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THE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY,
1594-1642

This is the first complete history of the theatre company, created in 1594, which in 1603 became the King's Men. Shakespeare was at the heart of the team of players, who with their successors ran an operation that lasted until the theatres closed in 1642. During those forty-eight years they staged all of Shakespeare's plays, a number of Ben Jonson's, most of Thomas Middleton and John Webster, and almost all of the Beaumont and Fletcher canon. Andrew Gurr provides a comprehensive history of the company's activities. A chapter on their finances explains the unique management system they adopted and two chapters study the fashions in their repertory and the complex relationship with their royal patrons. The six appendixes identify the 99 players who worked in the company and the 168 plays they are known to have owned and performed, as well as the key documents from the company's history.

ANDREW GURR is Professor Emeritus at the University of Reading. His many books include *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* (Cambridge), now in its third edition, *Writers in Exile, Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge), also about to appear in a third edition, *The Shakespearean Playing Companies*, and (with Mariko Ichikawa) *Staging in Shakespeare's Theatres*.

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*Thy Muses sugred dainties seeme to us
Like the fam'd Apples of old Tantalus:
For we (admiring) see and heare thy straines,
But none I see or heare, those sweets attaines.*
(Thomas Bancroft, *Two Bookes of Epigrammes
and Epitaphs*, 1639, Epigram 118, 'To Shakespeare')

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Preface

An acting company conceived an idea in 1594 that it realized in 1608 and that helped it to run for forty-eight years as the unrivalled leader of its time. In 1599 the company conceived a management system that made its actors their own managers and financiers, creating the only effective democracy of its time in totalitarian England. For us now the plays of Shakespeare have made the company he worked for into part of the ceremonial regalia commonly paraded in the acts of worship by Shakespeare-lovers. This book is about the company which made the icon so many of us worship.

Shakespeare became what he made Henry V call himself, a gentleman of a company, though the king's was not quite the same as the player's. It seems right to call the company he helped to found, which officially had four different names in the near half-century it did business, by his name. The label 'Shakespearean' is now of course a praise word. I have used it before to point to my subject's first cause, but the eponymity in the title of this book has a more distinct justification. Shakespeare and his plays were gathered up in May 1594 to form an essential component of a new company set up by Henry Carey, the Lord Chamberlain. Carey was the queen's cousin and as Chamberlain he was the official responsible for plays and for entertaining the queen with them. In that month, in alliance with his son-in-law Charles Howard, the Lord Admiral, he set up two new companies to serve his official purpose. A single company had been established eleven years before as the Queen's Men, but it had lost its hegemony. Setting up two companies was a sounder policy than having just one, since it gave better insurance against any future loss of the capacity to entertain royalty. London's two leading actors, Edward Alleyn and Richard Burbage, were each allocated a company of fellow-players and a playhouse belonging to someone in their family, and each company was given a set of already famous plays. One secured Marlowe's, the other Shakespeare's. In its repertoire, if nowhere else, at its creation in 1594 the Lord Chamberlain's Men was the Shakespeare company.

It served several patrons, was subject to no impresarios, and came to own its two playhouses. The first official title was the Lord Chamberlain's Men. When Henry Carey died in July 1596, his son George, the second Lord Hunsdon, became their patron, so that for the next few months they were the second Lord Hunsdon's Men. The new Lord Chamberlain was Lord Cobham. He died less than eight months later and when George Carey succeeded him as Lord Chamberlain the company resumed its original title. Then in 1603 when King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England he took the leading company for himself, later giving the others to his son and his queen. Through the next thirty-nine years it was the King's Men, James's son Charles taking them over at his accession in 1625 when James died. All the professional acting companies playing in London under the early Stuarts were royal property, so in September 1642 with Charles fled and the country at war, Charles's opponent, Parliament, laid a ban on playing. The company and all its competitors died. None were resurrected until a new monarch arrived eighteen years later. Through the forty-eight years of its life under its four different titles the company stayed remarkably the same, so the one name, the Shakespeare company, is the clearest description.

Conditioned as we are to start the study of this period with Shakespeare, it is easy to forget that it was not the author but the company that controlled everything to do with his plays. The company bought the play from the author and did with it whatever they pleased. Indeed, apart from the very few plays that survive in manuscript as the 'allowed book' licensed for staging, it is likely that most of the play-texts we read are only approximations of the texts that the company chose to stage. There is strong evidence to show that even Shakespeare, himself a company co-owner and a performer of his own scripts, never expected his texts to be transferred to the stage as he wrote them. The company did what it pleased with its scripts, as on more than one occasion Jonson, Webster, and other writers lamented. Every play had its first publication on stage by the company. Printed texts came later and rarely show exactly what playgoers to the Globe or Blackfriars saw and heard. The company was the real author of the 168 plays that have survived from its long reign, but its first publications only survive residually in the printed texts.

Besides justifying close study of the companies, that regrettable fact sets up a massive and intangible barrier between then and now. Of the 168 Shakespeare company play-texts still extant, no more than four or five come close to the company's product, and one of those, Q1 *Henry V*, is not the Shakespeare we are used to seeing and reading. The company's

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‘allowed books’ with the Master of the Revels’s signature on their final page authorizing them for performance were its most treasured assets. Such unique manuscripts were never handed to a printer because they would never be returned in usable form. Only two of the company’s manuscripts with that precious signature survive. All the others are at some remove from the staged versions, printed or copied from authorial or scribal manuscripts with no great authority as performed texts. The Shakespeare company mined its allowed books for its performances, and thought of the manuscript and print copies made for reading as a secondary form of publication, a residue that they remoulded on stage. From the company’s more than ten thousand performances (roughly two hundred a year for forty-eight years), we have reliable scripts for fewer than one-fifth of their plays. The deficiency of the available texts is the prime reason for writing about the company ambience that first put them on stage, in the hope that it may assist modern attempts at translating the texts into comprehensible forms.

As a companion to the surviving plays this book is really an extended footnote. Nearly a quarter of the survivors are by Shakespeare, which does not make easy the need to choose what to include and what to omit. My assumption is that readers will have some acquaintance if not close friendship with the Shakespeare plays, so I have gone into detail on them only where they say something special about the company’s practices. If this history seems to take more note of the other writers and of features like the company finances and the players’ personalities, that is because they are less familiar. That is the price of the Shakespeare presence. It gives value to the context that brought the plays into being.

A number of the names, or rather their spelling, used here are worth a note. Most people use the spelling ‘Bolingbroke’ for the character in *Richard II* who becomes King Henry IV. That was the eighteenth century’s version. Shakespeare himself wrote it as ‘Bullingbrook’, or ‘Bullingbrooke’, following Holinshed’s spelling in order to open up the image of the usurper as water wetting the hot head of sun-king Richard. I follow Shakespeare’s orthography in this case, as in the New Cambridge edition of the play, because it reproduces the phonetic spelling, and therefore what people would have heard on stage in the early performances. ‘Fluellen’, however, is here rendered as the modern ‘Llewellyn’, again as in the New Cambridge text. Otherwise the quotations from Shakespeare copy the Norton Shakespeare in this and in act, scene, and line numbering. The Norton is a version of the Oxford edition of *The Complete Works*, but restoring Falstaff’s name in place of the Oxford’s Oldcastle.

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Preface

A multitude of people deserve special thanks for this work. In particular I should like to thank those giants Alan Dessen, Bill Ingram, Scott McMillin, Robert Weimann, and Ros Knutson, the 'rival' of my watch. Sally-Beth MacLean and her Records of Early English Drama (REED) organization have been wonderfully generous in checking my notes of the company's travels and in providing the two maps of where they toured. Others have given help both in matters of detail and in the overview. For such uplifts I would like to thank Melissa Aaron, Michela Calore, Janette Dillon, Reg Foakes, Brian Gibbons, Peter Holland, Mark Hutchings, Mariko Ichikawa, Grace Ioppolo, David Kathman, Ron Knowles, Tiffany Stern, Robin Headlam Wells, Charles Whitney, Christopher Wilson, and those labourers in my graduate vineyard at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, in 2001. And there are always the librarians, at that most rewarding resort the Folger Shakespeare Library, at the beautiful new British Library and at my university, Reading. They all have my warmest thanks for their constant readiness to help. Above and behind all, of course, is Sarah Stanton, the quietest, strongest, and most positive underpinner of Shakespeare studies in the business.