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978-0-521-13490-3 - The Children of Paul's: The Story of a Theatre Company, 1553-1608

Reavley Gair

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The Children of Paul's and the English drama

This work originated as a development from the problems of editing Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* for the Revels series. I wished to create, with as much historical accuracy as possible, a commentary which would restore for the modern reader the play and its conditions as closely as the surviving information would allow. The present book is the result of that initial undertaking; it is designed as a social and literary history of England's first permanently based drama company and it seeks to challenge some of the orthodoxies about the theatre of the children. The Children of Paul's were a distinctive group with special qualities of their own and it is my intention to illustrate, as vividly as possible, this uniqueness.

This history, *The Children of Paul's*, seeks to illustrate the dramas performed by that company by studying the physical conditions of the playhouse, and the cathedral itself; by examining the personalities of the masters, the actors, the musicians and dramatists; and also by investigating the audience, to determine not merely who they were but what the players expected them to know and recognise. The physical context of this theatre, in the north-west corner of the Chapter House precinct, was a vital factor in determining both its success and its quality: for a period at least it was a local repertory theatre for people from the neighbouring parishes.

The focus of this study has been intentionally narrowed to illuminate the specific company studied, to stress the uniqueness of its character. This restriction necessarily inhibits a wider perspective on the development of the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as a whole. In an attempt, therefore, partially to redress this balance, the following summary of the major developments in the wider corpus of dramatic history has been

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compiled. This précis is divided into three sections, each devoted to a different Master of Choristers, in order to cover the periods when drama flourished within the cathedral precincts. For the scholar it may be simplistic, but conversely it may act as a useful index and reference point for events at Paul's in relation to the wider context of the London drama outside its confines.

**The Mastership of Sebastian Westcott
(1 February 1553–April 1582)**

The scholars of St Paul's, both of the choir and the grammar school, may be associated with acting as early as 1378, when they petitioned Richard II

to prohibit some unexpert people from representing the History of the old Testament, to the great prejudice of the said Clergy, who have been at great expence in order to represent it publicly at Christmas.¹

It is, however, to the Renaissance in England that their involvement with the drama properly belongs. The stimulus for the evolution of the acting and producing of plays may largely be ascribed to those scholars who argued for its educational function. In 1531 Sir Thomas Elyot in *The booke named the Governour* defended the plays of Terence and Plautus as a glass of conduct, arguing that

comedies . . . be undoubtedly a picture or as it were a mirrour of mans life, wherein ivell is nat taught but discovered to the intent that men beholdynge the pmptnes [promptness] of youth unto vice: the snares of harlotts & baudes laide for yonge myndes: the disceipte of servantes: the chaunces of fortune cōtrary to menes expectation: they beinge therof warned: may prepare them selfe to resist or prevente occasion. Sēblably remēbring the wisedomes: advertisemēts: cōūsailles: dissuasion from vice & other pfitable [profitable] sētences, most eloquētly & familiarely shewed in those comedies, Undoubtedly there shall be no litle frute out of them gathered: And if the vices in them expressed shulde be cause that myndes of the reders shulde be corrupted: than by the same argumente nat onely entreludes in englishe, but also sermones wherein some vice is declared, shulde be to the beholders and herers like occasion to encrease sinners. (Gij)

The moral defence of the drama quickly gained extensive scholarly approval and by 1560 William Malim, headmaster of Eton, could take the argument a stage further, when he laid

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down the normal practice at the school for the month of December:

Around the feast of St Andrew the Master is accustomed to select, at his own discretion, the best and most accomplished plays, which the pupils may perform publickly, not without dramatic elegance, at the ensuing Christmas Season with spectators looking on. The art of acting is a slight accomplishment but in so far as it pertains to the learning of the action of oratory, and the gestures and movements of the body, nothing else accomplishes these objects to so high a degree. At times the master may also present plays in the English language, provided they are written with wit and humour.²

Whatever the theoretical justification for plays, however, the authorities long remained cautious, as a statute of Henry VIII in 1543 makes clear; while

it shall be lafull to all and every persone and personnes, to sette forth songes playes and enterludes, to be used and exercised within this realme, & other the kynges dominions, for the rebukyng and reproching of vices, & the setting forth of vertue: So alwayes the saide songes playes or enterludes medle not with interpretacions of scripture, contrary to the doctryne set forth or to be set forth by the kynges maiestie . . .³

The English drama and the actor, then, evolved in the latter part of the Renaissance poised between the theoretical justification of the scholar and the suspicion of the authorities that their activity was potentially subversive. Despite this insecurity of status, the travelling entertainers of the medieval period, who were as much minstrels and acrobats as actors and who never played in the same place twice running, were, in the first half of the sixteenth century, seeking to take advantage of the improvement in the social attitude towards drama in order to evolve into professional actors. Already by the 1560s there were more or less regular seasons of plays presented at the major London inns and the players quickly became aware of the desirability of finding a permanent playing-place under their own control. Such an investment, however, demanded a stability of position which they did not have, for the *Acte for the Punishment of Vagabonds* (1571/2) stipulated that all 'Comon players in Enterludes Mynstrels Iuglers . . . [who] wander abroade . . . [without] Lycense of two Justices of the Peace . . . shalbee taken adjudged and deemed Roges Vacaboundes and

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Sturdy Beggars . . .⁴ The entertainers needed recognised social status to effect their metamorphosis from minstrels to actors.

This transition was achieved with the help of the court, which was consistently well-disposed towards actors, save in the case of subversive doctrine. The Vagabond Act of 1571/2, while ostensibly condemning all players, in fact makes a distinction between the best actors, who are licensed, and the rest who are truly rogues: this system of licence was to be the most important factor in the development of the player companies. In 1574 the City Fathers turned down a request for recognised playing-places in London, but later in the same year Elizabeth licensed James Burbage and others as servants to the Earl of Leicester 'to use, exercise and occupie the art and faculty of playeng comedies, tragedies, Enterludes, Stage playes, and such other like as they have already used and studied, or hereafter shall use and studye, aswell for the recreacon of or loving subjects, as for or solace and pleasure, when we shall thinke good to se them'.⁵ The price for this royal support was, however, a measure of royal control, for they were forbidden to play during the time of common prayer or in the midst of plague visitations. In addition, in an Order of the Common Council for 6 December 1574, the players were warned not to perform any drama which had not met with the prior approval of the Lord Mayor and Aldermen.⁶

Despite the restrictions, the security was enough to justify the investment and by 1576 James Burbage had built a permanent playing-place in Finsbury Fields, The Theatre. This first outdoor public playhouse was erected at a time when Sebastian Westcott and the Children of Paul's had already shown what had probably been long suspected by Burbage, that there was a permanent year-round market in London for stage spectacles. In the same year the Children of the Chapel Royal at the Blackfriars began a sequence of regular shows indoors within a specially modified hall in their precinct. The next year, 1577, saw the building of The Curtain, adjacent to The Theatre in Shoreditch.

This rapid proliferation of heavily capitalised playing-places did not escape the wrath of the preachers, for they remained convinced opponents of the stage. Thomas White thundered from the pulpit of Paul's Cross on 3 November 1577:

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. . . beholde the sumptuous Theatre houses, a continuall monument of Londons prodigalitie and folly. But I understande they are nowe forbidden bycause of the plague, I like the pollicye well if it holde still, for a disease is but boded or patched up that is not cured in the cause, and the cause of plagues is sinne, if you looke to it well: and the cause of sinne are playes: therefore the cause of plagues are playes . . . without doubt you can scatty name me a sinne, that by that sincke is not set a gogge . . . theft and whoredome: pride and prodigality: villanie and blasphemie: these three couples of helhoundes never cease barking there, and bite manye so as they are uncurable ever after, so that many a man hath the leuder wife, and many a wife the shreuder husband by it.⁷

One may perhaps wonder whether White had the Children of Paul's very much in his mind when attacking the theatres, with his reference to 'pride and prodigality'⁸: like his fellow Calvinistically inclined priests, he saw only a direct challenge to the divine will in the existence of playhouses. White, unlike Elyot, has no doubt that plays are a positive element in the degeneration of the young.

During the period of the Mastership of Sebastian Westcott, then, the Children of Paul's co-existed with the rapid growth of the professionally organised London player companies and the development of buildings specifically designed for the performance of plays. Although Westcott's children had significant competition from the Children of the Chapel Royal, they remained Elizabeth's favourite entertainers, but when he died they were already beginning to be eclipsed. By 1582, despite the hostility of the preachers, in both the popular and the courtly imagination the professionals of the city were overtaking the choristers. It is towards the time of Sebastian Westcott's death, also, that it becomes obvious that the style of plays in England is moving away from the Morality tradition so popular at Paul's, with Legge's *Richardus Tertius* (1580), Peele's *Arraignment of Paris* (1581), Watson's *Three Ladies of London* (1581), and [?] Munday's *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune* (1582).

The Mastership of Thomas Gyles (22 May 1584–July 1600)

During the period of Gyles' probation as Master, the Children of Paul's and the Children of the Chapel Royal performed as a joint company, but when this co-operative broke up the Blackfriars

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theatre appears to have closed (1584). This eclipse of the first Blackfriars company was symptomatic of the way in which the professionals were very rapidly overtaking the early lead in popularity gained by the chorister companies, and while Paul's, under Lyly, remained active and inventive, Gyles' mastership was wholly overshadowed by the brilliance of the professional, adult, London open-air theatres and their repertoires.

The professionals, however, were in conflict with the City Magistrates who, under the influence of the preachers, were seeking to close down the playing-places within their jurisdiction. Any excuse was sufficient; so on 13 January 1583, when a scaffold collapsed at a bear-baiting causing eight deaths, the playhouses were promptly ordered shut. The court, however, probably under the influence of Elizabeth herself, refused to allow the players to be intimidated and on 26 November 1583 the Privy Council directed the Lord Mayor that, 'Forasmuch as (God be thanked) there is no . . . infection within . . . [the] citie at this presente, but that hir maiesties playeres may be suffered to playe within the liberties as heretofore they have done, especially seeing they are shortly to present some of their doeinges before hir maiestie, we . . . pray your Lp. to geve order, that the said players maybe licenced so to doe within the Citie.'⁹ At the same time there was created the Queen's Players Company, drawn from the best acting talents in London and including Robert Wilson, Richard Tarlton and John Laneham.

Although this group, the Queen's Men, remained the dominant company until about 1588, they were in competition with Worcester's Men from whom emerged the leading actor of the 90s, Edward Alleyn. By 1590 the companies had reshuffled and renamed themselves and the dominant position was assumed by the amalgamation of the Admiral's and Strange's Men, and this lasted until 1594. It was during the 80s and early 90s that there began to emerge, with the professional companies, the dramatists and the plays which have remained the hallmark of the Elizabethan drama. Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine I and II*, Peele's *David and Bethsabe* and the works of Lodge, Wilson, Tarlton, Greene were all first presented by the London open-air theatres in this period, before the Marprelate controversy caused the closure of Paul's in 1590/1. Business was good enough for an extra playhouse to be built. This was The

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Rose (c.1587); situated on the south bank of the Thames in Surrey. The Rose, Theatre, Curtain and other public playhouses were usually round or polygonal timber-frame buildings with thatched side roofs. There were normally three ranges of gallery seating, reached by steps or doors from the main open yard. The prices increased the higher one climbed, a penny being paid at each level. There were special courtiers' galleries above the stage, which was a platform (up to 40 feet wide) projecting into the middle of the yard. At the rear of the stage was the tiring-house with two or more doors on to the main acting area. The 'above' (the first gallery level) had a balcony and there was a trap on the main stage. The acting area was largely covered by a roof, the heavens, to shelter the actors' expensive costumes and to offer a place from which descents could be made. Performances were always scheduled during daylight hours.

Coincident with the closure of Paul's (1590/1) is the clear emergence of Shakespeare as the dominant dramatic talent, with his *Henry VI*; then, in 1592, came Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* and *Edward II* together with Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. But at this point London began to suffer a severe infestation of the plague and on 28 January 1593 the Privy Council directed the Lord Mayor and Aldermen that 'Forasmuch as . . . yt appeareth the infection doth increase . . . we thinke yt fytt that all manner of concourse and publike meetinges of the people at playes, beare-baitinges, bowlinges and other like assemblyes for sportes be forbidden.'¹⁰ The plague continued unabated until late 1594 and it was not until 8 October in that year that Lord Hunsdon requested permission for his company (Shakespeare's) to be given permission to resume a winter season at 'the Crosse kayes in Gracious street'.¹¹ This long interruption caused a major reconstruction of the player companies. There were now no children's troupes, and after a short while it became apparent that the theatrical scene was to be dominated by two major companies who were to remain pre-eminent until the end of the reign. These were the Admiral's Men (under Philip Henslowe at The Rose) and the Chamberlain's Men (Shakespeare's group at The Theatre). Playing was now so successful that it was felt worth-while to build yet another playhouse beside The Rose on the south bank, The Swan (c.1595). These were stable and

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secure years for the companies, with playing normally running in an unbroken sequence of forty-two weeks, save for a lenten break, with an occasional summer tour of some eight weeks in the provinces.

In 1597, however, occurred an event which disturbed the profitable calm of this golden period. A new company, Pembroke's Men, performed a (lost) play *The Isle of Dogs* at The Swan, but this 'lewd plaie' was found by the Privy Council to contain 'very seditious and sclanderous matter' and, as a result, they 'caused some of the players to be apprehended and comytted to pryson, whereof one of them was not only an actor but a maker of parte of the said plaie'.¹² This was Ben Jonson, but he managed to establish his innocence by blaming his collaborators for the offensive parts of the play and thus escaped the loss of his ears. As a direct result of this political indiscretion the Privy Council, on 9 February 1598, sanctioned the existence of the Admiral's and the Chamberlain's Men, thus recognising their pre-eminence, but ordered the suppression of all other companies.

By now Shakespeare's fame had grown, as the testimony of Francis Meres makes clear:

As *Plautus* and *Seneca* are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latines: so *Shakespeare* amongst y^e English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for Comedy, witnes his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Loves labours lost*, his *Loves labours wonne*, his *Midsummer night dreame*, & his *Merchant of Venice*: for Tragedy his *Richard the 2.* *Richard the 3.* *Henry the 4.* *King Iohn*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*.
(*Palladis Tamia*, 1598, p. 282)

The position of the Chamberlain's Men, with Shakespeare as chief purveyor of plays and three pre-eminent actors, Burbage (for tragedy) and Kempe and, later, Armin (for comedy), and the Admiral's, with an astute business manager in Philip Henslowe and a powerful dramatic talent in Edward Alleyn, seemed unassailable. As Gyles' health declined and his charges became more unruly and dishevelled only a seer might have predicted that within two years the Children of Paul's and the Children of the Chapel would once more seek to challenge the heavily capitalised and expansionist dramatic industry of the professional players.

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As the old year (1598) waned and the new began, so the Chamberlain's Men began to pull down The Theatre in Shoreditch and carried its timbers across the river to the south bank, where they used the materials to build the first Globe: for this location virtually all of Shakespeare's subsequent plays were designed. By the time this playhouse was fully functional, Paul's were on the verge of recommencing their dramatic activities under their new *de facto* master, although their former one was still installed in the almonry house.

As the 90s passed, so departed the calm and peaceful conditions which the playhouses had enjoyed. The new century opened competitively, for the Children of the Chapel Royal were re-established in a new building at the Blackfriars (1600) and the Admiral's Men, to meet the competition from the new Globe, built The Fortune playhouse within the city limits, between White Cross Street and Golding Lane. A contest of popularity emerged between the chorister and city companies and for a while the novelty of the children's revival made them the more successful. But the adults were by now established too firmly to be seriously inconvenienced: by 1602, when another company, Worcester's Men, was established at the Boar's Head, the Poets' War had been decisively won by the open-air professional stage. Before the old Queen died, however, a new conflict between stage and state arose, and this was even more serious than the *Isle of Dogs* affair.

On the night before their abortive insurrection, 8 February 1601, the supporters of Essex paid the Chamberlain's Men at The Globe for a performance of Shakespeare's *Richard II*: presumably they were attempting both to give themselves moral courage and to induce others to share their faith that the time was ripe to replace an old and ineffectual ruler by a young and vigorous pretender. The failure of the coup, an embarrassing fiasco, and the subsequent investigation caused a prohibition on playing and some probability that Shakespeare and his fellows would be arraigned for treason. They were, like Jonson earlier, successful in arguing their way out of trouble.

The Privy Council, however, grew sterner in its attitude to the playhouses, but still made an exception of the Admiral's and the Chamberlain's Men; in a sense these two companies were

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enjoying the unique privilege of an existence which the state was attempting to turn into a monopoly. On 31 December 1601 the Council reiterated its instructions to the Lord Mayor and Aldermen for 'th'expresse and streight prohibition of any more play howses then those two . . . charging and streightlie commaunding all suche persones, as are the owners of any the howses used for stage plaies within the cittie, not to permitt any more publike plaies to be used, exercised or shewed.'¹³

The return to favour of the player companies in general was not accomplished until the new reign began. In 1603 the Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men; the Admiral's Men, Prince Henry's Men; Worcester's Men, Queen Anne's Men and the Children of the Chapel Royal, the Children of the Queen's Revels – Paul's were not included in this general promotion. For the professional actors, however, royal recognition had now progressed so far that they were officially unfeed royal grooms. On 9 April 1604 the Privy Council directed the Lord Mayor and Aldermen that 'we thinke it . . . fitt, the time of Lent being now Passt, that your L. doe Permitt and suffer the three Companies of Plaiers to the King, Queene, and Prince publicklye to Exercise ther Plaies in ther severall and usuall howses for that Purpose, and noe other, viz. The Globe scituate in Maiden Lane on the Bancks in the Countie of Surrey, the Fortun in Golding Lane, and the Curtaine in Hollywell in the Cowntie of Midlesex, without any lett or interruption'.¹⁴

The ascendancy of the three adult companies at court was never seriously challenged by the choristers and quickly the two kinds of playhouse, the public (or those of the adult open-air theatre) and the private (those of the indoor chorister and ex-chorister company) became indistinguishable in terms of the age of the actors and the style of the plays. The royal recognition which they were all now enjoying, however, had its penalties, and in 1606 there came *The Act of Abuses*. This laid down a fine of £10 for any person or persons who in a stage play, 'Interlude, Shewe, Maygame, or Pageant jestingly or prophanely speake or use the holy Name of God or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghoste or of the Trinitie, which are not to be spoken but with feare and reverence'.¹⁵ This led to the alteration of play texts, old and new, to avoid blasphemy; and in the following year the control further tightened when the Master of the Revels (the