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Introduction

Then did the worthies of that famous Age,
Make me the constant, the continued stage
Where they did act their Revels, Mirth, and Sport,
Being the harmlesse Genii of the Court
Henry Glapthorne, 'White-Hall, A Poem', (London 1643)

The English court under the Tudors and Stuarts was a political and administrative institution which retained the mobile character of medieval kingship. The court was simultaneously the monarch's residence, the centre of national administration and of communication with foreign powers, but – remarkably to a modern understanding of how a state fulfils these functions – it was not necessarily fixed in any one place. As the king or queen moved from Whitehall to Greenwich, or to any of the other royal houses around London (see map), the central executive government moved also. The institution of the court carried on its business in a variety of royal palaces in and about London, and indeed elsewhere if need arose; the monarch's residence was the physical focus for the administrative functions of the chief nobility and their servants. The court represented an impressive concentration of governmental, administrative and legal power, civil and military, domestic and foreign, but it also continued to be the place where the reigning monarch carried on his or her everyday life, with its mundane functions of eating, sleeping and keeping clean. The court was therefore simultaneously a public and a private place: the rituals which arose around the boundaries between the public and the private mark out the history of much court ceremonial and etiquette. The English court at the close of the sixteenth century has been compared in size and character to 'a luxury hotel', with up to 700 'guests' and roughly 1,000 staff members, but since these people moved from one palace to another through the course of the year it was also 'a hotel on

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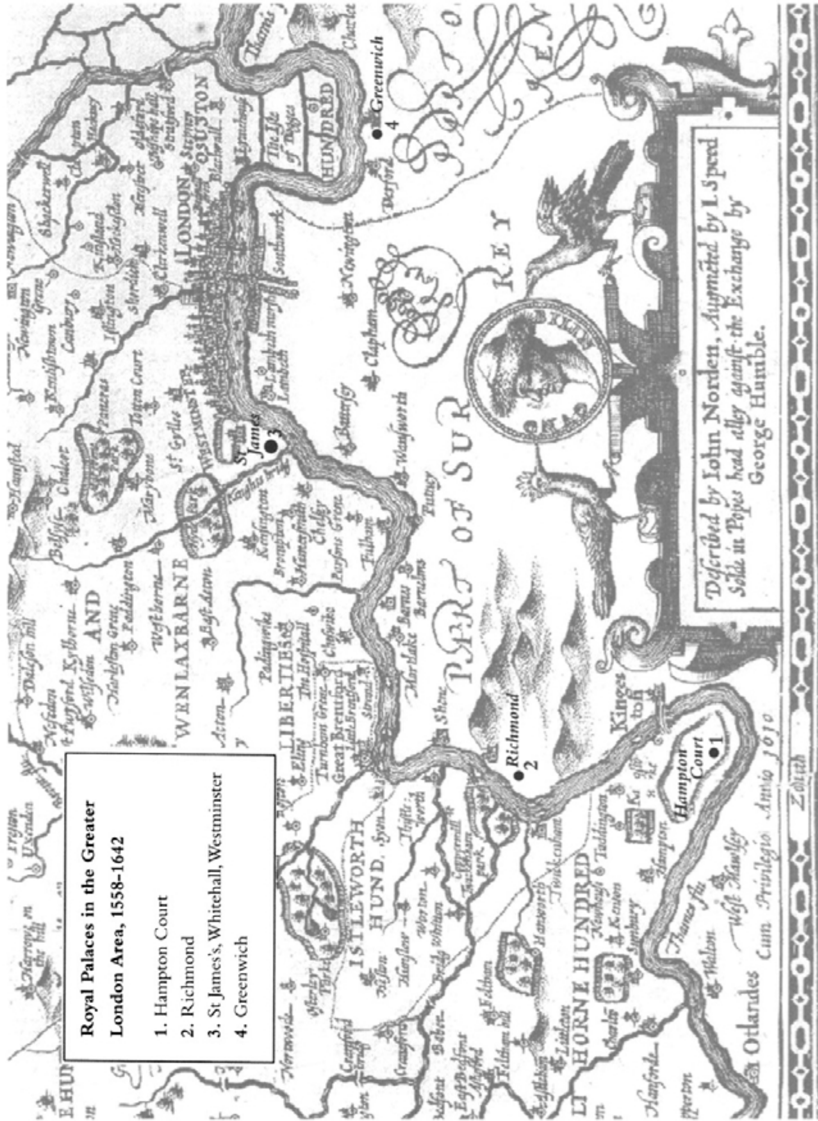

Court locations, based on John Speed, *c.* 1610.

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wheels'.[1] The strain of living in public must partly lie behind the various stories of Queen Elizabeth's irascibility, and equally behind those of King James's similarly short temper, as well as of other indiscretions – at least as his reporters have it – on public occasions. The crisis over governmental rule from the court, a complex descendant of a far simpler medieval original, came in the 1640s, but the tensions had been felt for many years before that.

James may have been impatient with the constant pressures of such a life, and he certainly sought relief from the administrative demands of a court that was increasingly based at Whitehall by taking off to relatively remote corners of south-eastern England for hunting trips. Equally, however, he was consciously proud of his position, and in the book of royal statecraft written for his son Henry, *Basilikon Doron*, he restated what, in the context of the present study, is one of the most interesting contemporary commonplaces about the monarch's function in the court: 'A King is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly do behold.'[2] The court as a kind of theatre, in which the serious business of civil order, prosperity, national interest, and state power is symbolised by rituals involving the enthroned monarch, rituals which, if not exactly open to public view, were at least an impressive show to which those involved might feel privileged to be admitted–all this was familiar to Shakespeare, and makes itself apparent in his plays.

Whatever James and Charles might have claimed, government was not centred in the king alone, but the king or queen alone symbolised its authority, and, wherever the monarch appeared at gatherings involving more than his or her personal attendants and close advisors, national and frequently international prestige were involved. So, from a relatively early date, the monarch's 'pastime' – the recreational events which were meant to relieve the stresses of governing the commonwealth – potentially provided occasions of political significance. The assembly of the whole court – the chief representatives of the English nobility, and hence of the executive government – let alone foreign ambassadors and visiting notables, at performances of plays, masques, ballets, and concerts naturally lent such occasions a hierarchical meaning. The presence of the enthroned monarch in the audience complicated the relationships between the observers and the performers; various literary manifestations in the texts of some plays and, markedly, of masques bear witness to the complex theatricality which would have been in the air at all court shows. Even hunting, into which Henry VIII and James threw themselves with personal athletic gusto, could be turned into a ceremonial occasion to symbolise the power of the monarch and his or her munificence. Large companies still flatter senior executives or import-

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ant customers with rituals of fishing and shooting which retain associations of privilege, as having been the pursuits of the moneyed Edwardian gentry. The intent is the same as it was in Elizabethan or Tudor times: to signal status, and to confer prestige on those with whom it is shared.

Certain other court ceremonies were far more accessible to a wide and general public. Processions through the public streets in times of progress, royal marriages, funerals, and coronations, were so; but also the annual Accession Day tilts at Whitehall under Elizabeth, with their elaborate pageants, speeches, and armorial trappings as accompaniment to the contests themselves, all mounted in a large arena, must have done much to widen the apprehension of the splendour and rather self-conscious romance of the court.[3]

The importance of 'magnificence' – the conspicuous and self-advertising display of wealth and cultural sophistication – was well understood by the founder of the Tudor dynasty, Henry VII. While his political intent seems partly to have been to signal a continuity and conformity with the late-medieval monarchs he succeeded, and hence to legitimise his rather tenuous claim to the throne, his cultural taste included new continental influences, and signified the cosmopolitan power of an England which depended for a good deal of its wealth on trade with northern Europe. Henry's great new palace of Richmond, an ambitious and splendid architectural undertaking, appears to have been designed on French models, while the cultural sophistication of the Burgundian rulers and their entourage seems to have underlain Henry's patronage of artists and craftsmen, and the pageants and ceremonial shows of his court.[4] His son Henry entered with vigour into the role of munificent patron as well as that of skilled participant in the fashionably noble accomplishments of horsemanship, fighting, dancing, and music. Henry VIII was by far the most ambitious builder of all the Tudor and Stuart monarchs, aided by the money and estates of dissolved monastic establishments, and the acquisition and expansion of two large palaces taken over from Cardinal Wolsey: Hampton Court and Whitehall. Henry also largely rebuilt the palace at Greenwich, erected the fantastic and elaborate Nonsuch, and added enormously to royal property generally. His aggressive foreign policy, not particularly effective in terms of successful warfare, was accompanied by grandly elaborate, and what one can only call theatrical, displays of diplomacy, proclaiming the king and his national power in heraldic splendour.

Following the short reigns of his children Edward and Mary, the long rule of his second daughter, Elizabeth, established the fame and prestige of the English monarch on an unprecedented scale. Although never able to be as free with money as her father had been, Elizabeth maintained a court which lacked

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nothing in expansive magnificence when she chose to display it, and her followers and supporters carefully fostered images of their ruler which emphasised her power and almost mystical authority, perhaps to compensate for the usual symbols of personal military prowess commonly assigned to male leaders. Good fortune and good government strengthened the political and economic power of the kingdom during her reign to such an extent that, in the seventeenth century, under the Stuart rulers James I and Charles I, the English court had become a major centre of European diplomacy. As a leading Protestant power, England had a considerable role in international politics, and James, committed to peace though he was, enjoyed his position as something of a broker between the major Catholic powers of France and Spain. Conscious of their European significance, both Stuart monarchs cultivated a personal style and a court taste which were more internationally fashionable. The renaissance in graphic art and architecture in particular was finally acknowledged and absorbed into English culture during their reigns; their foreign queens, Danish and French, successively, helped broaden the sophistication of taste of the Stuart courts.

Patronage of the arts was therefore part of a quite deliberate programme of royal propaganda, and those arts which advertised royal magnificence more obliquely, or were less utilitarian, were less favoured. Henry VIII's building programme was directed as much to defensive fortification as it was to splendour, and even the style he favoured for his palaces has more than a hint of the castle about it; he was as interested in securing the services of foreign armourers, gunnery experts, miners, and other technicians as he was those of the distinguished foreign painters and craftsmen who decorated his chambers. Patronage of writers and scholars by the crown at any point between 1485 and the 1640s, could at best be called nominal and occasional. Musicians fared somewhat better, as the need to maintain royal choirs at Windsor and Greenwich provided a number of official posts which were filled by a succession of distinguished composers and performers; instrumentalists were also maintained by the monarch to provide suitable music at feasts and dances. The post of Sergeant Painter – which was certainly filled by accomplished portraitists – seems on the whole to have leant more to the utilitarian pole, certainly under the Tudors, and as late as the Restoration the post is described in terms of a series of applied tasks the incumbent is expected to fulfill, more or less as a superior interior and exterior decorator.

It is in this context of 'tied' patronage that we must consider the theatrical arts at the Tudor and Stuart courts. Dramatic shows, of various kinds, evidently provided the kind of splendid advertisement of cultural sophistication that

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monarchs wished to foster, apart from having a strong appeal for their own sake. Kings and queens themselves performed: Henry VIII in costumed 'masks', Queen Anne as a dancer in Jonson's masques, Queen Henrietta Maria and her ladies in French (and English) plays, as well as dancing, with her consort, in the masques. The future Charles II danced before his parents as 'Prince Britomart' in a masque at Richmond in 1636. These 'amateur theatricals' of royal and noble enthusiasts may be firmly distinguished from the professional theatre which the court patronised when plays were brought to the palaces by the commercial companies. To a degree these extremes met in the masques, which involved some professionals as coaches and in speaking parts, but dramatic entertainments at all levels of skill and finish were presented at court in the same places before similar audiences. Plays and masques were shown in the same court rooms, and in the earlier Tudor years they shared costumes, properties, and scenery.

Otherwise, the court maintained an arm's-length relationship with professional actors, whose activities underwent such a remarkable change between the accession of Henry VII in 1485 and the opening of the Rose playhouse just over a century later. Henry maintained his own troupe of actors, about whose activities we know very little. When Elizabeth gave order in 1583 for an acting troupe to be formed under her name, bringing together the most famous and accomplished performers in London, she evidently did not expect them to be resident at court as exclusively royal entertainers, and they probably received very little as direct emoluments from their title apart from their livery, the clothes in scarlet cloth which would designate them to be servants of the queen. The Queen's Men continued to act commercially in London and throughout the country; while more prominent, their career is similar to those of the numerous troupes who bore the names of leading noblemen. The function of a nominal patronage which served as official protection for the commercial career of actors has often been commented on in histories of the development of the Elizabethan theatre, and the troupes which bore royal names, as all major companies did after 1603, were no different in any essential respect from those patronised by the nobility.[5]

The licences or letters patent which the acting troupes carried with them stated that their professional career, the exercise of their quality, was in fact practice, in order that they would be ready to entertain the king or queen when so required. Royal performances, therefore, though they were relatively infrequent events in the company's annual activities, had a particularly important place in its well-being. Aside from that, performance at court was a sign of favour and prominence, frequently touted on the title-pages of published plays, for example, and was well rewarded financially. The court has traditionally been

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viewed as one of the major supports of the professional stage, despite the very oblique relationship that obtained between theatre artists and their patrons.

Because of the social nature of theatre, plays were particularly a feature of the royal calendar in feast seasons, when the court was full, and given over to celebration. The old festivals of Christmas, celebrated over the full twelve days between Christmas Day and Epiphany, and the two or three days of Shrovetide, the festival preceding Lent, remained the particular times of year at which plays were seen, although increasingly under the Stuarts plays were commissioned throughout the year. The association of theatre with feasting, dancing, and other communal celebration is interesting in itself, but the demand for the actors also corresponded with their own professional season: it was in the period between the autumn and the early summer that playing in the London theatres was most usually carried on.

My aim in this study is to concentrate attention on the physical and aesthetic conditions under which actors worked when they performed at the Tudor and Stuart courts. What was the relationship between the stages on which actors performed in their playhouses and other regular playing venues, and those built for them in the temporary theatres which were made in court halls and chambers? How, if at all, were playing and staging adapted to such conditions? How did the stages for professional plays – *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *King Lear* – differ from those built for masques? In attempting to recreate these important early performances in our imaginations there are many matters about which we need guidance. Modern readers can consult numerous excellent books about conditions in the contemporary playhouses, but it remains more difficult to understand the 'theatres' in which the English monarchs and the leading nobility saw many of the plays which interest us today. By contrast with the now-vanished playhouses, however, four of the royal chambers used as theatres in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries survive, and can still be visited. In the chapters which follow I will attempt to draw as full a picture as I can of such places, and of the conditions within them during the years when audiences watched plays and masques there. As in most areas of theatre history in this period there are probably more questions than available historical information can reliably answer, but I shall attempt to indicate the boundaries of reliability in any of my own answers. We must begin with some understanding of the organisation of the court, then of the external influences which might bear on court performances, before passing to the actual wood, paint, canvas, and candlelight of the stages within the royal palaces.

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1 The royal administration

> Where is our usual manager of mirth?
> What revels are in hand? Is there no play
> To ease the anguish of a torturing hour?
> Call Philostrate.
> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.35–38 (London, 1600)

In order to understand the functioning of the court under Elizabeth, James, and Charles, one must grapple with the historical accretions of administration which had grown from a far simpler medieval system. The conservative and traditional instincts of monarchs and civil servants had retained titles and divisions of influence and responsibility from previous centuries, but changes in the practices of rule and in physical living arrangements, and chiefly the enormous expansion of the court as an administrative centre in the 1500s and 1600s, resulted in often eccentric and Byzantine methods of organisation, at least to modern eyes.[1]

Much of what we know of the details of court life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries comes from records of expenditure, preserved in the Office of the Exchequer. The head of each administrative subdivision of the royal household completed a variously detailed annual account, making claim on royal funds for money laid out and detailing the defrayment of cash advances. These surviving records provide many instances of outlay on dramatic activities. Two departments in particular were involved in theatrical activities at court: the Office of the Revels, which, after its beginnings under the early Tudor kings, grew into a full-scale production team, subsequently being reduced to a rather less expensive operation; and the Office of the Works, a major royal department charged with building and maintenance on a very wide scale, among the responsibilities of which was the provision of stages and seating for plays. The papers of the Office of the Wardrobe, which supplied cloth and furnishings for all

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kinds of state occasions, might also be expected to provide information pertinent to theatrical events, but, although the Wardrobe certainly was crucial to court plays and masques, its accounts for the period considered in this book are disappointingly meagre, providing only general summations of annual activities, with tantalisingly more detailed information on occasion.[2] Other records pertinent to theatre occur in the accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber, historically the department of the royal household which dealt with costs connected with the monarch's immediate environment, and which was presided over by the Lord Chamberlain.

In fact 'the Chamber' is a more or less specific term, depending on how it is applied. Originally it represented one part of the binary division between the private and public lives of the monarch: the Chamberlain administered the king's chamber, where the king slept, ate, and conducted business. The more public side of the court, centred in the hall, included all the supporting offices of kitchens, workshops, stables, and so forth, and was administered by the Lord Steward or the Master of the Household, which is what this part of the court, again rather confusingly, could be called, since the whole royal entourage was also known as the household. The word 'household' could therefore also be applied generally and loosely, or specifically to refer to a particular administrative division with particular areas of responsibility. The more complex courts of Tudor and Stuart times had introduced architectural divisions, as we shall see, between chamber and household, which might be reflected in the still understandable division between the household above stairs and the household below stairs: the monarchs lived on upper floors, with service buildings at ground level. A third division, between purely domestic offices and the stables, was reflected in the Tudor post of Master of the Horse, although this had become more of an honorific title than a practical responsibility by Queen Elizabeth's reign.

To return to the Chamber, the Elizabethan and Stuart Lords Chamberlain presided over a very large number of administrative departments, some of which seem to have little to do with personal attendance on the monarch. Certain of these departments or offices had grown so large, and had such enormous responsibilities, that they had moved 'out of court', having their centres of operation either in other buildings under royal control–the Wardrobe and the Revels in Blackfriars (a confiscated conventual building), or, later, the Revels alone at St John's Priory, Clerkenwell (another such property)–or at a series of dispersed locations–the Works with a depot at the Tower of London, a storehouse in Scotland Yard, and workmen and equipment constantly on the move from place to place. 'The Chamber' is further complicated by the distinction

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which had gradually developed in topographical subdivisions of the royal living space, in the terms of which the Privy Chamber, to which access was restricted to the monarch's immediate attendants and intimates, was distinguished from the more public rooms in the royal suite, the first and largest of which was known either as the Great, or the Guard, Chamber. Under a female monarch, the attendants of the Privy Chamber were women, so that the honorific titles of the traditionally male attendants of the medieval kings were further ritualised. Recent historians of the court have argued that the intimacy and influence which admission to the Privy Chamber carried with it were important factors in the political life of the court, and political life certainly was one of the chief characteristics of the court as an institution; more will be said in a subsequent chapter on how this influenced entertainment.

Although access to the monarch's personal rooms might carry with it status and power, as it certainly did under James,[3] the official centre of administrative power under the king or queen was the Privy Council. In English palaces the Council Chamber was usually contiguous to the suite of the royal residence and audience chambers; chief officers of the royal administration and high-ranking intimates of the monarch made up the group that met there.

The Lords Chamberlain therefore had jurisdiction over chambers which were remarkably concentrated centres of power. The various royal palaces contained very little space in which the monarch could be absolutely private, which is perhaps one reason why James was given to retreating to rural hunting lodges. The complex enterprise of Tudor and Stuart government involved constant comings and goings of important people through the rooms and connecting corridors of the royal suite. The organisation and regulation of this traffic was the responsibility of the Lord Chamberlain, but he evidently relied on deputies: on the Master of the Guard, on his peers as hosts and guides of important foreign guests, and in the Stuart years on the Master of Ceremonies, a post established by James.

The ceremonial aspects of many royal events were also the business of the Heralds, who ensured that the pageantry and punctilio were suitably impressive, and in line with ancient precedent. The various ceremonial processions of the annual royal calendar–on St George's Day, or Maundy Thursday, for example–fell within their area of supervision, as did occasional events: the funerals of royalty and important nobility, marriages, christenings, and coronations. Even when such royal ceremonies did not move through the public streets, as they frequently did when King Street itself–modern Whitehall, which ran through the heart of the principal English palace–was a public thoroughfare, their function within the confines of the palace buildings was also to show off the

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