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The London theatre of 1583

Giving pause

The year 1583 has been called a crossroads in theatre history, a threshold, and a turning point,[1] but these metaphors of wayfaring and homecoming rest on territory that has not been thoroughly explored. Theatre historians have not thought much about the London theatre of 1583. The founding of the Queen's Men makes the year seem decisive, but the context of evidence which would allow us to fill in the terms of that decisiveness has been glanced at mainly by scholars with other stories to tell, stories that concern Shakespeare and the 1590s. Beyond the crossroads of 1583 playwrights can be discerned whose biographies seem accessible – Marlowe alone would be attraction enough, but there are also Kyd, Greene, and Peele, not to mention anyone more famous. The urgency of reaching identifiable playwrights whose careers seem to have shape and direction carries us past 1583 with little more than an acknowledgement that the founding of the Queen's Men was an important move in the contest between city and crown over the control of the London theatre.

Instead of hurrying on, we would like to pause. We are not accustomed to thinking about an Elizabethan theatre that had never heard of Shakespeare and Marlowe. That in itself makes us suspect that the body of plain theatrical fact which clusters around the founding of the Queen's Men, at that time the most illustrious company of actors ever assembled in England, has not been studied firmly enough. We can tell a crossroads when we see one, but it is of little use unless we have some orientation and can tell in which directions the roads might lead.

At the beginning of March 1583, the best English actors were under the patronage of leading aristocrats – the Earls of Leicester, Sussex, Oxford, Derby, and others, men who must have appreciated the vivid combination of cultural and political attention the theatre entailed. By the end of March 1583, twelve of these actors had been removed from their organizations and formed into a new company, an instant all-star troupe, which would hold the advantage on the calendar of holiday performances at court, would claim royal privileges for

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securing playing places in the inn yards of London and in the new purpose-built playhouses outside the city walls, and would receive higher rewards than their competitors as they toured the countryside. In the theatre of the time, this was a far-reaching decision. The queen could have enrolled the best actors as her own at any time in her career. She had inherited a royal company when she came to the throne twenty-five years earlier, and that earlier company was fairly active in the provinces until the mid 1570s; yet they did not perform at court after 1569, and they seem to have been allowed to fade away by attrition (the last of the troupe died in 1580). For the first twenty-five years of her reign, the queen evidently preferred to let acting thrive under the patronage of the barons of the realm, the gift of whose performances she would receive at Christmastime. Her theatre patronage was mainly bestowed on the child actors from the chorister schools.

In other words, 1583 marks a shift in the politics of court theatre: where courtiers had offered the queen the gift of dramatic entertainments by companies under their patronage (the opportunity to offer the gift being controlled by the queen, of course), now the queen would take the gift of entertainment into her own name. The advantage of controlling the rivalry of patronage at court was now reduced as far as the holiday performances were concerned, and the loss must have been thought to be offset by some gain to the crown. We may assume that there was a local and factional element to the new arrangement, but much of this is now lost to the passing of time. Behind the scenes a contest over the Lord Chamberlain's office was probably taking shape, and Andrew Gurr has suggested that the new company may have been a special interest of Charles Howard in this regard.[2] The Master of the Revels had special interests too, and later in this chapter we will examine the schedule of court performances with an eye to his family ties, which may have been set back a little with the forming of the new company. Our broader argument will hold that the central government was not protecting the theatre so much as reducing it and gaining control over it. Beneath the 'struggle between City and Court', as Chambers called it, the two sides may have had something in common after all. The political considerations in forming the royal troupe also extended beyond the court, however, and while the remainder of the present chapter will deal with the politics of the court and the London theatre, we will broaden our view to include the national scene in chapter 2.[3]

A pause on 1583 entails further thinking about the children's companies, whose career was undergoing an important change.[4] Two boy companies had been appearing on the holiday calendar for years: the Children of the Chapel and the Children of St Paul's. Their managers having found it possible to open the doors of their dramatic 'rehearsals' to the public for a price, these boys were competing (perhaps sporadically, but with noticeable effect) in the

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commercial theatre. The Chapel Children gave their commercial performances at Blackfriars. The evidence is less certain about Paul's, but they seem sometimes to have charged admission for the plays they performed at their singing school in the cathedral precinct. In 1583, after the death the year before of the long-term master of Paul's, Sebastian Westcote, these companies were combined under the patronage of the Earl of Oxford. Thus the two children's companies of recent memory became one enlarged company in the year the Queen's Men were formed, and the two decisions may well have been related. Certainly the two companies that resulted, one adult and one children's, became instantly the mainstays of the court holiday schedule. The two decisions would also have had the effect of reducing the extent of the commercial theatre in London, in the case of the boys by combining two companies into one, and in the case of the adults by removing the vital actors from the existing companies and rendering those troupes secondary to the new Queen's Men.

These manoeuvres should be seen in the light of an earlier crown decision. In 1574 Leicester's Men had been granted an extraordinary royal patent to play without hindrance throughout the land. Five actors had been named in the Leicester patent, and three of them were summoned to the new Queen's Men in 1583, leaving little in the way of Leicester's Men behind. Walsingham and Leicester were allies on political and religious issues, and it is hard to think that Leicester would have been taken by surprise when the new company was in part formed of his best players. He certainly maintained an interest in the new company. But the other companies, and those of Leicester's Men who may not have been summoned, must have been disturbed at this turn of events – not only because the important actors were being drawn away from the leading companies, but also because the category of leading company was being instantly redefined.

Why should such a far-reaching decision have been made at all? And why was it made in 1583? Such questions cannot be answered directly, but an examination of the context in which the decisions were taken can lead, we believe, to understanding the possible areas where the answers may lie.

Basic inventory: an actors' theatre

We begin by raising a series of basic questions about the theatre of 1583, questions which playgoers of the day would not have had to ask, because they would have known the answers as part of their normal observation. Who were the recognizable actors of the day in London, the players one would make an effort to see? Which were the leading companies? To what extent were they 'London' companies, and to what extent were they on tour throughout the

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country? In London, where did they play? Who was writing their plays? And how many of those plays could be purchased by Londoners interested in the theatre – theatregoers, that is, who could read.

The last question is the easiest for us to answer.[5] There were no new plays from the acting companies to be read at all. By 1583 some of the older interludes might still have been on the bookstalls, along with translations from the classical drama. Nathaniel Woodes's *Conflict of Conscience* and the collection of *Seneca's Ten Tragedies* had been published in 1581, and the second edition of *Damon and Pithias*, written fifteen years earlier for one of the children's companies, had appeared in 1582. We have just named the only plays published in London for three years before the founding of the Queen's Men, and none of them came from the large permanent playhouses – the Red Lion, the Theatre, the Curtain, Newington Butts – which had operated near London, at one time or another, to some extent simultaneously, for years. The Red Lion had been built in 1567. The theatre at Newington Butts may have been in business as early as 1575. The Theatre was built in 1576, the Curtain in 1577. Stages at city inns are referred to during these years at the Bull in Bishopsgate Street, the Bell and the Cross Keys in Gracious Street, and the Bel Savage on Ludgate Hill. Children's companies were acting at Blackfriars and probably at St Paul's. Professional theatre was a growing industry in London, and new plays must have been plentiful in such a competitive environment. But the new plays were not being published, probably because the acting companies were keeping their profitable items to themselves. The first play to be published which can be connected with the adult professional companies of the 1580s was *Three Ladies of London*, which came out in 1584.

As for dramatists writing in London by 1583, the list is short. In March 1583, when the Queen's Men were being formed, Shakespeare was still a Stratford teenager, whose wife of a few months was expecting their first child in a few weeks. Marlowe was still at Cambridge, one supposes, and so was Robert Greene. George Peele, after living in London for a while (and perhaps writing plays – we do not know), was back in Oxford. Some older writers were probably living in London, but we can name no plays they had written by 1583: Chapman, Kyd, Chettle, Drayton, Lodge. Who had written plays for the public theatre by then? We can be fairly sure of five names: Stephen Gosson, Anthony Munday, Richard Tarlton, Robert Wilson, and Rowland Broughton. It must be noted that the first two of these, Gosson and Munday, had recently been condemning theatres as sinks of iniquity and plays as enemies to virtue and religion. They might have seemed unlikely to produce many scripts in the future (Munday actually did write more plays – he was hard to predict). All we really know about Rowland Broughton is that he failed to write the eighteen plays which in 1572 he promised to write.[6] Tarlton and Wilson are the two

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writers on our list who would have seemed certain to write more plays after 1583 (both were named to the Queen's Men), and they were primarily known as actors.

It is when we turn to theatres, companies, and actors that the answers to our questions begin to look more substantial. The London theatregoer of 1583 would have seen Leicester's Men acting at the Theatre to the north of the city, with such actors as Wilson, John Lanham, and William Johnson; and Warwick's Men acting at the playhouse at Newington Butts to the south of the city, headed by the Dutton brothers, John and Laurence, and Jerome Savage. Our playgoer would have been thinking back a few years to Warwick's Men because that company seems to have broken up in 1580, when the Duttons and others went over to a company under the patronage of the Earl of Oxford. So Oxford's Men should be numbered along with Leicester's and Warwick's as troupes known in London. Derby's Men and Sussex's Men had been appearing at court in recent years. Tarlton was with Sussex's Men, gaining his reputation as the first star of the London theatre.[7] There were also three companies well-travelled in the provinces which are likely to have played in London from time to time: Essex's Men, Berkeley's Men (with Arthur King and Thomas Goodale), and Worcester's Men (with a talented youngster, Edward Alleyn).[8]

It would be a mistake – one frequently made – to assume that London was the 'home' of the adult companies, or that they settled into certain playhouses for what we would call a 'long run'. These were touring companies much of the time, and our London playgoer would have been frequently aware of their comings and goings. London was the busiest city for theatre, of that there is no question, and the actors usually made their own homes there. But by 1583 we cannot be certain any adult company was permanently lodged in its own London theatre, not even Leicester's Men. Although the Theatre had been built by the leader of Leicester's Men, James Burbage, and although his company must have played there, the first thing to say about Leicester's Men in the early 1580s is that they spent much of their time travelling the countryside. They appeared in many places, including London, including the court – but they were not a London company. All the companies travelled, but Leicester's toured far and wide – as part of his lordship's political interest, it would seem. The Queen's Men were formed to travel too, and while it is right to think of them as holding an advantage among adult companies on the court schedule, it is even more important to think of them as holding an advantage across the country.[9]

The actors were in circulation – that is the best way to think of them. London was the centre of the circulation, with its rapidly growing population, its new playhouses, and its proximity to the court. Who would not have wanted to play London? But the city government was hostile to the theatre, and the challenge of settling near the city and building a following among Londoners

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was the challenge of mounting a large repertory of plays and rotating them daily. In feeling the attraction of mastering such a challenge, even the best companies would have noticed how many fewer plays were required on tour. Touring had its hardships too, but it did not require ten or twelve plays ready to be performed in daily rotation. That was the challenge of the London theatre, the challenge of building a repertory large enough to rotate the plays frequently and draw audiences day after day in the face of competition from other companies trying to do the same thing.

It was during the decade of the 1580s that the daily repertory system took hold in the London playhouses. By 1592, when Henslowe's listing of plays begins, a full-fledged repertory was being rotated at the Rose, and programmes so vast do not happen suddenly or in isolation. Yet the nine years separating Henslowe's record from the founding of the Queen's Men is a long time in the life of a competitive industry, and the repertory system evident in Henslowe's *Diary* cannot be taken as a sign of the norm in 1583. It is better read as a sign of the intention. To those companies ambitious for the London market, the need for a sizeable repertory and daily rotation would have been apparent in 1583, and regular weekday performances would have been important in establishing a season of plays by the time the Queen's Men were formed. But the Queen's Men did not settle in one London theatre (they seem to have moved among the playing spaces, as though they were on tour even in London), and we do not know of any other adult company that did settle before Strange's Men at the Rose. One of our themes will be that the 'watershed' years in the London drama were the early 1590s, roughly from 1590 to 1594, and a major development of that period was the establishment of the major companies in particular purpose-built playhouses, offering large-scale repertories. The Queen's Men did not fit into this system. They were peripatetic instead, and their palmy days in the London theatre fall on the distant side of the watershed – the theatre of 1583, but not the theatre of 1594.

What *can* be said of the London theatre of 1583 is that it consistently afforded playgoers a choice. No other city or town regularly offered a choice, not of professional drama. We have named ten companies – two children's, eight adult – which acted in London at one time or another during the five years before the founding of the Queen's Men. That does not mean they all acted simultaneously, and the list includes some little-known or short-lived organizations that may not have acted often. Berkeley's Men may not have made much of an impact in a city where Leicester's and Sussex's Men could hold forth for some weeks before taking their plays to court, or where Tarlton and the young Edward Alleyn could be seen for low prices, or where the children's companies were providing *avant-garde* delights for the wealthier set. But when

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Berkeley's Men did play London, they increased the choices available – whereas when they played Bristol or Dover they could hope to be the only show in town for their few days there. The Theatre and the Curtain, the playhouse at Newington Butts, the theatres at St Paul's and Blackfriars had all been built or refurbished in the past seven or eight years, joining the older Red Lion and the inn-yard stages. The theatre was building a centre in London. But that does not mean the adult companies clustered in London suddenly or rapidly. English actors knew how to travel. They had toured for generations. It was their tradition, and they had the routines well in hand. London and its permanent playhouses were the new market, the best market, and the hardest market in many ways, the market of the future for actors ambitious enough to think of rising to fame. But there were many well-known markets across the nation as well.

This busy industry, circulating through the countryside, seeing London as the magnet for expansion, aiming for court performances, serving the interests of its aristocratic patrons, and above all trying to turn a profit, was an actors' theatre. Our inventory insists on this point. The evidence that remains to us concerns players and playhouses more often than writers and books. The information comes in small bits, of course. Nearly everything we want to know about the theatre of the 1580s has vanished over the years, and there is a risk of taking a cluster of facts for a pattern of evidence where it might more properly be called an accident. Should we imagine a writers' theatre after all, lurking behind the fragments of fact? We had never heard of Rowland Broughton until 1981, and we could not have guessed that any playwright would have been thought capable of writing eighteen plays in thirty months, but professional actors signed a contract for him to do that. On the other hand, Broughton failed to meet his contract – that is why his name is preserved in the legal records – and eighteen plays in thirty months sounds impossibly high, as though the contract was an act of hyperbole all round. We are reluctant to take his case as typical. The evidence that we have to go on produces names for actors in 1583, names for companies, and names for playhouses, and it is that kind of detail, the names of things, that one does not find for writers and their plays in the professional theatre of the same time. As far as we can tell, this was an actors' theatre. It had been vigorously on the road for decades, and now the new London playhouses, just beyond the reach of the authorities, along with the other stages within the city, were competing with one another to draw audiences. Londoners had a choice of playhouses, and a choice of famous actors. Moralists and officials were alarmed. Opposition to the stage was on the increase: and it was the actors and the playhouses they attacked, not writers and publishers.

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Theatre expansion and the central government

Sometimes it seems that the growth and flowering of English drama occurred in the 1590s, but this is not precise enough. The printing of plays certainly expanded in that decade, producing the texts that have come to be known as 'Elizabethan drama', but the increase of acting companies and playing spaces upon which the printing industry would eventually capitalize had occurred earlier, in the 1570s and 1580s for London and before that nationwide. Our pausing point of 1583 is on the threshold of a change, and the results of that change can be seen in the 1590s, first with the evidence from Strange's Men at the Rose that repertory companies were moving into playhouses with which they would be identified, next with the rapid increase in printed drama during the early 1590s, and then with the establishment in 1594 of two major companies as the centre of the commercial theatre, the Admiral's Men at the Rose and the Chamberlain's Men at the Theatre. The 1590s are a period of concentration in the theatre, not of expansion.[10] From a country busy with showmanship over the previous several decades, London was drawing the theatre into a risky embrace with early capitalism. The capitalization has improved since then, and the embrace continues today.

Our vantage point of 1583 places us at the end of the first expansion-period of the professional drama, and on the threshold of the concentration that would be visible by the earlier 1590s. The founding of the Queen's Men gains clarity in this context. The central government was prepared to see a curtailment of the theatre by 1583, we believe, and the decision to form the Queen's Men was part of that process of curtailment. After 1583 the theatre industry became smaller, probably more stable and profitable, and certainly more manageable in the view of the crown government, whose opposition to the city authorities on matters theatrical may have been less severe than it appeared to be on the surface.

Certainly the illusion of a contest was created between London aldermen and the privy council. In calling it a 'struggle' between city and court, Chambers outlined a conflict between a city government hostile to the playhouses and a privy council protective of the theatre industry, with the city eyeing the playhouses as centres of disorder and idleness, and the privy council guarding them as training grounds for the queen's Christmas entertainments. The evidence for this view consists of repeated statements by the city and the privy council themselves. The city spoke of an immoral and disruptive theatre, which drew people away from religious services, provided a trysting ground for prostitutes and their clients, staged examples of licentious behaviour which spectators would be quick to imitate, and (perhaps the primary concern) served as gathering places for aggrieved and rebellious young people capable of riots.[11]

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The privy council spoke of a queen whose 'solace' increased with her attendance at plays, especially at plays performed by actors well rehearsed through regular perfomances in and near the city.

Neither party spoke in directly political terms, and for that reason – politics being obviously the real concern of both – the moral shading of the city and the aesthetic shading of the privy council are to be taken as codes subject to further examination. Yet it must be admitted that the most important generation of theatre historians, the generation of Chambers and Greg, accepted the queen's-solace argument rather at face value. This generation was inclined toward an aesthetic view of the drama themselves. Their shrewdness tended to be directed toward the city position, and particularly toward recognizing the formation of a long-lasting political momentum behind the façade of moralism by which the theatre was resisted. The privy council, however, was taken at its word. 'After all, the people must have their recreation', wrote Chambers of the council's interest in keeping the theatres open, 'and, what was more, the Queen must have hers' (*ES*, I, 267). Forty years later F. P. Wilson repeated this argument, and concluded that 'by 1584 dramatists and players could realize that they had a friend at court, and proverbially that was worth a penny in the purse'.[12] One wonders if the companies which saw their leading players drawn away by royal command in 1583 shared this view, or would have agreed with Chambers that 'it was really the court play which saved the popular stage' (*ES*, I, 267).

Elizabeth I's personal interest in drama was keen and well-educated – the privy council was not inventing the queen's-solace argument out of thin air. Beyond the queen's love of drama, however, there was a burgeoning city to be governed, and a nation divided over the basic question of religion. We view it as self-evident that the privy council was motivated by political considerations that came before and outweighed their monarch's aesthetic interest, even though no one on the privy council would have willingly put himself in the path of this monarch's reaction if she thought that an interest so personal to her as the aesthetic was being crossed. And anyhow the queen's personal interests were her way of representing an intensely political attitude. It is in the context of such considerations that some decoding of the struggle between city and court seems necessary.

From our vantage point in 1583, a major event was the accident at Paris Garden in January of that year, when collapsing scaffolds killed eight spectators at a bear-baiting. Religious opposition to spectator sports had been sharply increasing, probably in response to the growth of the playhouse industry, and the issue of Sunday performances came to be something of a lightning rod in the complaints. The Paris Garden accident happened on a Sunday, and even before the pamphleteers were able to announce this as divine retribution for

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the abuse of the Sabbath, the Lord Mayor wrote to Lord Burghley calling for an end to Sunday performances and seeking Burghley's influence with the Surrey justices, under whose authority the Bankside entertainment places lay. The result, achieved during further correspondence in 1583, was what the city authorities may have regarded as a victory: the council did extend the prohibition against Sunday playing from the city to the suburbs.

In the meantime, Tilney was instructed in March to set about forming the Queen's Men. Left to itself, this outline of events implies that the privy council, having lost a round to the city over the Paris Garden accident and the banning of Sabbath performances, was reasserting its authority and protecting the actors by forming the new company. That appears to be what Chambers meant in calling the new company 'a deliberate and to some extent a successful attempt to overawe the city by the use of the royal name' (*ES*, I, 291).[13]

That answer stops short of asking what seem to us obvious questions about the theatrical situation of the time. Would the players, first of all, have seen the Sabbath issue as threatening? To the extent that they were trying to establish themselves in London, the main issue for the players during the 1580s would have been the building up of regular weekday performances in and near the city.[14] The Sabbath is the day for drawing crowds, but the actors who were trying to sustain a London season of several weeks instead of several days were seeking a steady flow of admissions six or seven times a week, and the first six mattered more than the seventh in the business of gaining a reliable and returning audience in this competitive setting. To the players, the Sunday battle might have been worth losing if the weekday war were won at the same time (especially if the occasional Sunday performance could be slipped in behind the authorities' backs). From this perspective those lightning bolts hurled by the religious opposition at the misuse of the Sabbath would have seemed a useful distraction from the main issue. Perhaps the city caught on in November 1583, for upon receiving instructions from the privy council to permit the new Queen's Men to play within London on weekdays but not on Sundays, the Mayor and his fellows promptly tried to reverse the terms by permitting the Sundays and banning the weekdays. The privy council had to write again a few weeks later, to insist that weekday performances be allowed.[15]

From the privy council's perspective, nothing was lost by granting the Sabbath victory to the city. To the extent that the council was looking to the London playhouses for 'rehearsals' for court performances, regular weekday performances were even more effective than regular Sabbath performances. What mattered more, we suggest, was reducing the number of companies and the number of theatres active in London, a point on which the council may have been the silent and unacknowledged allies of the city. Merging the two children's companies after the death of Westcote strikes us as one step in a

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