left debris and droppings. The lane and the narrow alleys off it were full of tenement dwellers who used it as a refuse dump and a privy. Though the City was keen to introduce proper control, the difficulties were added to by the ownership of land there by a leading privy councillor, Lord Buckhurst. Inspection, a full report and an Act of Common Council produced adequate remedies, on paper, but with what actual success it is hard to tell.³

If sanitation was one of the normal problems of local government in London a worse problem, bubonic plague, was becoming a continuous, rather than an occasional threat. In Shakespeare's lifetime London was seldom free from it. No cure was known, and all that the Privy Council, the College of Physicians and the City itself could do was to repeat orders whose ineffectiveness had been many times proven. Private charity contributed money which the City officially distributed, but flight, the reduction of all business, and reliance on heaven were the usual recourse. Thus in July 1593 a special meeting of the court of aldermen ordered that

the summoning of all Juries as well in the Lord Mayor's Court as both the Sheriff's Courts and also the keeping of the Court of Conscience shall be forborne until it shall please Almighty God of his infinite mercy to stay the present infection of the plague within this city.⁴

This particular outbreak, it is true, stimulated the long-mooted idea for building a separate place of isolation, a pest-house, for plague victims as an alternative to forcible confinement to their

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own homes. Helped by a loan from the committee administering London's share in a successful privateering venture against Spain, this official pest-house was built in 1594. Some twenty years later Parliament authorized compulsory plague rates to meet expenditure on relief, but Shakespeare had been in his grave for half a century before London could be considered free from the disease.

Rogues and vagabonds, the last of the City's standing problems in matters of ordinary everyday life, were a problem affecting all Tudor England. Inevitably London attracted many of them and especially those driven out of their usual vocations. The soldiers and sailors caught up in and discharged from Elizabeth's wars or garrisons, cultivators displaced by inclosures, refugees from religious persecution in France or the Low Countries joined there with discharged servants, ne'er-do-wells, deserted women and wretched orphans. They lurked in the brick-fields near Islington, in the purlieus of the markets and in any corner where they could find cover. At their worst they formed mutinous assemblies by the Royal Exchange or on Tower Hill, driving the City to appoint provost marshals and to keep, night after night, in every ward, patrols of scores of armed men whose task it was to search all ale-houses, inns, cellars, lodging houses and any other likely harbouring place and to bring before the justices all incapable of giving a good account of themselves. At its simplest it was as with Edward Bennett and Elizabeth Randall;

who have wandered within this city . . . vagrantly and have otherwise been of lewd and dishonest behaviour . . . [as they have confessed] . . . shall be tied at a cart's tail and whipped out of this city as rogues and vagrants and to have a passport delivered unto them declaring their said offences according to the form of the statute in the 22nd year of Henry the eight.¹

At its worst it was an order to provide nightly two hundred 'well and sufficiently weaponed and appointed' men and one hundred by day to safeguard the vulnerable parts of the ward of Faringdon outside the wall, the other wards providing their normal watches besides reliefs for the burden falling on that hard-pressed area.² When Shakespeare first arrived in the city it was striving to turn the former royal palace of Bridewell into a self-supporting workhouse in which to train vagrant children in the habits of industry. By the middle of his stay Parliament had enacted the Elizabethan poor law. But at no time, either then or in the next two hundred years was the problem completely solved. The workhouse was no cure and Dickens' Artful Dodger had his exact Elizabethan counterparts.

The government of the city, as Shakespeare knew it, followed the pattern common to most English towns, standing out by size and complexity rather than by constitutional innovations. A lord mayor, elected for a year from twenty-six aldermen elected for life by the citizens of the twenty-six wards into which the city was divided, headed the court of aldermen. That court provided the day-to-day government, the seniors being justices of the peace and each being responsible for the running of his own ward. Supplemented by some two hundred common councilmen elected annually by the wards, they formed the civic Parliament, legislating, taxing and ordering the city. Standing committees of aldermen and common councillors dealt with matters of continuing concern—for example the civic estates, London Bridge or martial affairs. Centuries of hard bargaining with the Crown had brought an autonomy it never dared to take for granted. The officers of the Crown were almost entirely excluded. It chose its own sheriffs,

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as it chose its mayor and aldermen. Its mayor was *ex-officio* conservator of the Thames and admiral of the port, chief magistrate, coroner, escheator and principal in the commission of felony. It administered its own law, appointed its own police, ran its own army, enrolled its own deeds and wills, determined its own citizens and looked after their orphans. Retail trade within the city was the monopoly of its citizens, and their organized authority over standards of craftsmanship extended in most cases three miles beyond the liberties, in some, for example the goldsmiths and the stationers, throughout the realm.

Yet this whole imposing structure was preserved by a balance of forces and needs. The Crown needed the loyalty and taxable capacity of the city. It needed the skill of its members for the day-to-day running of government, whether as financial advisers of the expertise of Gresham, customs farmers like William Garway and Nicholas Sutton, merchant members of the Levant or Russia or East India companies, or goldsmith venturers in the company of mineral and battery works. The city, in its collective capacity, required the assurance of a stable government, royal backing against the exactions of foreign states and the minimum of interference in its day-to-day life. Each harassed the other and each had ample opportunities for so doing. The Crown had only to yield to the importunities of some courtier, in partnership, no doubt, with a city syndicate, and grant a monopoly of starch or playing cards, for the affected parties in London to bring all possible pressure to bear to get it reversed. In turn, the citizens exported illicitly as much as they dared and opened their purse strings as grudgingly as they could. Shakespeare, the provincial, dealt comparatively little with such civic affairs, though Jonson, the Londoner, mirrors them again and again, and the records of the Crown are full of the manœuvrings of those concerned.

Perhaps monopolies and warfare produced the worst frictions and a glance at the latter shows the extent and effect of the Crown's demands in the city. The years 1591-4 saw, in 1591, the compulsory provision of six ships and one pinnace, complete, as in all these demands, with crews, stores and victuals, at a cost of £8000, and 650 men with, again as in all these demands, arms, clothes and equipment, for Brittany and France. The year 1592 required £6000 for ships and 450 men for Normandy; 1593 required 650 men for France, and 1594 six ships and two pinnaces for Brittany and 300 out of an English contingent of 1500 for the Low Countries. These were provided by means of heavy civic taxation on companies and individuals, and to an accompaniment of distrains and committals for refusal to pay, and new taxes to meet arrears of those already granted. Some men may have volunteered, but many were pressed. Masterless and idle men, caught in the civic sweeps, were kept in Bridewell as stand-by's and the general quality may be judged by the Privy Council's addition to the Queen's letter of January 1593:

And because upon occasion of like service heretofore there hath not been so good regard had to the choice of the men for their abilities of bodies, years, and condition as hath appertained, whereof hath followed that many persons levied and impressed hath either there at London, or after they were arrived at the place of their services, through fear either run from their captains or offered money to them or to their officers to be discharged and suffered to return as by experience hath often appeared though severely to be punished as an offence of dangerous example and hindrance to her Majesty's service.¹

Before very long the Council was demanding sixteen ships and 10,000 men to meet a possible invasion by Spain, but, well before that, the aldermen were entreating one of their number 'to