English Court Theatre 1558–1642

John H. Astington

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK http://www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Bembo 10/13 pt [VN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Astington, John
English court theatre, 1558–1642 / John H. Astington.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 64065 2 (hardback)
1. Theatre – England – History – 16th century. 2. Theatre – England – History – 17th century. 3. Theatres – England – History – 16th century. 4. Theatres – England – History – 17th century. 5. Great Britain – Court and courtiers – History – 16th century. 6. Great Britain – Court and courtiers – History – 17th century. I. Title.
PN2590.C66A88 1999
792'.0942'09031 – dc21
98-39968 CIP

ISBN 0 521 640652 hardback

Contents

Illustrations and acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

Permission for the reproduction of photographs has been kindly granted by the Cambridge University Library (Map), Courtauld Institute of Art (1, 7 and 18), Mr R. J. G. Berkeley, Berkeley Castle (1), The Royal Collection © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II (2 and 11), The British Library (3, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19), The College of Arms (4 and 5), The British Architectural Library (6), The Provost and Fellows of Worcester College, Oxford (7), The British Museum (8, 13, 16 and 20), The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (9), The Duke of Devonshire and the Chatsworth Settlement Trustees (18), and the Victoria and Albert Picture Library (21).

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

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

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

king's or queen's magnificence and power, and they were watched by privileged selected observers who formed an audience.

Display and observation were constant features of court life, and they equally governed royal entertainments, to which monarchs came to watch a display or exhibition of some kind: war games, bearbaiting, or a play. Dramatic entertainment evidently varied in the degree to which it was public, and hence to which it was a formal occasion at which the etiquette of seating by rank and favour was of particular importance. From fairly early in the Jacobean period, players performed not only before the king in halls and great chambers at the traditionally important feasts of Christmas and Shrovetide, but also in smaller places to more select groups–the entourage and guests of the royal children, for example. As we shall see, by the 1630s there was a considerable variation in the size of the various places in which court dramatic entertainments were presented, and hence a corresponding range in their formality.

The court officer originally charged with the management of plays and similar shows was the Master of the Revels. The post had been created by Henry VIII, and, although the responsibilities of the job changed over the following hundred years or so, the Master remained a deputy of and responsible to the Lord Chamberlain, who therefore had some say in the appointment when it changed hands. During the rather less than a century between the accession of Queen Elizabeth and the Civil War, the post actually changed hands very little. The two principal incumbents of the mastership during the queen's reign were Sir Thomas Benger and Edmund Tilney, and the chief appointments by the Stuarts were those of Sir George Buc and Sir Henry Herbert.[4]

The substantial change in the post was from what one might call in modern terms a production co-ordinator to a licenser and censor of acted and published dramatic texts, with a consequent shift in the focus of the job from being principally within the court to principally outside it. The change, it has been argued, grew out of the success of the Office in promoting production standards: stimulated by court patronage, the London acting companies grew in size and sophistication, while a freeze on the extravagances of the court's budget correspondingly required the Master to look to the actors themselves for suitable costumes and settings, which in the earlier period had been provided either from the Revels store or by building them specially for a given occasion.[5] The surviving documents from the Revels Office show that the Master and his hired workmen were heavily involved in 'theatre business' only until the time that we have traditionally thought of as the beginning of the London professional theatre: the decade between the mid 1570s and the mid 1580s.

The success of commercial theatrical enterprise in those years, under the patronage of leading court nobles and, after 1583, of the queen herself, entailed the fading away of the Revels Office as an artistic centre. Such a story is certainly borne out by the records of expenditure, which are both more extensive and more carefully and intriguingly described in the years before the 1580s; certainly the Office appears to have stopped producing costumes, properties, and settings thereafter. Yet the production functions did not altogether disappear, and the costume store appears to have been maintained for some time. The Revels Office remained responsible for the selection and approval of plays for court performance, and retained primary responsibility for lighting at court shows, for example, as well as for some other aspects of the physical mounting of plays; and chiefly of plays, since the famous Stuart masques were from the start such expensive enterprises that they were not handled through the Revels budget.

These changes affected the physical accommodation the Revels Office enjoyed. The centre of the operation always remained in or near the city of London, rather than in any of the palace precincts. Hence one constant budget item in the accounts was for the cost of transport, by waggon and barge, of the 'Revels Stuff', as it was commonly called, to the palaces where it was needed. To move a large boatful of theatrical gear to Greenwich, for example, would probably have involved transporting it first by waggonloads through the London streets to the wharf at the Tower, downstream of London Bridge, which was a particular obstacle, especially on an ebbing tide, to any but small craft. From there the loaded boat would be sailed or rowed to the wharf at Greenwich palace, to be unpacked there and carried to where it was to be set up for the play. To move equipment in the opposite direction, to Hampton Court, either by road or water, would have involved a lengthy journey. The constant handling the Revels gear sustained would have had consequences for its durability, so that even in the later more quiescent years the Office would have had to employ workmen to repair or replace its equipment.

Apart from the Master's own living space–an element of his income and therefore to be jealously defended–the Office in its most expansive phase of operations needed a considerable area for the making and storing of costumes, properties, and scenery. Various kinds of scenic elements of the larger kind were finished and painted in the place where they were to be used, but they were planned and framed up in the Revels workrooms, and moved from there as described above. Once the production functions of the Office were reduced, it had a less pressing claim on space, although the Master retained the important function of reviewing plays for court performance, and he did so by summoning

the actors to present their work before him, rather than visiting the playhouses himself. King Claudius asks Polonius if he has 'heard the argument' of the play presented in act 3 of *Hamlet*; the Lord Chamberlain's deputy was responsible for avoiding scurrility and political embarrassment in the English court. Since, from 1581 onwards, one of the Master's tasks had become to read and license all new plays for performance, when the actors visited him to show their suggested plays for the court he would not have been interested so much in hearing the play as in seeing it. The actors are more likely to have given a full performance with costumes and properties than a seated reading. The Revels Office property was also a rehearsal hall, then, large enough to approximate to the stage space either of the theatres or of the temporary stages in court rooms.

At the very beginning of Queen Elizabeth's reign the Revels Office was based in the Blackfriars, the complex of former conventual buildings which also accommodated two distinct theatres between 1576 and 1642, but it was moved in 1560 to a similar property on the north-west edge of the city of London, in Clerkenwell, north of Smithfield: the Priory of St John of Jerusalem, the gatehouse to which still stands. The Office remained here until the early Jacobean period, for a period of almost fifty years. After 1608 the physical facilities of the Office were never settled for so long in one space, nor perhaps with such convenience as they had enjoyed at St John's. There are very few references to the later premises having been used for the traditional functions of storage, workshops, and rehearsal rooms. Briefly, the Office was located in Whitefriars, south of Fleet Street (another theatre district), then once more in the city, between St Paul's and the river, and it made at least one more move within the city, into Cheapside ward, before the 1640s.

For the entirety of the three reigns the Office was consistently within easy reach of Whitehall and St James's palaces, but also of central London, never being sited more than three-quarters of a mile from St Paul's, and never located with the Office of the Works in either the Tower or Scotland Yard. The reasons for this metropolitan focus undoubtedly varied over time, but the central rationale must have been the need to communicate with the actors. Although the Revels staff had to travel and transport equipment to stage royal shows at Greenwich, Richmond, Windsor, Hampton Court, and other places, the central business of the office was evidently seen as being connected to the professional theatre, based in London. St John's lay close to the playhouses on the northern side of the city – the Theatre, the Curtain, and eventually the Fortune – while the subsequent sites of the Office lay at the centre of the circle formed by the seventeenth-century playhouses. As the Master became licenser of plays for publication, as

well as for performance, his accessibility to Stuart publishers, most of whom worked within the city limits, also became a matter of importance.

Originally, however, the Revels Office must have located itself within the city precincts for the same reasons as did the royal Wardrobe: direct access to suppliers of cloth and other primary materials, and also to a pool of skilled labour–tailors, basket-weavers, painters, carvers, workers in wood and metal, and a host of other trades relevant to the preparation of costumes, scenery, and properties. As a patron of the furnishing and decorative trades, the Revels Office lapsed in importance after the 1570s, but its year-round business remained part of the cultural life of London rather than of Whitehall. Its officers and representatives travelled from the city as and when they were required. The Revels supervised and managed touring shows, in modern terms, and like a modern management they were based in the centre of theatrical activity. To take the modern analogy a little farther, while the Revels was a government department, some of its employees were involved in private theatrical ventures. The chief example is Edward Kirkham, Yeoman of the Revels between the 1580s and 1616, and entrepreneur of the children's companies at Blackfriars and at St Paul's in the early seventeenth century.[6] Equally, certain theatre people aspired to the security of the royal payroll, John Lyly and Ben Jonson chief amongst them.

Such a metropolitan focus for the Office rendered local arrangements, when a play was to be performed for the monarch at Greenwich or Richmond, of particular importance. The Revels Office staff arrived immediately before the show, to set up scenery, tiring house, and lighting, but they did not ever, even in their most expansive phase of existence, carry out all the physical preparation required. 'Making ready', as it is frequently called in contemporary documents, was carried out by the staff of the Chamber, with their ranks of ushers, grooms, and porters, who prepared royal apartments for any use. Cleaning and airing, and heating in the winter months, were presumably an important part of any 'making ready'; 'apparelling', the other recurrent word connected with preparations for plays, involved the decorating of the room in question with wall hangings, carpets, and upholstered seats, all of which were kept in storage when rooms were not in regular use. Since certain of these materials may have been under the official custody of the Wardrobe, yet another administrative area of the royal household would have been involved in the collaborative operation.

From early in the career of the Revels Office, however, a good deal of the labour and building required for mounting plays and similar entertainment was provided by the Office of the Works.[7] The actual division of labour, very roughly, appears to have been that the Works built auditorium seating and the

basic stage structure, and, apart from their responsibilities for costuming, the Revels hung lights, built stage decorations, tiring houses, and music houses, and looked after backstage requirements. There evidently were many grey, overlapping areas in such preparation, however; certain specialised workmen turn up on the payroll of different royal departments, for example. Equally there would have been a compelling need for one managerial co-ordinator to oversee the whole job. The work of straining overhead wires and hanging chandeliers, for example, the habitual manner of providing lighting in court chambers for plays, should evidently have been done before expensive tapestries were hung in the room below, but we do not know who may have supervised the sequence of work.

The Office of the Works was a large department with a broad range of responsibilities, from the design and building of new structures, through running repairs to roofs and plumbing, to decorative art.[8] It was headed by a Surveyor, rather than a Master, and from 1615 the incumbent was Inigo Jones, the great neoclassical architect and chief designer for the Stuart court masques. The Works had depots and storage yards in the central metropolitan area, a regular staff of supervisors of all its operations, some of whom were resident at the more removed palaces, and, like the Revels Office of the mid sixteenth century, a large group of journeyman workmen hired for specific jobs. Among these, the carpenters were central to preparations for entertainments. The major task, whenever plays were performed in larger chambers, was to build rising ranks of seating around the perimeter; a framework of heavy timber scaffolding, braced against the walls, supported planks for steps and benches, and the assembly and subsequent demolition of these structures required many days of work from a team of carpenters. To build a stage for the actors must have been a relatively simple operation when compared to the heavy work of assembling the 'degrees', which had to be capable of withstanding both a good deal of dead weight, in the form of a seated audience, and the stress of movement as that audience assembled and dispersed, and hence would have to have been correspondingly massive and firmly built. Similar structures today, in studio theatres and gymnasia, are supported on metal frames; their Tudor and Stuart ancestors, built only of wood, would have been heavier in weight and appearance.

Decoration of temporary 'theatres' of this kind would largely have been done in a temporary fashion–that is, with hangings and tapestries–but a certain amount of painting would also have been undertaken. The Sergeant Painter and his staff of assistants were paid by the Works for decorative jobs of various kinds, but in the earlier years they were also paid by the Revels, for work in preparation for plays and entertainments. The sparser accounts of the Revels Office in the Stuart

years need not suggest that painted decorations–of the stage and tiring house in particular–were no longer carried out, but simply that the responsibility for such work had been taken over by the Office of the Works. Compared with their immediate Tudor predecessor, both Stuart kings spent fairly freely on building operations and on art patronage, and it seems unlikely that the decoration of court theatres would have been skimped, in either effect or expense.

In the larger court hierarchy, the Master of the Revels was not a particularly significant figure, and after the 1580s the Office itself had a relatively modest turnover, and a small number of regular employees.[9] Those leading nobles who patronised the Elizabethan theatre companies and hence, in the case of the two best-known groups of players, gave their court titles to the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the Lord Admiral's Men, were, by contrast, of the very highest élite, both by birth and by appointment to the Privy Council. All sixteenth- and seventeenth-century court functionaries expected to derive income from their positions, but there was a considerable difference in personal wealth between those holding the very highest and the lowest posts, and hence a difference in expectation about the support which might be offered by a given job. The two dramatists who aspired to the Mastership of the Revels, John Lyly and Ben Jonson, no doubt expected the post to provide both money and status; if someone of origins as humble as those of Inigo Jones could rise to be Surveyor of the Works, Jonson is likely to have reasoned, his own fame as a writer and his favour with the royal family would fit him to head the Revels Office. In fact, the post was always held by members of the minor nobility or gentry, a characteristic which was perhaps enhanced by the general movement away from the Office's responsibilities for theatrical production and a considerable expansion of the Master's role in licensing and censorship, where social rank might reinforce authority.

The chief part of the income that might have been expected by a Master of the Revels in later Elizabethan years came from fees paid by the actors for licensing plays–a proportionate tax on the entertainment industry, but which was entirely at the Master's disposal. Otherwise the Master's annual fee from the crown was a derisory £10–exactly that of a lowly Page of the Bedchamber–although he also drew an allowance for housing and living costs, and was paid for each day of attendance at court.[10] Shrewd Masters, therefore, would soon have realised that their bread was buttered on both sides: part of their job was to control and administer theatrical activity, but they would prosper in direct proportion to the success of the players. Over the period between Queen Elizabeth's accession and King Charles's suspension of his London court the Master's original function, as

chief organiser of court entertainment, dwindled to become a lesser part of his responsibilities, while the greater part of his time came to be given over to the tasks that generated the greater part of his revenue: the reading and licensing of plays for performance.[11]

By the end of the period we are considering, then, major parts of the Master's function went on outside the court, and had no essential connection with the rest of the Revels operation, and to that extent, despite his title, the Master of the Revels became rather tangential to the activity surveyed in this book. Much recent scholarly and critical attention has been focussed on the Master's activity–and on his power–as a licenser of the stage, and I am not going to rehearse that here. The staff of the Revels Office itself, however, continued to fulfil their long-established function as a production unit, although, by 1640, evidently far reduced in the extent of their operations, compared to their activity in 1558.[12] The very survival of the Revels Office is something of an anomaly, since its function after the 1580s could easily have been absorbed by the Works and the Wardrobe, offices which were otherwise involved in preparations for court entertainments; however, since the radical step of elimination was not taken at the time when the Elizabethan Lord Treasurer, Burghley, undertook serious cost-cutting and reform in the departments of the crown, the Revels Office survived on the basis of precedence and bureaucratic self-defence thereafter. Although the Master's duties now lay largely outside their origins in the ordering of court revels, the staff of the Office itself undoubtedly regarded him as their chief advocate and defender, and, in his access to influential people, a guarantor of their otherwise irrational survival. In this respect it was important that he be a courtier, and hence of a certain social rank. The Master also continued to be involved in his traditional job of selecting and preparing plays for court performance, present at 'Rehersalls, and making choice of playes, and Comodyes, and reforminge them' as an account of 1627 has it,[13] then attending to oversee matters on performance nights.

Although court revels could no doubt have gone on quite efficiently without a Revels Office therefore, as matters were organised during the period considered here the character and talents of individual Masters could have important consequences for the conduct of the Office as a whole. At the start of Queen Elizabeth's reign the incumbent Master was Sir Thomas Cawarden, who began the job in 1545, and therefore served four monarchs. As the last Master of the Revels of King Henry VIII (and the first to be issued with a patent for the post), Cawarden presided over an organisation which maintained close ties with the Office of the Tents, a Revels responsibility that was never wholly abandoned.

The early Tudor Office had wide-ranging duties in supervising and mounting all kinds of celebration and festival–not simply drama–within the court and outside it, particularly in connection with tournaments and military expeditions. The Revels inventories of this earlier period include not only the theatrical costumes which continued to be made and reworked for plays and masks well into the Elizabethan years, but also trappings for horses, for example. The buying, cutting, and sewing of fabric formed the major business of the Revels operation, and the early Tudor Yeoman of the Revels–the chief foreman and supervisor of artisans–tended accordingly to be a master tailor. The development of the Revels Office, it might be said, was historically connected to its function as a producer and a wardobe store of costumes. Long after its production responsibilities ceased in this respect, the accounts still record the annual cleaning and airing of the costume store, a ritual event without, it seems, much practical application to what the later Tudor and Stuart Office was expected to do in preparing for court shows.

The pragmatic business of cutting out and sewing, supervised by the Yeoman, can hardly have involved the Master, whose rank and status gave him a dignified distance from manual work. Cawarden himself, however, was not so far removed in social rank that he would not have been able to tell good work from bad in the working of cloth. The son of a fuller, he was apprenticed as a mercer, but rose and prospered at Henry VIII's court, apparently as a protégé of Thomas Cromwell.[14] His Mastership of the Revels was one of a number of preferments and rewards he received in the 1540s, and it is unlikely that he was given the job because of his background in the cloth trade, but rather as a sign of favour and as a source of patronage income. The question behind Cawarden's appointment, as well as the appointment of subsequent Masters, is what special qualities the post demanded, since it was clearly not a sinecure. The Master was, in effect, a deputy of the Lord Chamberlain, was responsible for a fairly large budget (in the most expansive years of Revels productions), and his activities advertised the taste and status of his monarch.

Moreover, if the Yeoman was the practical engine of Revels operations, it is fairly clear that the Master was expected to be the theorist. Designs for costumes were produced 'after the Master's device', as accounts frequently put it. In the case of plays, the Master's role was one of selection and approval: he vetted the work of others, and, in the days when the Revels Office supplied acting troupes with costumes for plays at court, the particular demands of a play–its period, setting, genre, characters, and so forth–would have dictated what the costumiers made. The 'masks' however–seasonal costumed processions and dances–were

expected to have a theme, and preferably a novel and entertaining one, possibly involving special properties, scenery, and surprising effects. In what sense might we regard the Master of the Revels as a supervising designer, as the Surveyor of the King's Works clearly was? Masters themselves might not be expected to have a detailed expertise in visual design, but they were certainly expected to supervise those that did, and to judge the best work, as they did with plays. To what extent such judgement was unusual, or whether it was regarded as knowledge that any man of a certain social rank might be expected to have or be able to acquire, are questions to which answers cannot easily be returned.

Whatever his artistic attainments, Cawarden set his seal on the Office as an efficient manager, and it was his practices that were extolled in Elizabethan memoranda from the 1570s. He also presided over an active period of Revels Office operations, for which we possess relatively detailed information in the form of account books retained by Cawarden and preserved by his executors.[15] These reveal – in addition to the habitual preparation of costumes – extensive work on scenic devices and spectacular effects. Cawarden presided over a production team which included skilled and sophisticated craftsmen and artists, with whom he was evidently able to communicate in an informed and knowledgeable manner. He was regarded by other members of the court–his peers and superiors–as an expert in translating conceptual outlines into theatrical reality, as he did with a show of Venus, Cupid, and Mars in 1553.[16] Despite some political trouble in Queen Mary's reign, Cawarden seems to have efficiently carried out the task of supervisor of the royal shows, the chief function of the Master of the Revels up to the time of his death. As a man of some social standing and a member of the court he provided the link between commissions for royal entertainments (from the Privy Council, the Lord Chamberlain, and so on), with their explicit or implicit expectations about taste and tone, and the practicalities of sets, properties, and costumes as they could be produced by the Revels Office staff, and by hired and seconded workmen and artists.

He survived to serve Queen Elizabeth for only two years of her long reign, but his influence lingered through his devoted servant Thomas Blagrave, who continued as Clerk of the Revels, and who later acted as Master, in the absence of any official appointment, from 1573 to 1578. Between 1560 and 1572 the Master was Sir Thomas Benger, a former member of Elizabeth's household at Hatfield before her accession, where he was an auditor; hence he was promoted both as a protégé and as a financial manager.[17] We know little about Benger's familiarity with the practices of theatrical production, but he was not successful in restraining the Revels budget, and after his death some hard thought was given to the

management of the Revels Office–perhaps to the very need for a Revels Office–in the face of a continuing crisis over royal expenditure. During the middle 1570s–well before the period we usually recognise as the heyday of Elizabethan drama and theatrical activity–Blagrave managed the Office, and produced at least one of three surviving memoranda for the use of the Privy Council in considering its reorganisation.[18]

All these documents probably originated from within the Revels Office itself, and, informed by self-interest, do not make any particularly radical suggestions for improvement: traditional practice governed by wise and thrifty management is the right course to follow, they collectively suggest; the Yeoman's report even calls for more capital investment in repairs to the Revels Office storage and work spaces, which are described as decrepit and cramped. One chief problem, which can hardly have been unique to the Revels, was the practice of long deferrals in the payment of bills and wages, since disbursements by the Exchequer were made only after an annual account had been audited and approved, and the Revels carried an insufficient pool of cash to cover its expenses for the year. The results were artificially inflated prices (anticipated interest charges, as it were) and personal disaffection on the part of creditors and employees alike. As briefs in response to an enquiry the memoranda certainly succeeded in so far as no major organisational change was undertaken in the running of the Revels, but in other ways the concerted reduction of royal expenditure, managed by the new Lord Treasurer, Lord Burghley, gradually shrank the budget and hence the range of activities of the Office, although the full effect of these reductions was not felt until about a decade after the original enquiry.

In 1579 the post of Master of the Revels was conferred on Edmund Tilney, who remained until 1610, becoming the longest-serving Master, presiding over a period of central importance in English theatrical and dramatic history. His tenure saw the reduction in activity of the Office referred to above and a corresponding expansion in the authority of the Master over theatrical activity outside the court, in the course of which he became a deputy as much of the Privy Council as a whole as of the Lord Chamberlain. Tilney's personal background certainly assisted in his appointment–he was related to the Howard family, prominent in Elizabeth's Privy Council–but he was also a serious author, and a man of some learning.[19]

Tilney was presumably informed about the intentions of the central court authorities concerning the financing of royal entertainments; he may indeed have been given some early hint in 1579 about the expanded responsibilities he was to assume in 1581. That new role, however, was to do with the control of public

entertainment, and can be said to be the court's response to pressure from magistrates at the local level, especially in London, over the problems of administering players and their business, especially when they could plead that their business was, after a fashion, royal business. The general plan for royal revels themselves was drastically to reduce the budget for production, and consequently to influence the kinds of performance or show that might be presented to the queen. Concurrently it reduced the number of skilled artisans hired by the Revels operation in the making of costumes, properties, and scenery, and some of them perhaps then sold their labour to the growing theatrical market in London.

The chief victim of the new court austerity was the 'mask', a traditional royal entertainment which became prominent, if it did not actually begin, during the reign of King Henry VIII at the start of the century, and which persisted thereafter. Like the more famous Stuart masques, it featured elaborately costumed and disguised amateur participants, music, dancing, and 'entries'–processions which sometimes featured floats or waggons with elaborate spectacular effects. Rich costumes were made in multiple copies, since the maskers were dressed in similar exotic or amusing style, exactly as the 'Muscovites' are in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The making, reworking, and storing of the costumes for the annual masks of Christmas and Shrovetide had been one traditional activity of the Revels Office for three-quarters of the sixteenth century. The rich fabrics used in the costumes and the hours of skilled work spent in their manufacture consumed a large proportion of the Revels expenditure; their storage and cleaning was a persistent concern of the Revels staff.

Whether the choice was taken simply on the basis of economy or whether it was felt that the old form of revel was rather *passé* and stale (as Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet* feels about the tired old motifs of masked entries (1.4.1–10)), the production of masks disappears from the activity of the Revels after the 1570s, and as they abandoned the production of costumes for masks so they seem to have given up their older practice of providing or supplementing costumes for professional players performing at court.

The first consequence of the new dispensation over which Tilney presided, then, was a new reliance on plays as the chief source of royal entertainment. Masks seem to have been largely 'in-house' creations, as the Stuart masques were; the leading performers were members of the court, whose appearance in elaborate disguise contributed part of the fun of the occasion. Plays, however, were increasingly the business of professionals from outside the court entirely. A good proportion of court plays in earlier periods, that is to say, were staged by members of the royal household–the children or men retained as singers and

instrumental musicians in the Chapel Royal, for example–or by amateur performers from schools or the inns of court, but as commercial theatre expanded after the middle of the sixteenth century the actors seen at court, though 'servants' of the chief lords of the realm, were likely to be men who made their living by performing plays to paying audiences in London and the provinces. Although such commercial playing was far more widespread at an earlier date than older historians of the English theatre would have one think,[20] the nature of both the typical play and the typical playing company changed considerably between 1550 and 1600: by the end of this period, larger groups of actors performed longer plays of increased technical and literary complexity.

Accounts of the history of the Revels Office have usually assumed that economies in production expenses were more easily achieved because the production standards of professional troupes had improved; actors in the playhouses spent considerable sums on costuming and otherwise producing the physical requirements of their plays as a matter of course, and hence were well prepared to present a performance before the monarch. However true this may be of the 1570s, it is certainly apparent from the inventories of Philip Henslowe, the prominent Elizabethan theatrical entrepreneur, that, by the end of the century, the leading acting troupes were spending large amounts on both acquiring costumes and retaining extensive stores of costumes, properties, and scenery. If the Revels Office had been established partly to furnish players with suitable gear, it had been superseded by the professional practice of the new Elizabethan theatre.

The increased reliance of the court on entertainment provided by 'common' players is also marked by two public signals of the special relationship between the theatre and the monarch's rule. The first chronologically was the extension of the Master's power in a commission of 1581, which gave him authority 'to order and reforme, autorise and put downe' all plays, players, and playing spaces throughout the realm as he saw fit.[21] All theatrical licensing, in theory, was therefore now in the hands of the crown, and the commission announced to actors and to local authorities alike that their interests could be pursued only with royal assent. The inflammatory and unruly tendencies of theatrical activity certainly required control, but the special status actors enjoyed as purveyors of revels and pastime also required protection against prohibitions and restrictions put in their way by lower levels of authority in the cities, towns, and counties where they worked.

In 1583, as a further sign of the connection between the crown and the theatre, Tilney was charged with establishing a new troupe of players which bore

the monarch's name: the Queen's Men. In doing so he chose an 'all star' group of the leading actors of the day, including the famous clown Richard Tarlton and the tragedian John Bentley. Favoured as performers at court for the next decade, the Queen's Men were also something of an arm of propaganda in their performances in London and the provinces, announcing the alliance between royal munificence and theatrical skill, and prominently advertising official approval of players and playing, which the widespread popular affection for Tarlton no doubt helped advance.

A second consequence of a 'thinned-down' operation in the Revels Office was that extraordinary costs which might be incurred on an *ad hoc* basis had to be dealt with by special payments. Particular occasions that the Revels might once have dealt with as a matter of course were paid for increasingly through the budgets of the Works or the Wardrobe, or approval might be given for one-time extensions to Revels budgets. So the entertainments connected with negotiations over a proposed French marriage for Elizabeth in the early 1580s involved the Revels Office in a number of unusually large expenditures, after which the annual budget for the remainder of Tilney's mastership averaged a modest £300. That the Revels were never extensively involved in creating costumes and scenery for the Jacobean masques might be explained partly by the Elizabethan tradition of restricting the Revels budget and of paying for extravagant special occasions through other funds.

Yet the 1581 commission which gave Tilney power to license plays and players also extended his authority to requisition for the Revels both raw materials and workers, of an impressive variety: 'painters, imbroderers, taylors, cappers, haberdashers, joyners, carders, glasiers, armorers, basketmakers, skinners, sadlers, waggon makers, plaisterers, fethermakers, as all other propertie makers and conninge artificers and laborers whatsoever'.[22] A barebones operation would have had no need of such people, and production preparations on some lesser scale evidently continued. In the absence of fuller, more informative accounts from the later Elizabethan period we can only guess at what these preparations may have been, but the accounts for Tilney's Jacobean years (1603–10) probably give a fair guide.

The Christmas and Shrovetide court seasons during those years were preceded by a period of rehearsals and auditions at the Revels Office premises in St John's (until the move in 1607). Acting companies would have taken their plays there to perform before Tilney himself, and some agreement would have been reached about the play or plays to be performed. At that point the actors and the Revels staff would have discussed the requirements of the play, and agreed upon what

the actors themselves were to provide and what, if anything, needed to be brought or made by the Revels. The St John's property included a 'great hall' for rehearsals, and the actors probably gave their plays there in conditions generally similar to those at court, the features of which I discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters. In 1604 the Office refurbished its own 'Tiering house' with canvas, and the plays were performed at St John's by torchlight and candlelight.[23]

'Robes, garments, and other stuff' were still being stored in the Revels wardrobe, and it seems quite likely that actors may have received help with costuming when they needed it, although there are no specific indications of this practice. Painted decoration for the stage was still being produced to some extent, as it had been in the early Elizabethan period, but the chief effort of the Revels staff during the production period, it seems, was directed partly to the actors' needs in the form of backstage security, heat, and sanitation (chamber pots for the players appear in more than one account list), and chiefly to the special lighting, which appears to have devolved on the Revels Office, for no very compelling reason, as a chief responsibility. Elaborate lighting of the court halls for festive occasions had been undertaken by the Revels in the years of its widest sphere of operation, and it seems that the Office of the Works, which took over many of the Revels' responsibilities after the 1570s, never assumed that of lighting, as it might easily have done. So account after account for the Revels in the Stuart period is filled with details of payments for hanging chandeliers, fixing wall brackets, and for the wire, spikes, and strainers required to secure them. One group of workmen who were never dropped from the Revels payroll were wire-drawers: specialists in bracing, hanging, and repairing the many candle-holders which lit royal chambers for the plays.

The vulnerability of the Revels Office as a rather marginal department of the household is demonstrated by its uprooting from its long-held premises in 1607. King James granted the part of St John's Priory in which the Revels Office was housed to his cousin Esmé Stuart for his own use as a residence, and he is unlikely to have done so if the Lord Chamberlain had intervened to suggest that such a move would be seriously inconveniencing royal entertainments; nor did the court authorities themselves provide an alternative property: it was the Master's responsibility to find suitable lodgings, stores, and workplaces for the Revels staff. Subsequent premises in which the Revels Office was lodged are unlikely to have been as extensive or commodious as those at St John's; we know little about them, but presumably they were required to serve the same functions of rehearsal space, storage, and workrooms. The Office moved first, early in 1608, to somewhere in Whitefriars, the old conventual complex west of Fleet Ditch and south of Fleet

Street, but by 1612 it had moved again within the city of London, to a site on St Peter's Hill, near St Paul's. The London address, though further away from Whitehall, was certainly central to the theatres which ringed it, and quite close to the Blackfriars theatre; communication between the Master and the players over licensing matters was thus as physically convenient as it could be. It was also near the major centre of publishing in St Paul's churchyard, and equally convenient for the expanded licensing responsibilities of the Master over printed plays.

At Edmund Tilney's death in 1610 the Mastership passed to Sir George Buck, or Buc, who had held the reversion to the post as officially sanctioned successor for a number of years, and he served in it until 1621. Buck was, like Tilney, a protégé of the Howard family, and similarly an author of historical works, and a poet. His surviving annotated commentary in the manuscript plays *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* and *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt* has most interested modern scholars as evidence of the kinds of censorship which Masters of the Revels imposed on the professional theatre, but he also wrote a commentary on the Revels Office itself, which no longer survives. He took an exalted and idealistic view of the 'Art of Revels', which brought together skills in 'Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Philosophy, History, Music, Mathematics' (the seven traditional liberal arts), as well as in other arts, but it seems unlikely, given the generally low annual budget of the Office, that in practice he presided over the creation of ambitious *gesamtkunstwerke*.[24] The most remarkable theatrical shows produced entirely within the court during the Jacobean years were the extravagant masques, but the Office of the Works had far more to do with the planning and execution of these than did the Revels. One may speculate whether the literary bent of successive Masters and their increasing involvement with the vetting of dramatic texts contributed to the gradual decline of the Revels from a centre of theatrical creativity to a rather dull service department of the court.

The ambitions of Stuart Masters, in other words, were not to make an impact on court culture, as Inigo Jones quite consciously did, but to oversee the world of the commercial theatre, principally in London. In doing this they were fulfilling what the Lord Chamberlain and Privy Council expected of them; we have no indication of complaints that Masters were neglecting their proper business. Such a role was partly entrepreneurial–an active Master would see to it that his privileges were respected by actors and publishers, and that all his fees were duly collected–but the supervisory function was central. The other officers of the Revels–Clerk, Clerk-Comptroller, Yeoman, Groom, and Porter–had no involvement in these licensing activities, and the Master, though he may have been busier throughout the year than his early Tudor predecessors, might have

become more remote from the traditional common business of preparing and producing shows. On the other hand, residence in London and a constant contact with plays submitted for new production in the theatres would have rendered the Master entirely *au courant* with theatrical taste and fashion, and the ritual auditions and selection of plays for court performance were probably made rather easier. Stuart Masters of the Revels knew the theatre world intimately, and could present its best achievements to the court. Actors for their part would have known that the Master of the Revels was a broker for prestigious and profitable court performances, and therefore would have attempted to keep their relationship with him as a licenser as smooth and untroubled as they could.

In old age, Sir George Buck became incompetent to manage the Mastership, and he was succeeded by Sir John Astley, or Ashley, in 1622. Astley officially remained the Master until his death in 1640, but in 1623 he deputised Sir Henry Herbert to take his place; Herbert paid him an annual fee to exercise the authority of acting Master. Herbert therefore served for the final two years of King James's reign, and for the entire length of King Charles I's until the cessation of court activity in the early 1640s. Herbert is probably the best known of all the Masters of the Revels in that his personality and sensibility emerge the most clearly from surviving documents. Astley, by contrast, is a shadowy figure, although he is the only Master known to have been a performer in court revels: he was a masquer in *Hymenaei* in 1606.[25] Why Astley gave up the Mastership is not known; it has been suggested that he lacked a strong patron among the powerful nobles at the centre of the court. Herbert, however, was related to the serving Lord Chamberlain at the time of his assumption of the Mastership: William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke.[26] Early in his career as acting Master, Herbert was involved in the scandal surrounding Thomas Middleton's play *A Game at Chess*. He issued a licence for the play's performance at the Globe, which continued until it was stopped by the protests of the Spanish ambassador, and in the ensuing enquiry Herbert probably benefitted from his connections to those with more power.

Many of the surviving records kept by Herbert–known to modern scholars through transcriptions of a manuscript which has now been lost–are to do with his dealings with actors over the licensing of plays, and with registering his fees and payments for those transactions.[27] His court responsibilities must also have kept him well occupied, however, given the constant theatrical activity of all kinds in the Caroline court, up to about 1640.

All four Masters who served the Stuart kings, however, were in a rather paradoxical position when compared to their earlier Tudor counterparts. Revels

under James and Charles expanded enormously. The court-produced entertainment was reborn in the magnificent masques, staged with great spectacle, consciously copying fashionable European style, but the importance of the Revels Office as a centre of theatrical production was not reborn with it. The season during which entertainments were presented was lengthened, the number of plays presented each year was increased considerably over those seen at court in the later years of Queen Elizabeth, while the dispersion of the royal family over a number of London palaces–chiefly St James's, and Somerset or Denmark House, as well as Whitehall–increased the patrons and the venues for the performance of plays. The princes Henry and Charles and the queens Anne and Henrietta Maria were all independent sponsors of theatrical performances. King Charles's conversion of the old cockpit at Whitehall into a permanent theatre is one prominent sign of the importance of theatrical entertainment at his court.

This greatly expanded activity was not matched by an expansion in the size or the budget of the Revels Office, so that inevitably the Revels could have supervised and controlled only *some* court theatre; unlike the Office of the early Tudor monarchs it was not the animating centre of theatrical activity at court. Frozen by Elizabethan austerity and, whether deliberately or accidentally, never reorganised by subsequent court authorities, it remained in a rather awkward organisational position, at least to modern managerial eyes, in relation to the entire range of theatre at the Stuart court. It was emphatically *not* in complete charge of theatrical events, and therefore the Master's position was partly a ceremonial one. The Revels mounted a certain number of plays each year, and provided services–chiefly lighting–for some other events, including masques, but other play and masque productions were mounted and financed by other departments of the household. In considering the staging of plays at court, therefore, probably from the 1580s onwards but certainly in the Stuart years, an enquiry into the practices of the Revels Office will not be sufficient. The Revels staff did not carry out all the work in creating court theatre spaces, and many plays were staged entirely without their participation.

Equally, despite my claim that the Master was a broker for court performance, actors performed at court without the Master's official involvement. Stuart acting companies carried the names of the royal family as patrons–the King's Men, the Queen's Men, the Prince's Men, and so on–and Prince Henry, for example, kept his own court, with his own budget and his own household staff and officers, through whom he might commission play performances without any participation from the Revels Office. The size and complexity of the Stuart