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978-0-521-50981-7 - The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642: Fourth Edition

Andrew Gurr

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THE SHAKESPEAREAN STAGE 1574–1642

For almost forty years *The Shakespearean Stage* has been considered the liveliest, most reliable and most entertaining overview of Shakespearean theatre in its own time. It is the only authoritative book that describes all the main features of the original staging of Shakespearean drama in one volume: the acting companies and their practices, the playhouses, the staging and the audiences. Thoroughly revised and updated, this fourth edition contains fresh materials about how specific plays by Shakespeare were first staged, and provides new information about the companies that staged them and their playhouses. The book incorporates everything that has been discovered in recent years about the early modern stage, including the archaeology of the Rose and the Globe. Also included is an invaluable appendix, listing all the plays known to have been performed at particular playhouses and by specific companies.

ANDREW GURR is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Reading. As chief academic advisor, he was a key figure in the project to rebuild Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London. His many publications include *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge, third edition 2004) and *The Shakespearean Playing Companies* (1996). Professor Gurr regularly contributes articles on Shakespeare to publications ranging from *Shakespeare Survey* to the *Times Literary Supplement*.

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THE SHAKESPEAREAN STAGE

1574–1642

FOURTH EDITION

ANDREW GURR

*Professor of English Emeritus
University of Reading*



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FROM THE PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The term ‘Shakespearean’ is used to cover what are normally called the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline periods – that is, the latter half of Elizabeth’s reign, from the 1570s to 1603, the whole of the reign of James I, 1603–25, and the period of rule (as distinct from reign) of Charles I, 1625–42. Shakespeare’s own contact with the London theatre world extended only from about 1590 to 1616, but he stands on its highest peak, and his name if anyone’s has to be given to the period. The theatre conditions that supplied Shakespeare with the venue for his plays came into existence in the 1570s, and disappeared abruptly in 1642. The first official recognition of the London-based commercial acting companies was given in 1574; a total ban on playing was imposed in 1642, and was thoroughly enforced for the next eighteen years, long enough to destroy almost all traces of Shakespearean theatre conditions and traditions. The seventy years of play-acting in which Shakespeare’s career was embedded needs to be seen as a whole, and the best single word for it is Shakespearean.

A number of the variables of the Shakespearean period have been regularised for convenience. The old-style system of dating, which began the calendar year in March instead of on 1 January, has been silently adjusted to the modern dating. The titles of plays and the names of players, which were spelt in various ways even by their owners, have been regularised in the forms adopted by Chambers and Bentley. On the other hand money is recorded in the old form of pounds, shillings and pence. That is, the ‘penny’ mentioned in this book is one two-hundred-and-fortieth part of a pound, one-twelfth of a shilling, not the one-hundredth part of a pound that is the modern value for a penny. The quotations use the old denotation of the penny as ‘d.’, not the modern ‘p.’. In accordance with the same principle of supplying an authentic picture of the Shakespearean background, quotations are given wherever possible in the original spelling,

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except that the Elizabethan typographical conventions of *i* for *j*, initial *v* and medial *u* have been altered to the modern usage. And to be consistent in the same principle, actors are normally called players, theatres are playhouses, playwrights (a term which crept into favour along with ‘actors’ in the 1630s) are given their own name for themselves, poets. Their product is the unserious business of playing.

FROM THE NOTE FOR THE THIRD EDITION

In this third edition some, though small, account has been taken of the shifts in priorities which have appeared in the last decade, under the pressure of new theories about the heuristic and self-reflexive nature of this game of studying Shakespeare’s working conditions. The Appendix listing the plays and their circumstances of performance, for instance, is now arranged in the alphabetical order of the plays themselves, not their dead authors. But for the most part the revision simply seeks to incorporate the new evidence that has appeared since 1980. The groundplan of the Rose playhouse and a few of its implications, the Globe’s entrance lobby, a better translation of Orazio Busino’s Italian, some recent conjectures about the staging of the plays, revised datings and related information about particular plays, these and other details have been inserted in the relevant chapters. There is even a small attempt in Chapter 2 at humanising the old picture of Philip Henslowe as a tight-fisted theatre impresario. Chapter 4, on the design of the different kinds of playhouse, has had the most additions. For different reasons Chapter 6, on the audiences, has had the least. Subheadings have been added to each chapter to clarify the organisation of the material.

A FOURTH PREFACE

It is now forty years since as a junior university teacher I felt the need to provide my students with an accessible summary of useful information about Shakespearean theatre. Having struggled through the eleven packed volumes of Chambers and Bentley, I felt attracted to their hard-nosed pursuit of material evidence but appalled at the sheer quantity of minutiae they accumulated. To pick out exemplary events and anecdotal stories long before New Historicism’s elevation of the anecdote as good history and to focus them on the plays seemed like a good idea at the time. The result was the first rather tentative version of this book. Since then I have returned again and again to the book’s subject-matter, making several

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of its chapters whole books, and for one a physical reconstruction of the original playhouse. Revising and augmenting all the bits of evidence now, for this fourth and probably final edition, it seems only a little surprising that so many of the ‘hard’ facts and anecdotes still stand up from the fog of theory that has clouded the subject so intensely in recent years.

For this revision I have stuck by most of the earlier principles, such as reproducing all quotations in the original spelling and relying very largely on illustrations from the time. It is regrettably true that the preference for modernised spelling still dominates reading texts – in, for instance, almost all editions of the plays and even in scholarly source books like *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660*, which reprints many of the documents quoted here, but all in modernised spelling. When we modernise the original spelling we all too readily conceal the differences between then and now, and those differences are the basic subtext of this book.

Its essential justification stays the same: to provide a material basis for understanding what evoked that unique florescence of plays created through those years. Materialism of this kind can produce some intriguingly fresh insights into what went on in the Shakespearean theatre. I am still teased, for instance, by the nature of the actor–audience relationship that provoked one extraordinary simile set down in a Shakespeare play of 1596. In *1 Henry IV*, 1.3.186–91, Worcester tries to tell the furious Harry Hotspur about the plot to take the crown from King Henry. It is, he says, ‘a secret book’, its ‘matter deep and dangerous, / As full of peril and adventurous spirit / As to o’erwalk a current roaring loud / On the unsteadfast footing of a spear’. Spears were for throwing at boars or deer when hunting. Their handles were round, light in weight and flexible, unlike the heavy square or bevelled fixity of a pikestaff. To use such a fragile rod for a bridge would undoubtedly be perilous. Editors link the simile to medieval chronicles such as *Erec and Enid*, where a gleaming sword appears as a bridge over troubled waters. A spear bridging a gulf would certainly make an ‘unsteadfast footing’. But why a spear rather than a sword, the symbolic bridge of the romances? We might remember that when Shakespeare’s company first set his name to his plays, in 1598 with *Richard II* and *Richard III*, and a year later for *1 Henry IV*, in each case they presented his name with a hyphen, as ‘William Shake-speare’. Knowing this little joke about the author as an actor playing huntsman or soldier enhances the likelihood that Worcester’s peculiar simile was set down as an in-joke among the players, perhaps even that the speaker of the lines about the shaky spear was the author himself. Such a reading tells us a lot about the quality of intimacy shared not only by the players amongst themselves but with their regular audiences, and the

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expectation on both sides that even the tensest or most portentous moment in a play could be broken easily and harmlessly with a metatheatrical in-joke. What was in Shakespeare's mind when he composed the joke? Was he saying that his company could not trust him to carry them over their obstacles? Perhaps the simile was a quiet admission of the lack of trust between them. Some failure of confidence certainly led the company to revise his second sequel to *1 Henry IV*, as the first quarto in 1600 of *Henry V* shows, a point made in Chapter 3 of this edition. Such features of early playing brighten the complex and collaborative business of staging that our modern reverence for Shakespeare all too readily obscures.

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