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Shakespeare's career as actor and playwright reveals the extraordinary accommodation of his genius to the circumstances of his time. This unique account describes Shakespeare at work against a background of theatrical rivalry, opportunism, service to noble patrons, and political intrigue. Peter Thomson recreates Shakespeare's writing career year by year, showing how the plays mirror their times. The story reveals the precarious nature of theatrical survival, the constant threat posed by the withdrawal of noble or royal patronage, the spread of disease, the anxieties of war and the climate of political uncertainty. This account of Elizabethan and Jacobean social and professional life offers a fascinating insight into the world in which Shakespeare produced his plays.

There are numerous illustrations gleaned from museums, libraries and great houses to illustrate the theatrical and social context of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

PETER THOMSON is Professor of Drama at Exeter University. His books include *Shakespeare's Theatre* (1985 and 1992), *Brecht* (with Jan Needle, 1981) and a study of *Mother Courage* (1997). He has also edited the plays of Dion Boucicault and co-edited, with Glendyr Sacks, *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (1994).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
 São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521666411

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First published 1992
 Canto edition 1994
 This paperback edition 1999
 Reprinted 1999
 Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
 Thomson, Peter, 1938–
 Shakespeare's professional career / Peter Thomson.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. 195) and index.
 ISBN 0 521 35128 6 (hardback)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616. 2. Dramatists, English – Early
 modern, 1500–1700 – Biography. 3. Literature and society – England –
 History – 16th century. 4. Authors and patrons – England –
 History – 16th century. 5. Theater – England – History – 16th century.
 6. Actors – England – Biography. I. Title.
 PR2907.T48 1992
 822.3'3 – dc20
 [B] 91-27351 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-66641-1 Paperback

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I could have written this book
for A, B or C,
for D or R.
I anchor myself in them.
But, as things are,
I offer it to the University Funding Committee
And dedicate it
to my Exeter Drama colleagues.

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Preface



This is not a book about Shakespeare but about Shakespeare's job. Even in his lifetime, he was uniquely successful, but part of that success was the outcome of his ability to accommodate his creativity within the confines of London's emergent professional theatre. It was neither common nor unknown for a country boy to make good in that bustling world, and it is certainly of interest that Shakespeare never rejected Stratford. Chapter 1 gives some account of his life there. The rest of the book aims to place his career in its historical and theatrical context. In order to do that, I have written more about the theatre's aristocratic patrons (in chapters 2 and 6) than is common in books of this kind. The Stanley family, Earls of Derby, have served as my main example, not only because of their intrinsic interest, but also because their fortunes and misfortunes tell us much about one section of the audience to which every successful playwright had to address his work. Shakespeare was 'well-connected'. The Lords and Ladies of his plays were not wild guesses from the wrong side of the track. I found myself intrigued by the discretion and diplomacy required of a playwright who elected to deal with recent English history in front of audiences that included direct descendants of the leading players in the power-game. Who were these men who legitimised England's first professional actors?

From the Stanleys, I have turned to the provincial life of the Elizabethan player and then to the new theatrical structures of the metropolis. Chapter 4 attempts to establish some of the ground-rules that dictated theatrical conduct in the London of the 1590s and how Shakespeare expanded those rules. It stands at the book's centre. The remaining chapters place Shakespeare's career against the background of the two contrasting reigns during which he lived, wrote and died. It has been an important part of my endeavour to hold in balance Shakespeare as 'typical' and Shakespeare as 'exceptional'. History has accorded him a supremacy that he seems never to have asserted for himself. That, too, is intriguing.

Acknowledgements



Those who have granted permission for the reproduction of illustrations are named at the relevant place. Our thanks to them. My particular gratitude goes to David Wiles for generous letters, to Dorrian Lambley for opening my eyes about the end of chapter 4 and to Leslie Read and Christopher McCullough for constructive conversation. The picture research for this book was undertaken by Cathy Turner, whose eye for detail saved many a slip. She has been an exemplary collaborator. And if I seem to take the support of my family for granted, that is because they allow me to.