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The company's unique features

For six years from May 1594 the English government gave two acting companies the exclusive right to entertain Londoners. We know little about what one of the companies did to fulfil that privilege, except for Shakespeare's plays, about which we otherwise know a great deal. About the other company we know a lot, more in fact than about any other of the playing companies of the Shakespearean period. We even know more about its two playhouses, the Rose and the Fortune, than about any of the other twelve or more playhouses built between 1567 and 1629. The other company, generally known as the Admiral's Men, is the subject of this book.

Between 1594 and 1600 the Shakespeare company staged an unknown number of plays. Of those that survive we have evidence for only four besides the nineteen of Shakespeare's up to *Hamlet*. On the other hand we know that the Admiral's Men staged 161 plays up to the end of 1600, twenty-two of which still exist in print. The survival rate of plays by both companies is similar, but the history of the Shakespeare company, the Chamberlain's Men, gives no indication of the 140 or so other plays they are likely to have staged to match those performed by the Admiral's. Since the two companies ran in parallel for those six years as the dominant force in English theatre, a history of the Admiral's career can show a great deal of what in the Shakespeare company's long life still lies in shadow.

The Admiral's Men found their own distinctive way to cope with the unique demands laid on them by the exclusive access to professional playing in London that they were granted in 1594. Once they had settled into their daily routine of performing a different play each day to much the same body of customers, they invented a device that enhanced each performance in ways the Shakespeare company, so far as we know, seems to have ignored almost completely. They faced the fact that the same familiar faces had to appear on stage each playing a different role every afternoon, as successively, say, Tamburlaine, Faustus, Hieronymo or Barabbas, alongside the equally familiar faces of their fellows in each play.

To cope with this the company developed a trick that exploited precisely the audience's familiarity with their faces. While the lesser players doubled their bit parts, the company gave their leads plays involving quick-change disguises. In one play of 1595 their leading player Alleyn took four parts, three of them in disguise parodying his more famous roles in other plays, notably Tamburlaine and Barabbas. It was a trick they sustained for decades. Sam Rowley, a long-term sharer in the company, wrote a play about Henry VIII that included scenes where the king disguises himself to walk anonymously among his people. The tradition reached its apotheosis in 1611 with *The Roaring Girl*, a play about a well-known Londoner, who was persuaded at one performance to appear on stage in person and sing a song, setting her own reality up against the company's representation of her. The company's long history shows that metatheatrical trickery of this kind was basic to its activities.

It may well be that such tricks were far more basic to all Elizabethan theatre than can readily be recognised from readings of Shakespeare. We know he gave disguises to the boys playing Portia in *Merchant of Venice* in 1596 and Rosalind in *As You Like It* in 1599. We also know that *Measure for Measure* uses the old trick of the disguised governor fashionable at the time, and we know that Henry V disguises himself to talk to his humble soldiers, but otherwise the Shakespeare canon gives us little sense of the intimacy that prevailed in the original conditions of performance. With the multitude of different outlets in the media for modern entertainment that we enjoy today we find it difficult to imagine the effect of having the choice restricted to one of the only two venues and companies open daily in the 1590s. In a city of perhaps two hundred thousand people, Philip Henslowe's records suggest that in 1594 the average playgoer went to a play as many as twenty times every year, once a fortnight. No other playing company could have had such a close familiarity with its audiences. Those audiences standing crammed together in broad daylight around the stage had a familiarity with what they were experiencing that no modern audiences can create.

May 1594 was the greatest growth-point in English theatre history. An appalling epidemic of bubonic plague which killed over ten thousand Londoners had stopped the performing of any plays from June 1592 to April 1594 except for only two short stints in the frozen months of January 1593 and January 1594 when for a while the plague was latent. During that long break from acting Shakespeare turned to writing his two great poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, which his friend from Stratford Richard Field published in spring 1593 and 1594. *The Rape* was entered in the Stationers' Register on 9 May 1594. In that same month two Privy Councillors, Henry Carey the Lord Chamberlain, who was

responsible for the regulation of playing, along with his son-in-law Charles Howard the Lord Admiral, succeeded in setting up a deal with the Lord Mayor of London designed to achieve a compromise between the mayor, who insisted that all plays be banned from his city, and the two Council members, who wanted playing to flourish. They identified two playhouses in the suburbs of the city where a pair of fresh companies made up from the most outstanding players in the land could stage their plays.[1] The deal they forged creating the new playing companies must have been a decisive factor in turning Shakespeare back to the play-writing that he had forsaken while the plague raged and he looked for a sponsoring lord. He had composed and published his two epyllions on Field's presses with letters of dedication that showed his growing hope of reward from the Earl of Southampton. We can only guess how willingly he went back to his former work as a player in the Lord Chamberlain's new company during that momentous month.

The Privy Councillors as they saw it had a duty to entertain the queen with the best new plays every Christmas. In the event their two new companies could (and did) provide this service exclusively for the next six years. Carey's and Howard's plan had an obvious precedent, the major company set up eleven years before in 1583 with the queen herself as its patron.[2] Entitled the Queen's Men, it took the best two or three players from each of the companies then competing for attention at court, and received the exclusive right to perform at inns and other places inside the city and to take their plays round the country.[3] In May 1594 Carey and Howard took the extra precaution of setting up not one but two new companies, and appeased the Lord Mayor by agreeing to ban all playing at the city inns where plays had been staged regularly in the past. Instead they allocated their companies to playhouses out in the suburbs, both of which belonged to people with whom the two Councillors already had long contact. James Burbage, builder and owner of the Theatre in Shoreditch, had been a servant to Carey for the last ten years. Edward Alleyn,

[1] The idea behind this scheme, with its brilliant resolution of the problem of running plays in a city whose mayor and aldermen were opposed to playing, is only a hypothesis, but it gives by far the best explanation of the available evidence, which is deficient chiefly because the Privy Council papers between 1593 and 1595 have disappeared. For a full account of the situation and the hypothesis, see Gurr, 'Henry Carey's Peculiar Letter', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56 (2005), 51–75.

[2] Howard rather than the unsubtle Carey seems to have been the grey eminence behind the establishment of the two new companies in 1594, though the key executive figure must have been the Master of the Revels. Howard is thought to have been sponsor of Edmund Tilney's original appointment as Master of the Revels in 1578, since they were related by blood.

[3] The story of this venture is given by Scot McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

son-in-law to the builder and owner of the Rose playhouse on Bankside, Philip Henslowe, had worn Howard's livery for a similar period.

Each company took up players from a variety of former groups. The Chamberlain's Men took Richard Burbage, son of the Theatre's owner, along with others who had been in the Earl of Pembroke's Men, almost certainly including Shakespeare. They also took several players from the recently deceased Lord Strange's, later the Earl of Derby's Men, and one former Queen's Men's player. The Admiral's took a mix including one Queen's man, two from the old Admiral's, now a travelling group, and several players from other companies. For their repertory Carey's company were given some of the old Queen's Men's plays, including several that Shakespeare eventually rewrote for them: the first *King John*, an ur-*Hamlet* and *King Leir*. They also acquired all of Shakespeare's earlier plays, including the first histories he had written or shared the writing of up to the hugely popular *Richard III*, along with his early comedies and his one tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. Howard's group, the Lord Admiral's Men, took all the Marlowe plays that Alleyn had made his name with, the two *Tamburlaines*, *Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Massacre at Paris*, along with *The Spanish Tragedy* and a variety of plays that Alleyn had purchased over the years from Robert Peele and other writers.

The Admiral's Men were Shakespeare's opposites, the other half of this adroit scheme that sponsored and limited all playing in London from May 1594 till 1600. The two companies quickly developed quite distinct identities, which is half the reason for this book. While the Shakespeare company was always a team of sharers taking equal parts even in the playhouse they built, the Admiral's Men, led by the most famous and venturesome actor of the time, eventually became the first playing company to be controlled by an impresario. Alleyn ran it along with his father-in-law for most of its thirty years. The two companies also gradually diverged in their general policy and in the audiences they aimed at. The Burbage company tried to use their outdoor venue only in the summer, while hoping to secure a different venue indoors for each winter.[4] By contrast the Alleyn company proved ready or at least willing to use its outdoor playhouse throughout the year. This difference in their preferences meant that by the end of their long life the Admiral's company catered chiefly for the mass of 'citizen' playgoers at the cheaper outdoor playhouses, whereas their opposites, the King's Men, fed and chiefly lived off the richer playgoers at the indoor Blackfriars.

[4] This story has often been told recently, initially in Gurr, 'Money or Audiences: The Choice of Shakespeare's Globe', *Theatre Notebook* 42 (1988), 3–14.

As impresarios Alleyn and his father-in-law Henslowe live now in Shakespeare's shadow. That is unfortunate because not only do we have so much more knowledge of their work through their first six years than we have for the Shakespeare company but their work ran in radically distinct ways which the Shakespeare shadow all too readily obscures. Henslowe has left us the unique and invaluable *Diary* of his dealings through the 1590s, and equally valuably we now have archaeological evidence of his first playhouse, the Rose, in similarly unique detail. Amongst Henslowe's and Alleyn's papers we even have a builder's contract for the playhouse, the Fortune, that replaced the Rose in 1600 and remained in use staging *The Spanish Tragedy* and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Faustus* regularly until 1642.

The stories of the two companies interact remarkably, even though for their first six years they marched in parallel lines, the sort that never meet. Their playhouses, the Rose with its replacement the Fortune, and the Theatre with its successor the Globe and later the Blackfriars, featured in different ways in the early careers of what are now known with good reason as the duopoly companies, the Admiral's and their opposites the Chamberlain's. The term 'duopoly' suits them because for the six years from May 1594 thanks to Carey and Howard the two companies held an almost exclusive share of performances in London. Their founders, Carey and Howard, set them up as a pair with the same purpose but the forms their enterprise led them to diverged from the start. They had different repertories and different players, and for all the similarity of function their activities diverged as much as Shakespeare's plays differ from Marlowe's. Just as the Chamberlain's worked as a team of equal sharers whereas Alleyn controlled the Admiral's repertory, so Shakespeare wrote plays that invited a more equal sharing of roles for the players than did Alleyn's great dominating roles. The eponymous King Richard II shared his role in Shakespeare's first history play for his new company with the 'silent king', Bullingbrook, whereas Alleyn's Tamburlaine conquered and ruled everybody in his plays. In *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria* Alleyn delivered almost three-sevenths, more than one-third, of all the lines in the play, as we shall see below. The radical difference between divided authority in *Richard II* and the absolute dominance of the hero in *Tamburlaine* is an almost parodic representation of the roles the leading actors played in each company.

Whereas we know of only the nineteen or so Shakespeare plays plus just a few others in the Chamberlain's repertory up to 1600, for the Admiral's Men we have the titles, or their approximations, for 229 plays staged at the Rose and then at the Fortune between May 1594 and the summer of 1625. Of that total, thirty-five have survived in early printed texts, with varying levels of reliability. We also have manuscripts for two plays, one of them,

John a Kent and John a Cumber, written in the author's own hand, with another, *Jugurtha*, in an incomplete mid-seventeenth-century transcript, and a third in five different hands which seems to have been prepared for a revival in 1601 but never got past the censor. That play, *Sir Thomas More*, stands outside the repertory considered in this book and is therefore examined separately from the rest. Considering that the titles of the plays staged at the Rose and the Fortune are only comprehensive for the first three years of their existence, and that nearly two hundred plays from the later years after 1600 have probably been lost forever, it is even more regrettable that we have perhaps less than one in twelve of the total of plays that we know were rehearsed and prepared through the usual three-week preparation schedule at the Rose before being tried out in the playhouse.[5]

[5] This book so far as possible cites plays in facsimile editions. The lists given here are by author, starting with plays by unknown writers. MSR = Malone Society Reprints, Oxford, which appear in type facsimiles. EEBO = Early English Books Online. A few are taken from other editions. Anon., *George a Greene, the Pinner of Wakefield* (Q 1590) MSR 1911; Anon., *A Knack to Know an Honest Man* (Q 1595) MSR 1910; Anon., *Look About You* (*Disguises*?) (Q 1600) MSR 1913; Anon., *Thomas Stukeley* (Q 1605) MSR 1970 (see also George Peele, *The Stukeley Plays*); William Boyle, *Jugurth* (Bodleian MS.Rawl.poet.195, 1660?); George Chapman, *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria* (Q 1598) MSR 1928 [ed. Lloyd E. Berry] in *The Plays of George Chapman: The Comedies*, Urbana, 1970, earlier editions by R. H. Shepherd (1873), and T. M. Parrott, *Comedies* (1914); George Chapman, *An Humorous Day's Mirth* (Q 1599), MSR 1937 [1938] [ed. Allan Holaday in *The Plays of George Chapman: The Comedies*, Urbana, 1970]; Henry Chettle, *Hoffman* (Q 1631) MSR 1950 (1951); Henry Chettle and John Day, *1 The Blind Beggar of Bednall Green* (Q 1657) facsimile edition, Uystpruyst, 1902; Thomas Dekker, *Old Fortunatus* (Q 1600), in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers, 4 vols., Cambridge, 1956–62, Vol. 1; Dekker, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (Q 1600) ed. Bowers, Vol. 1; Dekker, Henry Chettle, William Haughton, *Patient Grissill* (Q 1603), ed. Bowers, vol. 1; Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *1 The Honest Whore* (Q 1604), ed. Bowers, Vol. 2; Thomas Dekker, *The Whore of Babylon* (Q 1607) ed. Bowers, Vol. 2; Thomas Drue, *The Duchess of Suffolk* (Q 1631) EEBO; Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (Q 1594) MSR 1926; William Haughton, *Englishmen for My Money* (Q 1616) MSR 1912; William Haughton, *The Devil and His Dam* (*Grim the Collier of Croydon*) (Q 1662), reprinted in *A Choice Ternary of English Plays* Gratiae Theatrales, ed. William M. Baillie, New York, 1984; Haughton and John Day, *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (Q 1601) EEBO; Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (Qq 1592, 1599, 1602) MSR (1592), 1948 [1949], MSR (1602), 1925; Christopher Marlowe, *1 Tamburlaine* (1587, Q 1590), *2 Tamburlaine* (1587, Q 1590), *Doctor Faustus* (Qq 1604, 1616), *The Jew of Malta* (Q 1633), *The Massacre at Paris* (O 1594?) [in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Bowers, 2 vols., second edition, Cambridge, 1981]; Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl* (Q 1611) in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Bowers, Vol. 3, ed. Paul Mulholland, The Revels Plays, Manchester, 1987; Middleton, *No Wit/No Help Like a Woman's*, ed. John Jowett, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, Oxford, 2007; Anthony Munday, *John a Kent and John a Cumber*, ms 1595, MSR 1923; Munday, *The Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntingdon* (Q 1601) MSR 1964 [1965]; Munday, *The Death of Robert Earl of Huntingdon* (Q 1601) MSR 1965 [1967]; Munday, Michael Drayton, Robert Wilson, Richard Hathway, *1 Sir John Oldcastle* (Q 1600) MSR 1908; George Peele, *The Battle of Alcazar* (Q 1594) MSR 1907 [*The Stukeley Plays* (*The Battle of Alcazar* and *The Famous History of the Life and Death of Captain Thomas Stukeley*), ed. Charles Edelman, The Revels Plays, Manchester, 2005]; George Peele, *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe. With the Tragedie of Absalon* (Q 1599) MSR 1912; Peele, *Longshanks* (*King Edward the First*) (Q 1593) MSR 1911; Henry Porter, *The Two Angry Women of Abingdon* (Q 1599) MSR 1912; Samuel Rowley, *When You See Me, You Know Me* (Q 1605) MSR 1952.

For centuries now we have revelled in Shakespeare's plays because we have them in print and can linger on their wonderful use of language. In playhouses his theatrical brilliance has been deployed to more variable effect, although in recent years a more generous acknowledgement of his genius in playmaking comparable to his genius with language has grown in public awareness. Theatrical brilliance is of course less easily registered than verbal genius because it is far more difficult to put on record. This difficulty puts the company opposite to Shakespeare's at an even greater disadvantage, because their skills were in theatre and their surviving play-texts reward close study on paper much less readily. The evidence set out in this book argues that for the six years while they partnered the Shakespeare company in sharing the monopoly of playing for Londoners they proved more inventive in exploiting the resource the new duopoly gave them. By their nature such skills are not easily reproducible, for reasons set out in the second chapter here. But the fact that the story of the Admiral's Men is on record in far more detail than that of their opposites means that it repays careful scrutiny as the mirror to the other great theatrical success story of those fertile years.

A broad mosaic of tangible if fragmentary evidence survives in the Rose's financial and repertory records from those first hectic years. Even more tangibly, the Admiral's company was lodged in the only one of the ten open-air amphitheatres built through that key period that survives today in an almost complete set of foundations and a mass of associated remains. The third of these great escapes from the usual processes that destroy historical records is the builder's contract for the company's second playhouse, the Fortune. Putting the three together gives us more substantial evidence about the Admiral's Men and their two main theatre venues than for any other company or playhouse of that unique theatrical era.

Yet for all the wealth of shadowy presences and the crowds of nameless participants in the theatre of the Shakespeare period there is a real danger of making overconfident deductions from the fragments of evidence. It is dangerous because such plentiful pieces of the mosaic tempt us into making tenuous connections that we would like to be stronger than they really are. The first comment ever made about the earlier Admiral's company to which Marlowe sold his *Tamburlaines*, an anecdote in a letter by Philip Gawdy, illustrates the dangers of connecting these riches too tightly.

Gawdy, born in 1562, was a younger son of Norfolk gentry with little income and no prospect of ready employment. Ostensibly a law student at Clifford's Inn, he mostly hung around the court. At the age of 29, in 1591,

he ventured out to sea. His ship was the soon-to-be-famous *Revenge*, commanded by Sir Richard Grenville. He was on it in the Azores when they confronted a Spanish battle fleet of fifteen warships sent out to safeguard the treasure ships from South America that were bringing home their annual delivery of bullion which the English fleet was after. The English ships were too far away to help the *Revenge*, which was captured after a ferocious battle, patriotically celebrated by Tennyson in his famous ballad.[6] Grenville was wounded and taken prisoner along with sixty other English seafarers including Gawdy. While they waited to be ransomed, they were imprisoned in Lisbon Castle. Gawdy was one of the last to be released because his captors overestimated his social status and his financial backing. One of his letters to his elder brother sent from Lisbon on 9 February 1592 begins, understandably in the circumstances, by proclaiming his low social status and his lack of resources. He was released that autumn in exchange for a Spanish prisoner at a cost to his brother of £200.

The letter that concerns us, however, was written some years before his seafaring misadventure, on 16 November 1587. Addressed to his father in Norfolk, it is full of cheerful chat about his current activities in London. One of his stories is about a disaster that struck the first company of Admiral's Men while they were performing at a suburban playhouse:

> My L. Admyrall his men and players having a devyse in ther playe to tye one of their fellows to a poste and so to shoote him to deathe, having borrowed their callyvers one of the players handes swerved his peece being charged with bullet missed the fellowe he aymed at and killed a child, and a woman great with child forthwith, and hurt an other man in the head very soore.[7]

In 2002, Charles Edelman, a leading expert on Elizabethan military technology, pointed out that calivers, long-barrelled muzzle-loading firearms, were unlikely for the sake of the actors to have been loaded with bullets, and the players could not have used blanks, which did not then exist. So the caliver that killed the young playgoers must have had gunpowder in its chamber to make the noise of a shot, but only wadding should have been fired from the barrel. Citing similar precedents, Edelman argued that the projectile doing the damage must have been the broken-off tip of a scouring rod.[8] Prompted by this explanation, Julian Bowsher, the

[6] 'At Flores in the Azores Sir Richard Grenville lay . . .' *The Revenge. A Ballad of the Fleet*, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, Longman, London, 1969, pp. 1241–45.
[7] I. H. Jeayes, ed. *The Letters of Philip Gawdy*, London, 1906, p. 23; BL MS Egerton 2804, fo. 35.
[8] Charles Edelman, '"Shoot at him all at once": Gunfire at the Playhouse, 1587', *Theatre Notebook* 57 (2003), 78–81.

Figure 1. A caliver being scoured, an engraving from Jacob de Gheyn, *The Exercise of Armes*, 1608. It accompanies the order 'Draw your skowringe-stick out of your Musket'.

archaeologist, then engaged in cataloguing the 40,000 fragmentary remains dug up at the Rose site in 1989, was able to identify an obscure piece of bent iron found in the Rose's yard as the broken tip of a scouring rod.[9] Gawdy's fatal engine appeared to be identified.

Gawdy's anecdote is seductive, drawing us into the temptation such fragments can engender when we try to connect one piece of evidence with another. His account is thought to refer to a performance of the second *Tamburlaine*, published in 1590 as an Admiral's company play. In the first scene of its final act, Tamburlaine's soldiers shoot at the captured

[9] See Julian M. C. Bowsher, and Patricia Miller, *The Rose and the Globe – Playhouses of Tudor Bankside, Southwark: Excavations 1988–1991*, Museum of London, London, 2009.

Governor of Babylon while he hangs from the city walls. Edelman's conjecture offers seeming proof that both *Tamburlaines* were on stage by late 1587, and that they were first staged at the Rose, built in that year. Thus it seems that the first Admiral's Men, with Edward Alleyn starring as Tamburlaine, were performing there more than four years before Philip Henslowe started his famous *Diary* in 1592.

It is regrettably not such a firm connection. The *Diary* records day by day all the performances by Strange's Men with Alleyn as their leader from February 1592, and yet *Tamburlaine* gets no mention until August 1594. Gawdy specified the company involved in the incident but not the playhouse. Partly on the evidence of an assertion by Thomas Middleton in 1603 about *Faustus*, that a character 'had a head of hayre like one of my Divells in Doctor Faustus, when the olde Theater crackt and frighted the Audience',[10] it is now thought that the chief playing-place in London of the early Admiral's Men when they first staged *Tamburlaine* and *Faustus* was not the Rose but the Theatre. Middleton may or may not be right in naming the location for his *Faustus* anecdote. He was too young to recall anything but a legend from the 1580s, so the Admiral's company really might have been at the newly built first Rose rather than the bigger Theatre. But it must be conceded that nothing tangible connects *2 Tamburlaine* with the early Rose. The small piece of curved iron found in the Rose's yard is not necessarily the murderous fragment figuring in Gawdy's tale and Edelman's deduction. We have to treat this cross-connection of the fragmentary pieces of evidence as no more than a seductive possibility. Early English theatre and everything to do with Shakespeare even when he is only an opposite is full of such temptations.

This book tries to be the biography of a company, telling how it came into being, followed by its long and distinguished career of thirty-two years until the great plague epidemic of 1625–26 forced its closure. As a biography it ought to treat the team of players which is its subject in the singular, a collective, as teams are sometimes thought to be. But the endeavours of the many individuals who worked for it demands use of the plural, so from here on the company will be 'they' or 'them'. After a summary history and an account of some features of their repertory that contrasts in striking ways with the more familiar Shakespearean one it will

[10] T. M., *The Black Booke*, Middleton, *The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 209. I hope that at least through this book readers will pronounce the Marlowe hero's name as Henslowe did, 'fostes', or 'forstus', and not with the German pronunciation immortalised much later by Goethe.