Introduction

The history of the pre-Elizabethan theatre in England, from about the twelfth century to 1558, has traditionally been a history of provincial – i.e., non-London – theatre: above all because of the survival of the manuscripts of the great Corpus Christi cycles from York, Chester, Wakefield, and N-Town, because of corresponding interest in the performances of these cycles and therefore in the surviving theatrical records associated with them, because of the provincial origins of other plays surviving from the medieval period in manuscript (such as the Digby *Mary Magdalene* and the Macro plays' *Castle of Perseverance*), and because of the apparent touring nature of a linguistically and physically exuberant play such as *Mankind*, which in part inspired the seminal work done on travelling professional companies *c.* 1475–1590 by David Bevington in the early 1960s.[1] These rich resources of both texts and records have served as magnets, from the nineteenth century to the present day, for scholars interested in the medieval English theatre: in text and performance analysis, in theatre history, and in theatre as a part of social history. Most recently, in the late twentieth century, the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project, established in the 1970s and dedicated to the finding, editing, and publishing of the records of drama, theatrical pageantry, and minstrelsy of the various cities and shires of Great Britain, from the beginnings of such records to 1642, has focused, to date, on provincial theatrical records and on great households outside London. Although REED will eventually be publishing several London records volumes, its nineteen collections currently in print (to the end of the year 2000), dealing with cities such as Coventry, Chester, and York and with areas such as Lancashire, Shropshire, Dorset, and Cornwall, have given renewed impetus to research into early English provincial theatre.

No play texts have survived, for pre-Elizabethan London, similar to those which exist for the provincial centres; and early London theatre records – both in manuscript and in print – largely cannot be matched

with dramatic texts and also are considerably more scattered and harder to find than theatre records for provincial cities such as Coventry and York. Recent general histories of the early English theatre reflect the lack of attention which – despite the work of a few individuals – has accordingly been paid, overall, by theatre scholars to pre-1559 London, even though the city was increasingly, from the twelfth century, the economic, social, and political capital of the nation. The 1994 *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*,[2] for example, is divided largely into sections defined geographically by the four English provincial cycles, Cornwall, and East Anglia; it virtually ignores London also in its chapters on other types of drama (morality plays, saint plays); and there are only a few brief references (only four of them indexed) to London, overall, in the book's 372 pages. The medieval volume of the *Revels History of Drama in English*,[3] eleven years earlier, also managed indexed references to London – although more extensive ones – on only four pages. (A 1974 exception to the norm is Alan Nelson's *The Medieval English Stage*, which includes an eight-page section on London.[4]) The situation in relation to early sixteenth-century London theatre has been little better: even though, for the sixteenth century overall, English theatre historians have traditionally made a 180-degree turn at *c.* 1558–76 and have begun to deal from that point on with almost nothing but London-based theatre (and the court). The 1990 *Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*[5] essentially begins with the reign of Elizabeth I;[6] and although there is a *Revels History* volume entirely devoted to the period 1500–76,[7] it has no focus on London as a theatrical milieu. The 1997 *New History of Early English Drama*, however, following the marked shift in late twentieth-century scholarship from authors and texts to contexts, includes a section on London's 1377–1559 royal entries: formal processions through the city's streets, with elaborate, constructed visual displays, speeches, and music, on occasions such as the coronation of a new monarch, the arrival home of a monarch victorious in war, or a state visit by a foreign ruler.[8] Other sections of the *New History* also include some useful references to the pre-Elizabethan city.

The very size and complexity of London, and its close relations – geographically and politically – with the royal court, from the medieval period on, have worked against it in terms of any development of a city-focused theatre history for the period before the initial construction of London purpose-built playhouses in the 1560s and 1570s. Extant early Tudor play texts, for example, by Londoners such as Henry Medwall and John Heywood have been routinely discussed by scholars mainly in

terms of courtly performances, interests, and politics: which have traditionally been privileged in academic study above "street-level" performances and concerns, and which have not yet been displaced from this position by a growing number of scholars more attuned to popular culture.[9] City medieval and early Tudor theatre records have been sparsely used by scholars: in significant part because largely having to be hunted down in thick manuscripts dealing also with a multitude of non-theatrical matters (orphans, night watches, rebellions, loans to the king, trade regulations and disputes, legal cases, etc.), with the size of the city having resulted in an overwhelming amount of such kinds of manuscript material having survived, located in a very large number and variety of archival collections, both public and private. Comparatively few theatre records from such sources have been published (and then with varying degrees of accuracy), and in a variety of venues some of which have not been well known to literary/theatre scholars.[10] (Social and political historians have made more use of them.) The misperception also of many Renaissance theatre scholars that the London authorities at all times were implacably opposed to the theatre – a misperception generated by narrowly focused studies of sixteenth and seventeenth-century city play prohibitions and regulations – has led as well to a general failure in early English theatre scholarship to consider London itself (except in medieval and early Tudor royal entries, as noted above and below) as a positive theatrical force;[11] and the general prejudice, until very recently, of theatre scholars against pageantry and in favour of play texts has also thus been a major factor in the traditional disregard of London by literary and theatre historians. London's medieval and early Tudor theatre is, to an important extent, a pageant theatre of the streets. Such theatre – to which largely belong the few pre-1559 wholly "theatrical" manuscripts to be found in London archives – "cannot be treated as 'literature'," states the 1994 *Companion* (p. 38), on the omission of pageant theatre from the volume; and the civic theatrical form of the royal entry – although a provincial as well as a London theatrical form – accordingly receives in the *Companion*, like London itself, only a few brief references. Only within the last four years has the Cox-Kastan *New History*, with its individual sections on a wide variety of topics such as household drama, printed plays, and popular culture rather than on authors, texts, or periods, notably demonstrated in a history of the English drama the late twentieth-century shift in "literary" studies to a very broad view indeed of the province of early English theatrical criticism and history.

Since 1984, however, there has existed a published, comprehensive listing of all the in-print records of pre-1559 London theatrical performances (both of pageantry and of the drama proper): Ian Lancashire's *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography.*[12] *DTR* puts London together with Westminster and lists for those locations, as part of one chronological grouping, the in-print records of all of court performances, private performances in the houses of the nobility and the higher clergy, school drama, civic street theatre, parish drama, and livery company plays. The volume thus gives a broad picture of the extensive theatrical activity (including prohibitions against theatre) ongoing in this one geographical area, over a period of some 400 years, *c.* 1170–1558, with one earlier listing even noting Roman archaeological remains, and with the picture widening further when the listings are also examined for areas such as Clerkenwell and Shoreditch, now parts of London but formerly separate from it.[13] Records dealing specifically with the original city of London only, as separate from Westminster, can also easily now be extracted from the grouping; and these records point to what we should expect, given the prevalence of theatre elsewhere in England in the early period and the size and importance of the early city of London compared to other major centres such as York, Chester, and Coventry: an active and extensive theatrical life in London itself, without Westminster, from at least the twelfth century on and perhaps from Roman times. Roman activity has since been confirmed by the 1987–88 archaeological discovery of Roman London's amphitheatre; and a London theatre history for Roman and Saxon times can also now begin to be written. The records listed in *DTR* as now in print are not numerous when one considers London's size (even though a few more records publications have joined the group since 1984); and they are scattered, and in many cases consist of merely illustrative excerpts from manuscripts. They also largely cannot be linked, as already noted, with extant play texts; and much of London's recorded theatrical activity from the thirteenth century on, as also already noted, is seen to be in the form of the elaborate street pageantry not only of royal entries but also of occasions such as the annual Watch at midsummer and the annual inauguration procession of the city's new mayor to Westminster and back. But the grouping of these records together in a reference work has been a major step forward in the study of pre-1559 London theatre as a comprehensive whole, even while the listing together of London and Westminster material also points to one of the factors, already touched on, which has held back such study: the tendency of scholars to think of

London's theatrical significance, in the medieval and early Tudor periods, largely in terms of the court, or as overshadowed by the court. (It is no accident that royal entries – involving the city focused on the court – are currently receiving much more academic attention than are wholly-civic pageant events such as midsummer watches.) The court, however, was not a London phenomenon but was, rather, peripatetic throughout this period, moving with the king or queen from one royal seat to another; and Westminster palace itself was located up the river from the city. Given that a number of medieval and early Tudor royal palaces were in the vicinity of London, and given the political and economic interdependence of the city and the Crown, the court and its theatrical tastes were clearly important influences on London theatre: but London, as a city, was not a satellite of the court. Indeed, politically, the London authorities spent a good deal of their time demonstrating the city's independence from the court.

What, then, can be said about the theatre, originating in the city itself, that the citizens of London experienced and participated in from earliest times to 1558? This, after all, was the theatre that eventually gave rise, in the late sixteenth century, to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, in what has long been considered to have been the golden age of English drama. Shakespeare was not a product of the court theatre; and commercial professional theatre did not suddenly spring up in London in the mid sixteenth century, with the construction of the first known purpose-built playhouses there, without a strong base in ongoing city theatrical traditions. Examination of the records, moreover, specifically of London *civic* theatre – of *city-sponsored* plays and pageants – from material records, such as archaeological remains in the Roman period, through written records such as early church prohibitions and chronicle histories, to surviving city and London craft-guild/livery-company manuscript records series from *c.* 1275–76 (when the city's series of official Letter Books begins) to 1558, both gives a new perspective on post-1558 London developments and above all begins to provide for London a pre-1559 theatrical history somewhat parallel to those we already have for cities such as York, Chester, and Coventry: for the theatrical histories of these other English cities have been, to date, largely histories of city-sponsored theatre. The study of early London, including its theatre, as itself an urban cultural phenomenon has also recently been gaining interdisciplinary scholarly attention (as sociohistorical criticism has become increasingly popular), and has recently been given special prominence by Lawrence Manley's sweeping 1995 *Literature and Culture in Early*

Modern London,[14] covering a 200-year period from *c.* 1475 and including important work on London's pre- (and post-) 1559 street pageantry as a major element in what Manley argues to be the city's increasing self-awareness as an urban political/cultural centre. Narrowing the focus taken by Manley (who broadly covers many forms of literature and culture), and extending the time period, this present book is intended to begin a study specifically of London's theatrical culture as developed by the city itself, from earliest times to the beginning of the so-called Shakespearean period: which is here taken, in its broadest definition, as starting with the 1558 accession of Elizabeth I. Because the subject of London's specifically civic theatre has been so little treated to date, I have not broadened the book's scope so as to deal also, except in a few passing references, with London's medieval and early Tudor parish drama or school drama, or with the city's longstanding theatrical folk culture (for example, of May games). I have also not treated court theatrical activities (such as Cheapside tournaments) taking place in London itself. The focus is entirely on civic theatre (as defined briefly above and in more detail below), though with attention also given to court-city theatrical interrelationships. Although these other theatrical forms should eventually also be examined in detail, in a broader work on the city's pre-1559 theatre, London's civic theatrical culture would seem first to deserve and to require some focused attention.

This book is, then, an examination of various aspects of specifically civic theatre in London over a period of some 1500 years: from the city's founding *c.* 60 AD to the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558. Within the term "theatre" I include not only plays (drama, or "theatre proper") but also, as clearly indicated by this point, other kinds of performances involving constructed set pieces and/or costumed and choreographed/designed role-playing: such as Roman amphitheatre shows, and the medieval to early Tudor street pageantry – stationary and portable – of constructed towers, castles, arches, Assumptions of the Virgin, giants, Jesse trees, and the like, and of the recitation of speeches or the singing of songs involving reciters/performers playing parts (of figures such as apostles, angels, and virgins). Such theatrical displays/performances were a major part of the social and political life of London over these 1500 years, and also were a significant part of the foundations upon which the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries was built. For the period before 1200 I also include role-playing activity more generally, given the major uncertainties of theatrical terms then, and the scarcity of records. Simply ceremonial decoration/display, such as

streets decorated with banners and tapestries hanging from the windows of houses, and processions of elaborately dressed dignitaries through the streets, has been included only where it would seem to be necessary background to the development of actual theatrical display/performance; and purely religious ritual or display, even where involving civic officials and institutions, has been excluded. "Theatre" is thus defined more or less as are the drama and pageantry covered by the published records volumes of the Records of Early English Drama project, but without REED's close attention to folk practices. The term "pageant" itself is here used to refer to formal visual displays (with or without spoken text) involving costumed role-players and/or constructed set pieces (stationary or portable). This is not what the term "pageant" often means in the pre-1558 civic records themselves; and I deal with this issue specifically in chapters 3 and 10. Nor is it the broader use of the term as increasingly found today in sociohistorical approaches to theatre.

By "civic" theatre I mean theatre sponsored, wholly or in part, by the city of London itself or by the London craft guilds or livery companies: organizations which, originally formed by particular occupational groups (brewers, goldsmiths, ironmongers, etc.) for purposes of trade regulation, religious worship, and/or mutual social support, from early times began to function in London as political groups of businessmen through which much of the city's governing was carried out.[15] (This book is thus in part "middle class" – as opposed to courtly or popular – theatre history,[16] although the city's governors provided theatre for all social and economic classes, from entertainments sent as gifts to the court, to street theatre which could be watched by all, whatever their status or economic level.) From the early fourteenth century, virtually no one could be a free citizen of London, with all the rights and responsibilities of such citizenship (including participation in city government), without belonging to a London craft guild:[17] and the companies therefore indirectly controlled the city's governing operations, as well as its economy.[18] Inevitably some of the companies, wealthier and more influential than the rest, came to play a larger part than the others in the civic government, and therefore also in the public street theatre – of royal entries, of mayoral shows, of the celebrations known as the Midsummer Watch – sponsored by that government: a theatre of political, religious, and civic obligations and rituals, and of public relations, as well as of entertainment.[19] What are today called the twelve Great Companies of London – in order of processional precedence, the Mercers, Grocers, Drapers, Fishmongers, Goldsmiths,

Skinners, Merchant Taylors, Haberdashers, Salters, Ironmongers, Vintners, and Clothworkers[20] – came to control the mayor's office (by custom, from the fifteenth century, virtually no citizen could be an alderman or mayor of London if he did not belong to, or agree to be transferred to, one of the Great Companies[21]); many sheriffs also belonged to the Great Companies;[22] and these companies therefore also became largely responsible for the civic theatre of the streets in which the mayor and sheriffs played such a significant role.[23] The mayor, with other prominent London officials and citizens, escorted English and foreign royalty and other dignitaries, formally entering the city, along streets decorated not only with rich hangings and banners – and with the companies lining the route – but also often with set-piece pageant stages constructed in traditional locations. The mayor and sheriffs were the civic leaders of the Midsummer Watch each June (to the early 1540s), in which portable constructed pageants (from at least the late fifteenth century) were carried in procession through the streets. The procession of the newly elected mayor each year to take his oath of office at the royal Exchequer at Westminster had also become, apparently by the late fifteenth century, an occasion for the carrying of portable pageants. All such events normally also involved music. The company each year to which the mayor belonged had special responsibility for street (and, by at least the late fifteenth century, river) pageants: especially (on land) at midsummer, when the sheriffs' companies also had to provide pageants, and for the mayoral oath-taking. Meanwhile many of the companies also seem, from the fifteenth century on, to have sponsored play performances at their major feast times (times of company celebration involving both religious services and secular activities such as the election of company officers), by performance companies which, by the early to mid sixteenth century, were the forerunners of the late sixteenth-century companies which acted the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.[24]

The scholarly work available to date on early London theatre overall is sparse but slowly growing. As we have seen, London has been largely missing from the theatre-history picture of England generally constructed by scholars until, in the second half of the sixteenth century, permanent theatres were first built there, both for public professional companies and for the so-called private-theatre boys' companies (the latter focused on court performances as their raison d'etre), and secular plays for these theatres, by dramatists such as Marlowe and Shakespeare, began to survive in significant numbers. The early fifteenth-century mummings of

poet and dramatist John Lydgate, for example, although including the only extant theatrical texts we can definitely assign to performance in a pre-1559 London civic hall, have been pretty well ignored as London drama.[25] A few late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century play texts – such as Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucres* – can be attached to performance in the London area; but to date, as already noted, these texts have largely been of interest to scholars for their associations with private patrons and above all with the court. Early sixteenth-century London printings of plays have been studied by bibliographers, and by scholars interested in what such printings might indicate about theatrical performance, but not with relation specifically to performances in London itself;[26] and theatre historians have been largely discouraged by the early London play-performance records available to date, which have tended to be tantalizingly meagre (as in the case of London's late fourteenth-century Clerkenwell/Skinners' Well play, discussed in chapter 3) and scattered. The Malone Society, however, in 1931 and in 1954 published what late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century London civic play-performance records it could find: twenty items (fifteen of them involving play suppression and control), between 1522 and 1558, from the city's official manuscript records series of Letter Books, Journals, and Repertories, and play performance records 1485–1558 from the manuscripts of the London Great Companies, though these latter records were so few as to seem to indicate very little company interest in the drama.[27]

Growing throughout the twentieth century, however, has been scholarly interest in pre-Elizabethan London pageantry: in part because a good deal of it has survived (at least in terms of extant descriptions), in part because of the mid-century rise in scholarly interest in performance studies and because of the development in the 1970s and 1980s of the New Historicism, with its emphasis on contexts and on the politics of theatre. The major work has been focused past 1558, in Shakespearean times; but the medieval and early Tudor period has also received some significant attention. E. K. Chambers in 1903, in his two-volume anthropologically focused *Mediaeval Stage,* provided only eight pages on London pageantry (largely on royal entries) to 1559,[28] but Robert Withington in 1918–26 published a two-volume history entirely of English pageantry, from early times to the nineteenth century, with a good amount of his material coming from pre-1559 London.[29] Withington also, unlike Chambers, was interested in the actual early theatrical displays themselves, rather than in the religious and folk beliefs in which they might have originated; and he provided descriptions, records transcriptions

and paraphrases, and numerous citations of sources (including of a significant number of early manuscripts as well as of printed dramatic histories, livery company histories, and London histories) for material on London (and other) entries 1298–1558, and also on London's annual pageant-filled Midsummer Watch and annual mayoral inauguration show (though on the latter largely after 1558). His wealth of detail is still useful today.[30] Moreover, in 1954's *Collections III* and in 1960's *Collections V* the Malone Society published a part-calendar, part-edition, with a substantial amount of material, of the pre-1559 (and later) records of the London Midsummer Watch and Lord Mayor's Show found in the extant manuscripts of London's twelve Great Companies.[31]

In 1966 Glynne Wickham began the publication of the eventual three volumes of his monumental *Early English Stages*:[32] examining early English theatre above all in terms of its visual stagecraft and hence paying a great deal of attention to London's royal entries, its "pageant theatres of the streets" (the heading of volume 1's third chapter) from 1377 to 1603.[33] Such pageant theatre was for Wickham central to the evolution of English stagecraft; and his extensive use of manuscript records of London theatre can be seen at its height in his transcription and translation of a lengthy Latin record, from London's Bridge House manuscripts, of the pageants constructed for the 1465 processional entry across the Bridge of Elizabeth Woodville, queen to Edward IV, coming to London and Westminster for her coronation.[34] (Wickham also unusually spent part of a chapter, in volume 1, examining Lydgate's mummings.) While Wickham was approaching London royal entries from the direction of stagecraft, Sydney Anglo was examining them – like Wickham, along with courtly theatrical forms such as tournaments and disguisings – in terms of their importance as tools of political policy. His influential *Spectacle, Pageantry, and Early Tudor Policy*,[35] published in 1969 (with a new edition in 1997), examined the political aspects (from a court perspective) of the various theatrical displays of the reigns of Henry VII through Mary, to the 1559 coronation of Elizabeth I, such displays including seven major and several minor London entries.

From the later twentieth century to the present, pageantry studies in general have been expanding significantly for both English/London and continental theatre, but largely, for London, past 1558.[36] Until very recently, London pageantry before 1559 has been part of the consistent, long-term working field of (besides Anglo) only one scholar, Gordon Kipling, whose focus on European court culture and festivals has included important historical and interpretative work, over some twenty