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978-0-521-10082-3 - English Professional Theatre, 1530-1660

Edited by Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry and William Ingram

Excerpt

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Introduction

The period of English theatrical history covered in this volume begins and ends with revolutions affecting every aspect of religious, political, social, economic and artistic life in unprecedented ways.

The first of these revolutions was brought about by King Henry VIII's decision in 1531 to abrogate the Supremacy of the Pope in the government of ecclesiastical affairs in England and to vest it in his own person. The second took place a century later when the outbreak of civil war in 1642 brought with it a ban on all professional acting as a legitimate occupation in Britain that continued until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

Until the first of these revolutions, plays and play-acting had been universally recognised and welcomed as occasional (if as essentially amateur) adornments of a recreational and educative kind to the celebration of the principal feast days in the Roman Catholic calendar – Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Whitsun (and, from the start of the fourteenth century onwards, Corpus Christi), together with most of those festivals dedicated to the apostles, saints and martyrs. All of these feasts were recognised as public holidays, distinguishing Holy Days of national or local significance from the hard grind of daily working life. Thus, by the start of the sixteenth century, plays (scripted by priests, clerks, schoolmasters or university dons) along with fairs, mummings (mimes and dances grounded in more ancient agricultural festivals of pre-Christian origin) and a wide range of athletic games had been absorbed into English social life for long enough to be regarded as licensed customs hallowed by tradition, and welcomed within the palaces, castles and manor-houses of the aristocracy (ecclesiastical and courtly), the livery halls of the wealthy merchant guilds and on village greens alike. A way was thus already open for spirited and enterprising young men to contemplate escaping from the drudgery of near-serfdom as agricultural labourers, household servants or apprenticed tradesmen into a lifestyle offering both greater personal freedom of action and hope of larger material rewards, by turning exceptional, but already recognised, mimetic talent into a professional career. This process had advanced far enough for King Henry VII to equip himself with a small company of six players, led by John English, within his own household.

These men became recognisable by the Royal Livery that they were entitled to wear; the retaining fee and rewards for Court performances accorded to them; and by a Patent to travel in order to seek out other audiences willing to pay to hear and

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see them. By royal decree, these same privileges were extended throughout his reign to favoured members of the nobility, both temporal and spiritual. Henry VIII adopted this practice on his accession in 1509 and extended the number of players in his own company from six to eight shortly afterwards. At least one of these players was a choirboy apprenticed to the leader of the company to play female roles.

By 1530 it had become customary to commission talented poets of the standing of Henry Medwall, John Skelton and John Heywood to write (or ‘make’) plays for these companies of professional actors.

This natural, evolutionary progression from an amateur towards a professionally orientated dramatic and theatrical mode of development, however, was destined to be rudely fractured in 1531 by the King’s decision to challenge the hitherto acknowledged right of the Pope in Rome to regulate the Church in England. It did so by introducing a political dimension, hitherto largely absent, into all aspects of theatrical life.

THE FIRST REVOLUTION

Following the first attempts, however, to reform the government of ecclesiastical affairs in England after 1531, this view of theatrical activity became inescapably intertwined with national politics if only because a drama born from within the Roman Catholic Church could not hope to escape accusations from ardent reformers (led by Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury and Thomas Cromwell as Lord Chancellor) of being a product and continuing manifestation of Roman Catholic superstition, idolatry and other propagandist snares set for the unwary by Antichrist himself – alias the Pope.

As these views gained credence among the ecclesiastical hierarchy and senior civil servants, upon whom both the King and the central government in London relied to establish the legitimacy of their views, so the continuance of both plays and play-acting came to be placed under close scrutiny, along with all other visual interpretations of Roman Catholic doctrine as represented by stained glass and statuary in English churches and by the preaching and practices of all monks and friars.

Given the uncertainties, however, which persisted among the population at large throughout the rest of Henry VIII’s reign about whether ultimate authority over expressions of religious belief in England rested with the Church or the State, it was virtually inevitable that future efforts to regulate public performances of plays re-enacting biblical history or the legendary lives of Catholic Saints and Martyrs by the imposition of censorship and statutory controls would become both more oppressive in intention and more varied in their results. This was because the further north and west of London decisions had to be taken at local level, the more frequently opportunities arose for ambiguities of interpretation to colour the judgements of the many individual civic and ecclesiastical officials

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charged with their enforcement: and some of these personal loyalties in matters of religious belief and political persuasions spilled over into the decisions made.

This was a situation that, following the death of King Henry VIII in 1547, could only be aggravated by those changes in the religious allegiances adopted by successive sovereigns which persisted to a greater or lesser degree throughout the rest of the Tudor era. The young King Edward VI, guided by the Regent – Lord Protector Somerset – and his Lutheran-minded Archbishop of Canterbury – Thomas Cranmer – made determined efforts between 1548 and 1553 to impose more explicitly Protestant controls over the content of plays and the conduct of all players (whether amateur or professional) through Proclamations, Orders of his Privy Council and statutory regulation. Following the accession of Queen Mary I, while his controls were stiffened, they were switched by her principal advisers – Cardinal Pole and her consort, King Philip II of Spain – to support the return of Papal Supremacy over the Church in England for the next five years. These efforts culminated in the creation of theatrical martyrs, burned at the stake for heresy, play-makers and actors alike (see docs 6 and 21a and b). This, however, was a situation that would not be repeated following the accession of Queen Elizabeth I.

Students, therefore, who seek factual information or enlightenment from the documents transcribed and presented in this volume about the erratic development of dramatic art and theatrical representation in England between 1530 and 1558 and beyond, must constantly bear in mind the abiding presence of two factors common to both the objectives of the policy makers in London on the one hand and to the degree of acceptance or resistance to them on the other hand that was encountered in different geographical areas of this country, taken as a whole.

First, the stage, along with the pulpit and the lecterns of schools, universities and the law schools (the Inns of Court in London) was not only among the primary sources of moral education, but potentially the most subversive. This explains why it should have taken another century for Tudor and Stuart governments to find effective means to control it by Proclamations, Decrees and other legislative and judicial means.

Secondly, the social status, lifestyle and economy of actors, and that of the play-makers whom they commissioned to supply them with performable scripts, were governed throughout this long period by three imperatives: their constant need to find audiences in the provinces, as well as in London and at Court, willing to pay to hear and see them perform; next, a continuing sequence of writers who could supply them with new plays that would attract popular audiences without landing them in prison for alleged expressions of heretical, libellous or seditious intentions; and, thirdly, an aristocratic patron willing to employ, maintain and protect a private company of players.

These three imperatives led in turn to the creation of a fourth: performance spaces, or playhouses, where admission could be controlled, prices of admission advertised in advance, and seating or standing room within the auditorium

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arranged to accord with the prices charged for admission, and which could be regarded by the company as their home base for all professional purposes.

Since the last of these imperatives obliged all professional companies to seek financial support from people with money to invest who regarded playhouses as offering, at least potentially, a profitable capital investment, they often teamed up with ground landlords and business speculators (whose interest in dramatic art was always questionable) in order to acquire the funding needed to purchase property and either build on that land or adapt the buildings already on it to meet their own requirements. These awkward partnerships frequently led to quarrels about contracts and shares of the profits earned from the resultant playhouses: and these, in their turn, frequently led to lengthy and costly lawsuits to which we owe much of the surviving evidence relating to these playhouses.

Thus every aspect of dramatic art and theatrical representation, ranging from the subject matter of all plays through the performance of them to public audiences, including the performance spaces in which they were given, come under ever-increasing government legislative control between 1530 and the end of the Tudor era in 1603. Just as in the latter half of the twentieth century successive governments in this country and the whole population alike have had to come to terms with the advent of radio, television and computer technology (as has been the case worldwide), so all Tudor and early Stuart governments had to come to terms with the invention of printing and with the arguments that surrounded acknowledgement of acting as a legitimate, professional occupation in England.

Both of these questions became the more acute and inflammatory as divisions in religious belief began to govern political, moral and educational ideology from the 1530s onwards. Thus, as play-making and acting began to shift from amateur and occasional activities towards professional and regular entertainment, pursued as much for monetary gain as for recreational and didactic purposes, Tudor governments found themselves under increasing pressure to impose censorship through national and local legislation upon all actors, play-makers and owners of performance spaces alike. This they achieved on a largely experimental basis involving frequent conflicts between representatives of the Church, the State and the Judiciary, with each fighting jealously to preserve its own special privileges and interests.

These conflicts reached their climax during the latter half of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I within the City of London, following the establishment of purpose-built playhouses in the capital and its suburbs. By then such residual claims as the Church had formerly exercised over the theatre, both in London and in the provinces, had been largely subsumed into the controlling hands of the Privy Council assisted by its Ecclesiastical Commissions. What still remained to be decided was whether the Court of Common Council at Guildhall within the City of London, and city and town councils elsewhere in the kingdom, would or would not yield up to the Queen and her Privy Councillors such prerogatives as they had formerly exercised over where, when and on what conditions plays

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could be performed in public places situated on land they regarded as subject to their own jurisdiction.

If the Court appeared to have won this struggle by the end of the sixteenth century, that can be attributed principally to the increased powers accorded to an officer within the Royal Household itself – the Master of the Revels. Created by King Henry VIII in 1545, this office consisted of a master, a comptroller and a yeoman: it was initially only intended to assist the Lord Chamberlain in the discharging of his responsibilities for the provision of recreational entertainments within the royal palaces. After 1581, however, the Master's responsibilities were extended to cover the issue of licences governing all play-texts, whether in manuscript only or in print, together with all acting companies and their playhouses; but it would take Edmund Tilney, the Master then in post, a full twenty years to complete this process, by which time Queen Elizabeth I was herself a dying woman and her godson, King James VI of Scotland, was eagerly awaiting a summons from her Privy Council to travel south to London as her designated successor.

If this success story respecting the long-drawn-out struggle for the right to control the advance of the professional theatre in England may be regarded as a by-product of Tudor absolutism in the government of all aspects of both Church and State, it also opened a route forward to the second revolution that would overtake it within the next forty years.

Claiming to have succeeded to the English throne by Divine Right, King James chose, within months of his accession, to silence all future controversy stirred up by Puritan preachers, some masters and wardens of affluent livery companies and like-minded members of provincial town and city councils, by taking control over the major acting companies, their managers and their playhouses into his own hands and those of other leading members of his family – initially the Queen and the heir apparent, Henry, Prince of Scotland and Duke of Cornwall. Had he confined himself to this compromise, the likelihood is that it would have been accepted, however grudgingly, by all his opponents; but instead he chose to extend these privileges to other members of his family and to a Scottish cousin, the Duke of Lennox. This provided excuses for the opening of more playhouses in London and an extension of the number of acting companies touring in the provinces, some of them under more dubious credentials. When his example was followed by his successor, King Charles I in 1625, these autocratic actions served to divorce English actors and their play-makers from the popular franchise they had previously enjoyed, and on which their right to earn their livings by performing plays before public audiences had been built. Once all actors could be branded by their opponents as 'royal slaves' and found themselves more frequently rewarded outside London for agreeing 'not to play' than for any performance actually given, that right can be said to have been forfeited.

In this emasculated state from 1625 onwards, acting as a legitimate profession in England again became open to question, as did the future of an aristocratic Court in an increasingly mercantile-orientated and libertarian-minded society.

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THE SECOND REVOLUTION

The Puritan revolution, simmering and threatening to break out since the opening of the Long Parliament on 3 November 1640, finally erupted into civil war when the King raised the royal standard at Nottingham on 22 August 1642.

In one sense this revolution was short-lived when compared with its predecessor, since it was seemingly reversed by the restoration of the Monarchy and the reopening of playhouses in London licensed from 1662 onwards to serve the needs of acting companies retained by King Charles II and his brother, James, Duke of York. Yet in another sense it was far more radical in its longer-term effects: for not only did it bring about major changes in the style of theatrical architecture, playwriting and scenic representation on London's stages, but it succeeded in ensuring that theatre-going, as a licensed and reputable pastime, would fail to re-establish itself on any regular, popular basis anywhere in the British Isles other than in London.

The outbreak of civil war in August 1642, however, confronted all professional actors immediately with agonising choices and decisions to be made for themselves and their families.

Denied survival in their former profession by the enforced closure of all playhouses and the cessation of all regular performances in London, they had to choose immediately between continuing to offer their services to those heads of the royal households who had previously supported them in their chosen way of life, or to desert and seek salvation by offering them to the Parliamentary cause.

Either way, the likelihood was that the most probable means of earning an alternative living would be through enlistment in one or other of the respective armies. In the event, only one of the actors previously engaged in the royal households – Eyllaerd Swanston of the King's Men – chose to desert to the other side. This in itself provides evidence that most actors assumed that if they were ever to return to their preferred way of life it could only be guaranteed by a short war concluding in a royal victory. In that hope they were to be disappointed, but they could well have been buoyed up in the belief that a majority of their audiences would remain as loyal to them as they themselves had proved to be to their royal patrons.

In this belief they were not altogether mistaken, for not only were there many humble men and women servicing London's playhouses as gatherers of admission monies, as scribes who copied out actors' lines and cues, as printers of plays and playbills and as purveyors of refreshments whose livelihoods were suddenly cut off, but many more who cared little for their new masters in Whitehall and still less for the bigoted and self-righteous preachers who had dispossessed them of their favourite recreational pastime.

Between them these malcontents sufficed numerically for as long as playhouses in London remained standing and vacant to encourage the bravest spirits among the erstwhile professional actors to band together and take the risks of staging occasional performances, the times and places of which were advertised locally by

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word of mouth, to earn some money. Others stayed in London and took other forms of employment.

These risks included betrayal, forcible suppression by platoons of armed soldiers and the subsequent despoliation of scripts, stage costumes and the playhouses themselves. Supporting documentary evidence for several such incidents, together with some instances of more positive assistance, is offered in part three of this book, 'Playhouses'.

In the provinces, these risks proved to be too great to take, for not only were there no longer any licensed companies of professional actors to take plays on tour, but no hope either of persuading city or town councils to lease their guildhalls to serve as playhouses. If dramatic entertainments were thus to be attempted they could only be offered in private houses, gardens, fairgrounds or other unlicensed premises and on a largely amateur basis; and in the provinces that was a situation destined to last far beyond the resumption of professional theatrical activity in London following the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660.

This is a theatrical world, however, that lies outside the confines of this volume; but it is one that has already been fully discussed and documented within this series in *Restoration and Georgian England, 1660–1788*, assembled by David Thomas and Arnold Hare, and published by Cambridge University Press in 1989.

THE DOCUMENTS

Three principal groups of documents follow: those covering the efforts of successive Tudor and early Stuart governments to bring control over the theatre into their own hands; those depicting the fortunes of professional actors and the widely varying degrees of esteem in which they were held by the populace at large; and those relating to the twenty-three playhouses which were built or rented in London during this period, the so-called Shakespearean era. This part of the book treats the documents of the time that explain the ownership of the buildings and the buildings themselves, and, less extensively, those that explain the history of each playhouse from beginning to end.

Collectively, these three groups of documents – despite the many gaps in our knowledge of their dimensions, interior appearance, maintenance costs and daily usage, which time, fires, wars, carelessness and other hazards have combined to create among them during the past 400 years – recall with surprising vividness and authenticity the rise and fall of the professional stage in England between 1530 and 1642.

What will not be found here is any comprehensive account of the many dramatic entertainments organised and executed by amateurs on an occasional basis. Nor should readers expect to find any systematic coverage of the careers of the many outstanding play-makers or their plays during this period.

These are serious omissions, but the reason for enforcing both of them is the same. So many documents relating to the professional stage in England have

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survived that the contributors to this volume were faced at the outset with having to decide whether the space allotted to them by the publishers would or would not permit them to include any other aspects of theatrical life, as represented by occasional academic, courtly and civic dramatic entertainments, within the limits of a single volume. As we strove to ration the number of printed pages and illustrations allowed to us between the professional stage, amateur theatricals and biographies restricted to only the most dynamic, innovative and productive of play-makers, it soon became obvious that any attempt to do this would result in failure to do justice to any of them. Thus, given the worldwide renown of the English professional theatre during the period assigned to this volume, we decided, very reluctantly, to confine our endeavours to that topic alone. Even so, we recognised that our approach would still have to be selective and illustrative rather than exhaustive.

In reaching this decision we drew some comfort, however, from the fact that the careers and plays of all the major play-makers, together with most of the surviving expressions of continuing (and often innovative) amateur activities, had already been printed in many highly reputable, scholarly editions. With nothing of any importance to add to these published records, we concluded that if sacrifices had to be accepted, these were the two areas which would have to be omitted from this volume. Outweighing all arguments to the contrary was the fact that to do justice to the sum total of the surviving documents relating to the play-makers – the most notable of the amateur entertainments devised for Queen Elizabeth I on her summer progresses through the provinces; the Lord Mayor of London's annual civic pageants (often scripted by professional play-makers) and the scenic and choreographic splendours of early Stuart Court Masques (scripted by Samuel Daniel, Ben Jonson, Thomas Campion and others) and staged with the aid of all the latest Italian, neoclassical precepts governing theatrical representation (a proscenium arch concealing changeable scenery constructed and painted in receding perspective, borrowed and implemented with striking success in England by Inigo Jones and aided by equally creative musicians and dancing masters) – would require another volume, possibly two. This, however, was a course of action which our publishers felt unable to contemplate, given the financial restraints governing their own activities at the present time.

All the documents which are to be found in this volume, therefore, are confined exclusively to the rise and fall of a popular professional theatre in England between 1530 and 1660. For the convenience of readers, these have been divided into three principal sections: 'Documents of Control', 'Players and Playing', and 'Play-houses'.

Each of these sections is accompanied by its own general introduction. Thereafter, brief editorial commentaries introduce each different aspect of the subject matter illustrated by the documents included in that section of the book.

In all three sections, the documents selected for inclusion have been transcribed from the original manuscripts or, occasionally, from the first printed edition where

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this is the primary source, as cited under each numbered heading. References are also given in these headings to the principal secondary sources whenever the manuscript in question has already been reputedly transcribed, edited and printed. Spellings and punctuation, however, have been altered (with only a few exceptions retained to preserve the authenticity of some original documents – most notably the word *Enterlude* and *Interlude* – between 1530 and 1570) to conform with modern usage. Some exceptions will also be found after 1570 respecting references to the major Elizabethan and early Stuart acting companies. Here we have agreed to retain the words ‘actors’, ‘players’, ‘servants’ and ‘companies’ as given in the documents with or without the use of capitalization rather than seek to impose uniformity upon them for no other reason than to try to make them conform to some common style of nineteenth-century or more modern invention.

In many instances, the compilers of all three sections, in order to conserve space, have only quoted that part (or parts) of particular documents which serve to confirm or advance knowledge of the topic under discussion with reliable, supportive evidence. This course of action seemed to be especially desirable where protracted lawsuits, bureaucratically worded parliamentary Statutes, and Decrees issued (and frequently reissued as occasion demanded) by provincial town clerks were concerned.

In other cases where the addition of glossarial or other explanatory footnotes appeared to be helpful, these have been uniformly placed immediately below each document throughout the book. All references to published material are given in condensed form, the full form being supplied in the bibliography.

The abbreviations used throughout this book are explained in a list of abbreviations, which, together with the index and bibliography, are not subdivided section by section but are all presented as entities complete in themselves and applicable to the whole book. The list of abbreviations is placed after the editor’s preface and before the general introduction. The bibliography and index follow the text.

In cases where documents in one section must self-evidently recur in another, a choice has been made – again to conserve space – to assign lengthy quotations from them to the section in which readers are most likely to expect to find them, but all such overlaps have been signalled by cross reference. The most notable example of this occurs in respect of the Privy Council’s reaction to a performance of *The Isle of Dogs*, a play attributed to Ben Jonson and Thomas Nashe and presented by the Earl of Pembroke’s company of players at the Swan Playhouse in July 1597. As this response was as immediate as it was extreme, it has to figure in ‘Documents of Control’: but as its consequences resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of both Ben Jonson and the actors concerned, and in premature termination of the London season brought about by the instant closure of all its playhouses, coupled with an unprecedented order for their demolition, the case for placing the relevant documents under ‘Players and Playing’ or ‘Playhouses’ is at least as compelling as that for confining them to ‘Documents of Control’ simply

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because these happen to precede the other two sections in this book. In this instance, it quickly becomes clear that only by a combination of cross referencing with some measure of common sense in the apportionment of a long sequence of documents between all three sections of the book can all the surviving evidence be offered to readers without recourse to lengthy and tedious repetition.

Notwithstanding these occasional awkward editorial requirements, it remains abundantly clear from the documents themselves that Tudor and early Stuart professional actors owed both their initial survival, and the remarkable success story which they subsequently imposed upon it, to their own ability to recognise that the restraints imposed upon them by their licences to earn their livings from play-acting were no more restricting or inhibiting than those applying to other men and boy-apprentices seeking to earn their keep in troubled times.

Spelt out, this meant that provided they could retain the active support of their noble patrons (to whom they owed their licences) and provided they could avoid giving grave offence to those government officials who claimed the right to issue or withdraw these licences, they could continue to exploit every new opportunity that appeared to be open to them to acquire larger audiences willing to pay to hear and see them perform their plays. Of these, outstandingly the most important was to secure and retain the favour and support of the many illiterate citizens who at that time still formed the majority of the population.

Their evident success in achieving this, however, served to impose a further restraint upon their remaining freedom of action – an obligation to preserve a conservative approach to the dramatic structure and content of the plays they commissioned for inclusion in their repertoire. Thus medieval Moral Interludes and familiar Saint Plays remained the preferred models throughout the sixteenth century and at least the first decade of the seventeenth. In these respects provision for romance, sensational horrors and heroics spiced with comic incident derived from Italian Renaissance sources together with an abiding respect for folklore and the supernatural, figured as priorities in most commissions issued to prospective play-makers by actors regardless of whether they were work-a-day journalists or university graduates aspiring to be recognised as men of letters. The actor-managers then reinforced their own control over prospective play-makers by requiring the submission of a 'Plott' or scenario, outlining the intended storyline and the actions required of the principal characters to advance it, scene by scene to its conclusion. It was then left to the company to discuss it and either to accept it or reject it. Companies retained their control over the completed scripts (after payment of an agreed fee) by acquiring the copyright in the manuscript which would then be used as the prompter's copy for all rehearsals and performances. Actors were only given copies of their own lines and cues, to prevent scripts falling into unscrupulous hands.

While the pragmatism that informed this approach to plays and their authors undoubtedly succeeded in securing the survival of some professional companies through the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I, it could only inhibit adoption of any