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0521025397 - The Queen's Men and their Plays
Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean
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This is the first book devoted to the Queen's Men, one of the major acting companies of the age of Shakespeare. In describing the troupe's position in the general political situation and the London theatre scene of the 1580s, the authors break new ground, showing how Elizabethan theatre history can be refocused by concentrating on the company which produced the plays rather than on the authors who wrote them.

The book combines a thorough sifting of documentary evidence with textual and critical analysis to provide a full account of the characteristics which gave the company its identity: its acting style, staging methods, touring patterns and repertoire.

Chapters detail the political context in which the Queen's Men were formed; the motives of the Earl of Leicester, Sir Francis Walsingham, and others instrumental in forming the company; the players' national tours; their impact on the commercial theatre of London; the staging of plays and the nature of the texts sent to the printer. A final chapter considers the company's relationships with the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare, and explores the possibility that Shakespeare began his career writing for the Queen's Men.

The account is illustrated with tour maps as well as photographs and ground plans of several surviving playing spaces. Appendixes include a detailed itinerary of the company on tour between 1583 and 1603, the casting requirements of selected plays and biographical notes on company members.

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PREFACE

This book has an obvious motive and an underlying agenda; both should be named at the start. The obvious motive is to draw together the factual information that has come down to us about one of the major Elizabethan acting companies, the Queen's Men, and to set that information within a broader narrative of later-sixteenth-century English drama. The underlying agenda is to suggest that a new approach to Elizabethan drama can be opened by centring on the acting companies instead of the playwrights. That would entail studying the repertoires of the companies with the kinds of critical and textual attention that are normally reserved for the canons of the playwrights. Theatre history normally steers clear of criticism and regards textual studies as a useful but separate discipline. We wish to remove the barriers between these fields to see if the overall territory might thereby gain some new prospects.

First, however, come the documents and facts. New information is on the increase for the Elizabethan theatre, especially now that the Records of Early English Drama team of scholars has passed well beyond mid-point in its project of gathering all pre-1642 records bearing on dramatic performance throughout England. A benefit of the REED project is that the routes by which the professional companies travelled can now be mapped for the first time, and one of our purposes is to show how extensive were the touring routes of the Queen's Men, and how important touring itself would have been in the motives which brought the company into existence.

Factual research has advanced on other fronts too: the manuscripts from the Elizabethan theatres have been given thorough examinations in recent years; the office of the Master of the Revels, as well as the biography of the key Elizabethan holder of that office, Edmund Tilney, has come under fresh scrutiny; the unexpected discovery of the Rose foundations has made an outline of one actual Elizabethan theatre briefly apparent; some of the remaining playing places in the provinces have been identified and photographed; and a handful of individual scholars, working through the masses of Elizabethan legal and social documents remaining from this period, have turned up hundreds of facts about actors, writers, entrepreneurs, and theatre-builders. The recent work bears only

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here and there on the Queen's Men, of course. Everyone working on Elizabethan theatre history, whether on the actors, the provincial records, the playwrights, the theatres, or even the carpenters and plasterers (for the new Globe project on the Bankside has generated some striking discoveries about how earlier playhouses were put together), must share the sense that the field has opened up for fresh exploration.

Nowhere is this sense clearer than for the acting companies. Andrew Gurr's *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* signals the change that has occurred by giving a fresh view of the evidence new and old, and supplying a sweeping narrative for the entire period from the 1560s to 1642.¹ Each company of note now needs to be studied in detail and with an eye for its own special characteristics – the qualities by which it differed from the others, the qualities by which the others would have known this company as something to be reckoned with. Our underlying agenda comes into play on this point. Along with a documentary narrative for the Queen's Men, we are intent upon those special characteristics which gave the company its identity – its acting style, its staging methods, its kinds of versification, its sense of what constituted a worthwhile repertory of plays.

That amounts to saying that acting companies were responsible for the plays they performed and can be evaluated according to that responsibility. Normally playwrights are taken as the responsible agents. The identities of most playwrights seem knowable. That acting companies have identities too is not such a familiar idea, and the troupes sometimes changed in personnel. The Queen's Men often divided into branches in order to tour more widely, so that the 'Queen's Men' appearing in one town were different actors from those appearing elsewhere. Moreover, by 1590 nearly half of the original Queen's Men had died or left the company, and their replacements were not clones but actors with talents and specialities of their own. (The later company appeared more often with acrobats, for example.) Yet the later company continued to perform the kinds of plays and roles of the earlier company: clown roles continued to be a speciality after Tarlton's death, for example, and the English history play, which the company of Tarlton and Knell seem to have brought into the commercial theatre, remained a staple in the repertory of the 1590s. Organizations have reason to develop characteristics of their own *because* they are subject to shifts and losses of personnel, and for a repertory acting company, the stock of older plays, with the style connected to them, must carry through to form the basis of each new season or tour. We think it clear that each company would have had its own style, its own textual procedures, its own sense of purpose, and its own impact on audiences and other acting companies. To some extent these characteristics would have been shared among the other companies, and sometimes actors moved from one troupe to another.

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The Queen's Men were first formed of actors from other troupes. But organizations within a profession always develop identities of their own, widely recognized features which stand out from the procedures they share with the other organizations, and we feel that the more urgent consideration is the extent to which each company was unique. Previous generalizations about the Elizabethan companies have tended to assume similarities among them (just as our assumptions about the playhouses did before the Rose foundations were turned up to show unexpected differences), but the test of similarity has not been passed until the possibilities of difference have been given a close look – and when it comes to style, versification, and staging, a close look has been reserved mainly for playwrights rather than acting companies.

The plays of the Queen's Men have never been given a critical and textual reading as a group before, but the more surprising point is that the plays of the other companies have not either, not as bodies of drama brought together under the name of the organization that performed them. Not even the Chamberlain's/King's Men have had their plays studied with the kind of critical and textual attention we bestow on some of their playwrights, although books on the Chamberlain's repertory by Bernard Beckerman, Roslyn Knutson, and Leeds Barroll have made this a more distinct possibility than it is for the other companies.² We have always settled for the category of authorship to organize our readings of the drama, while we have reserved the category of acting company to organize our narratives of fact, but a new history of Elizabethan drama *and* theatre might emerge, we wish to suggest, from combining criticism, textual study, and factual narrative under the primary category of acting company.

That undertaking would require many hands, of course, and the present book is intended only as a beginning – a brief for the larger argument, so to speak, and at best an example of some of the guidelines by which this kind of work can be done.

When the Queen's Men were formed in 1583, they were the best acting company in England. That is because the government official responsible for assembling the new company, Sir Francis Walsingham, had the good sense to consult the Master of the Revels, Tilney, about the actors to be chosen. Tilney was in a position to know about actors. As Master of the Revels during the previous five years, he had been responsible for arranging the dramatic performances given at court each Christmas season. He would have known which actors pleased the queen and which were co-operative with authority, two considerations that might have weighed about equally to a man in his position. He seems to have done better on the first score than on the second: he chose Richard Tarlton, who pleased everyone (but no one more than the queen), but he also chose John Bentley and John Singer, whom the authorities in Norwich saw fit to imprison after an affray during the company's first road trip, and

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John Towne, who killed another member of the company in a fight in 1587. The Queen's Men were not a tame group, but they could all act – Tilney knew where the talent lay. Anyone would have picked Tarlton by 1583, but Tilney also picked Robert Wilson, John Adams, Singer, Bentley, and John Lanham, among others – actors who were all being recalled with nostalgia twenty-five years later.

No one could have guessed in 1583 that this company would virtually disappear from the London theatre after about a decade. Having many of the best actors of the day, blessed with the patronage of the queen, being larger and better equipped than the other companies, knowing better than the others how to travel far and wide throughout the kingdom, drawing larger rewards wherever they played, with Tilney's schedule of court performances practically to themselves – how could they fail? With the English history play, they hit upon the kind of drama that would revolutionize the theatre of the 1590s. Yet when the revolution came, the Queen's Men were not in the vanguard, not as far as London is concerned. The Chamberlain's Men made the English history play count in the 1590s, and in so far as they learned how to do so from another company, they learned not from the Queen's Men but from the Admiral's Men and Lord Strange's Men. It turns out that Tilney missed two key actors after all, perhaps because they were only about sixteen years old when the Queen's Men were formed: Richard Burbage and Edward Alleyn. These two made a difference in the long run. The Chamberlain's Men were headed by Burbage and the Admiral's Men by Alleyn when these two companies virtually took over the London commercial theatre in 1594. We are not certain the Queen's Men ever performed in London after that. How they managed to lose the advantage in the London commercial theatre is one of the basic stories of English drama.

Yet that is too brisk, calling them losers. They did not lose in the nation at large, but in London. The REED evidence is having its impact, and there is no longer any reason for assuming, as earlier generations tended to do, that Elizabethan drama arose and flourished entirely in London. We now know in detail, through a county-by-county gathering of documentary evidence (two-thirds complete at this point), that English towns and cities were busy with drama and other kinds of showmanship throughout the sixteenth century. The growth of London drama at the end of the century contributed to a shrinking of English theatre – a shrinking into the centre of concentrated population and capital where drama could become a thriving commercial enterprise. The Queen's Men were not very adept in the concentrated theatre and publishing industry of London, but so long as Elizabeth lived, they were the primary company in the country at large. Our account of the company's career in chapter 3 attempts to keep the provincial touring in as sharp a view as the

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company's London and court performances, and our hope is that in laying out the routes by which the actors travelled and in describing their performance spaces where these can be determined, some of the reality of a flourishing touring theatre will gain a place in Elizabethan theatre studies.

That emphasis will also be found in chapter 2, where we consider this nationwide touring company in the context of the political and social issues of 1583. It seems to us that the Queen's Men were formed primarily for touring. Walsingham did not just happen upon the assignment to organize a royal company. He was thinking of political advantage, and the political advantage of this particular venture lay in having a group of famous actors banded together under the queen's name and reaching beyond London to the kingdom. The Queen's Men were meant to travel, and in that sense they were always successful, no matter what difficulties they encountered in London.

The first three chapters, then, concern the company's record in the nationwide theatres of the late sixteenth century. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are about the plays. Chapter 4 establishes the nine extant plays which can be assigned to the company according to conservative principles of selection. Chapter 5 studies the dramaturgy of the plays, and chapter 6 is devoted to their textual characteristics. The benefits of grouping the plays by acting company must be apparent in these chapters, or they will not be apparent at all.

Chapter 7 places the Queen's Men in the broader context of drama in the 1590s, when their style of performance and writing was rendered obscure. One way Shakespeare dealt with the Queen's Men was by rewriting a sizeable portion of their repertory. Four of their nine extant plays were turned into six Shakespeare plays in an act of appropriation extensive enough to make us think it could have occurred from the inside. Shakespeare knew the plays of this company better than those of any company but his own, and the long-standing speculation that he may have begun his career with the Queen's Men seems to us the most likely possibility. Yet – wherever Shakespeare got his start – the Queen's Men did not take him as seriously as they took Marlowe, the influence of whose plays they sought to curtail in some explicitly anti-Marlowe efforts. Thus, while Shakespeare was dealing with the Queen's Men by rewriting their plays, the Queen's Men were dealing with Marlowe by replying to his. Shakespeare's effort was the more effective – especially in that he learned his method for rewriting the plays of the Queen's Men from no one more obviously than the Marlowe whom the Queen's Men were trying to reject.

That brings us back to the Queen's Men as the losers in the London theatre. There is a cultural divide between ourselves and the years in which the Queen's Men seemed a force to be reckoned with, and we wish to suggest that a good way for historians to cross over that divide is to give first place to the obscure and nearly forgotten agents from the earlier time. If we do theatre history from

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the point of view of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Alleyn, and Burbage, it becomes an exercise in seeing the continuity between our culture and the past. What could be wrong with that? Nothing, unless the continuity comes to be taken for granted, in the 'Shakespeare our contemporary' vein of thinking. But this does seem to happen in an age which produces Shakespeare as part of its summertime culture, its film culture, and its educational culture – he is so built into our system that we have trouble historicizing him at all. Shakespeare was not our contemporary, and one way to insist on that fact is to study the things which he had to deal with and which our age is free to ignore. Shakespeare had to deal with the Queen's Men. We are free to ignore them – the first summer festival of Queen's Men plays has yet to be held. But if measuring the difference between Shakespeare and ourselves makes for good history, and if the Elizabethans are to be thought of as not another version of ourselves but as strangers from the past, and if things nearly forgotten are the proper objects for historians to keep in view anyhow, then we think the plays of the Queen's Men are worth careful attention.

We should add a word about the division of labour in this collaborative venture. Sally-Beth MacLean has taken the lead in examining the context of touring theatre, particularly as regards Leicester's Men, in which the Queen's Men were formed, and in writing the account of the company's provincial routes and playing places, spelling out the documentary evidence in Appendix A. Scott McMillin's primary assignments have been the plays, their dramaturgy, the casting, and the London theatre scene for which they were written. We hasten to add that each of us has read and offered revisions to everything the other has written, a process in which the invention of e-mail has been an enormous benefit. Portions of our work have appeared earlier in *English Literary Renaissance*, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, *Review of English Studies*, and *Elizabethan Theatre*. To the editors of those journals and books, we are grateful for permission to reprint.

We have also accumulated so many obligations to fellow scholars that it is perhaps best to list their names here, on the understanding that such spare recognition in no way reflects the depth of many of these obligations or the friendship they entail. In addition to Leeds Barroll and Andrew Gurr, whose reader's reports for Cambridge University Press were instrumental in shaping our final revisions, we are indebted to: Simon Adams, Herbert Berry, David Bevington, Anne Brannen, Susan Cerasano, Jane Cowling, Peter Greenfield, Peter Holman, Lynn Hulse, William Ingram, Alexandra Johnston, Arthur Kinney, Roslyn Knutson, Anne Lancashire, Ted McGee, Alan Nelson, Barbara Palmer, Mark Pilkinton, Richard Proudfoot, Alan Somerset, Sandra Siegel, James Stokes, Gary Taylor, Joan Thirsk, David Thurn, Robert Tittler, Brian

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We owe special thanks to collaborators who have contributed the maps, photographs, and ground plans that enrich our text. William Rowcliffe brought his graphic skills to the adaptation of maps originally designed by Michael Waldin for general REED purposes. Paul MacLean took expert photographs of every nook and cranny of the Elizabethan performance spaces described in chapter 3, from which a selection has been printed here. Conan MacLean assisted in the measurement and exploration of these provincial halls in order to make possible the professionally designed ground plans provided by Carlos Lanfranco, a graduate student in landscape architecture at Cornell University. We are also grateful to Gayle Mault for her help and to the National Trust for permission to publish the photograph of the High Great Chamber at Hardwick Hall.

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