

PROFESSIONAL PLAYERS IN THE GUILD HALL, STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, 1568–1597

J. R. MULRYNE

The following article summarizes professional theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in the years from 1568 to 1597, a period when payments for more than thirty visits to the town by travelling companies are recorded in the *Minutes and Accounts of the Corporation of Stratford-Upon-Avon*.¹ Stratford was, in the years in question, a fairly average Midlands town with a population of 1500–2000. It may therefore stand for any number of towns visited by travelling companies, an aspect of England's theatre culture being progressively revealed by volumes in the *Records of Early English Drama* series. The present discussion is indebted to the generosity of Alan Somerset, editor of the forthcoming Warwickshire volume, who has allowed me to quote from his unpublished work. I am also much indebted to Sally-Beth MacLean, whose remarkable *The Queen's Men and their Plays*, written with the late Scott McMillin, has set a scholarly standard for everyone working in the field. Published studies by Andrew Gurr and Siobhan Keenan have made my own immeasurably more modest enquiries possible. Research by Edgar I. Fripp, J. O. Halliwell, Richard Savage, Levi Fox and John Tucker Murray, sometimes neglected by today's scholars, has been called on, as well as recent historical and sociological studies by Robert Bearman and others. I am grateful to Margaret Shewring for scholarly and practical help.²

The immediate stimulus for writing lies with archaeological and historical research on the Stratford Guild Hall by Jonathan Clark and Kate Giles of the University of York.³ Clark and Giles's study has considerably altered our understanding of the Guild

Hall's history and fabric, and several conclusions below depend on their work. The Hall, now part of King Edward VI School, is the almost certain location for performances by visiting players, when these were authorized and paid for by the Stratford Corporation.⁴ Guild Halls, Moot Halls and

¹ *Minutes and Accounts of the Corporation of Stratford-Upon-Avon, 1553–1620 and other records*, 5 vols., vols. 1–4 transcribed by Richard Savage, with Introduction and Notes by Edgar I. Fripp (London, 1921–1929), vol. 5 edited and introduced by Levi Fox (Stratford-upon-Avon: The Dugdale Society, 1990). The manuscripts on which the volumes are based are held, mainly, in the archives of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Manuscript entries referring to visits by travelling players have been checked and where necessary corrected by Professor Alan Somerset, editor of the forthcoming *REED* volume on Warwickshire, and, for the purposes of this article, by myself.

² See Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and their Plays* (Cambridge, 1998); Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford, 1996); Siobhan Keenan, *Travelling Players in Shakespeare's England* (Basingstoke, 2002); Edgar I. Fripp, Introductions to *Minutes and Accounts* (see note 1); James O. Halliwell, *The Minute Book of Stratford Corporation* (London, 1863); John Tucker Murray, *English Dramatic Companies 1558–1642* (London, 1910). See also Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford, 1998); Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare For All Time* (London, 2002); Alan Somerset, "'How Chances it they Travel?': Provincial Touring, Playing Places and the King's Men', in Stanley Wells, ed., *Shakespeare Survey 47* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 45–60; G. E. Bentley, *The Professions of Dramatist and Player in Shakespeare's Time, 1590–1642* (Princeton, NJ, 1986).

³ The work, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, has resulted in the compiling of a detailed but unpublished report, from which I have drawn many of the details mentioned here in connection with the fabric of the Guild Hall.

⁴ Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, p. 39, writes that 'from 1559 plays had either to be licensed directly by the

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Common Halls were the usual location country-wide for such performances, and there is no reason to doubt that the same location was employed in Stratford. I have speculated below on one possible setting – the town's inns – for performances other than those presented before the Bailiff and members of the Corporation. Innkeepers did not compile permanent records, and no legal action took place in Stratford with reference to an inn-based performance, as happened, for example, at Norwich.⁵ My focus remains, therefore, on the Guild Hall and the professional theatre mounted there.

It is perhaps surprising that, while the main outlines are well known, detailed work on this setting has not been published hitherto, given that the Hall provided the schoolroom in which William Shakespeare was educated and, more than likely, in which he first saw professional theatre. His presence in Stratford for part or even the whole of the period 1568–97 remains a subject for debate, and this is not the place to enter that fray. But a more exact understanding of the conditions under which the playwright saw, or may well have seen, professional companies in performance may throw light on his concept of theatre as he prepared to travel to London and join the players. At the least, the records offer a useful survey of a typical Stratford resident's opportunities to experience professional and London theatre. Only groupies, one assumes, would travel to Coventry, Leicester or Gloucester to see the professionals, and only the elite and moneyed made business trips to London, allowing them to take in a theatre visit there.

Drawing on existing research, this study also attempts, in a necessarily limited and speculative way, to map visiting theatre on to the micro-history of Stratford during the period, so far as this can be reconstructed from surviving documents, asking whether bumper and lean years for visiting theatre can be attributed to events in the town, and whether cultural and religious change over the period can be discerned through the partial, and perhaps arbitrary, prism of travelling theatre. There has been considerable discussion, by Patrick Collinson among others, of the extent of puritan influence on the town's corporate life during the

last third of the century.⁶ The interaction of this religious climate with visiting performance, and more particularly with its cessation, may tell us something, however narrowly focused, about the relationship between theatre and the confessional upheavals of the period. A glance at local events, particularly the more technicolour happenings of pestilence, storm and fire, may also lead to some partial conclusions, and may at the least remind us that theatre, including visiting theatre, takes place not in a vacuum but in the context of society.

The Stratford Corporation's *Minutes and Accounts*, so far as they relate to travelling theatre, have been newly read and checked by Alan Somerset and myself. The occasions on which travelling players visited the town are listed in Appendix 2 below, together with the companies' names and the monetary reward each was given. The old-spelling orthography of *Minutes and Accounts* has been retained, but for ease of reference the lay-out has been simplified by omission and boldening. We cannot be sure the accounts document every professional visit but, given the fairly rigorous – and

mayor, or seen in performance by the whole corporation' and cites instances in Bristol and York where the Common Hall or Guild Hall is specifically named. Keenan, p. 24, indicates that while the official performance 'might be staged within the mayor's house . . . the more usual venue for civic-funded performances appears to have been the town hall or its equivalent' – in Stratford's case the Guild Hall. See also *REED Devon*, ed. John Wasson (Toronto, 1986), pp. xxv–xxvi, where a distinction is drawn between the preferred playing place of amateurs (the parish church) and that of professionals (the Guild Hall). King Edward VI School is in the process of restoring the Guild Hall with funds provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and is seeking support to make it possible to open the Hall to public access.

⁵ See *REED Norwich 1540–1642*, ed. David Galloway (Toronto, 1984), and Keenan, *Travelling Players*, esp. pp. 99–106.

⁶ For authoritative studies of radical Protestantism in England, see Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: the Church and English Society 1559–1625* (Oxford, 1996) and *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* (London, 1988). For a closer focus on Stratford, see Robert Bearman, ed., *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196–1996*, especially the essays by Robert Bearman, Christopher Dyer, Christine Carpenter, Alan Dyer and Ann Hughes.

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tightening – official control of travelling theatre, it is probable that all performances taking place before the Bailiff and members of the Corporation – taking place, that is, so far as we know, in the Stratford Guild Hall – are mentioned.

To examine the chronological record of visiting companies, it may be best to start at the end – the end, that is, of civic-authorized playing in the Guild buildings. The Borough Council Minute Book for 1593–1628 records a meeting of the Council held on 17 December 1602, at which a decision was taken to permit no further play-performances in (to quote) ‘the Chamber the guild hall nor in any p[ar]te of the howsse or Courte’. The full minute is reprinted in Appendix 1. I shall return to the details of the phrasing later. For the moment, we may note that the minute does not specifically ban *all* professional playing in the town, only performances taking place under the Council’s auspices (though strictly speaking an outright ban should be the effect, since no playing was permitted without the authorisation of the Bailiff and civic authorities). The fine of a considerable, though not crippling, ten shillings will be levied, we are told, on ‘whosoeuer of the Baylief Alderman & Burgesses’ should give leave for future playing in the civic buildings – an act, it implied, of civic irresponsibility.

An altogether saltier Minute was written for a subsequent Council meeting held on 2 February 1612. This reveals that the earlier decision had not achieved the desired effect, or not without exception (see Appendix 1 for the full text). Referring to plays, it says, ‘The sufferance of them is againste the orders hearetofore made’, which can only mean that, despite the ban, plays have continued to be performed in the Guild buildings. No payments are recorded in the Council’s accounts – presumably none was made, at any rate by town officials. Perhaps the Council is simply reaffirming, ten years after its first enunciation, a socio-moral principle: that plays are not appropriate to the decorum and dignity of the town’s civic buildings. Robert Tittler shows in his *Architecture and Power: The Town Hall and the English Urban Community* (Oxford, 1991) that such a stance was becoming widely

shared across the country in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The revised imposition in this Minute of a fine of ten *pounds* – that really is crippling – suggests that the meeting it records was characterized by something approaching righteous indignation. Use of the nice word ‘inconvenience’ – ‘the *inconuenience* of plaies’ as the Minute puts it – tends to confirm this. Among obsolete, but then current, meanings the *OED* offers ‘impropriety’ and ‘unfitness’, citing for the latter the antiquary John Hooker (1600): ‘They plead against the inconvenience not the unlawfulness of popish apparel.’ The present context alleges both impropriety and unlawfulness (because the earlier ruling had been defied). We can detect, perhaps, beneath the phrasing, an earnest discussion of the ‘impropriety’ of plays, as though local pressure was being exerted to sway Council members’ minds. The matter was, in the words of the Minute, ‘verie seriously considered of’. The whopping twenty-fold increase in the fine reads like a self-righteous gesture meant to impress. The rather limp tailing-off that follows may be equally revealing: the order will stay in effect ‘vntill the nexte common councill’ (only weeks or at most months away) or until it is then revoked – a less than confident forecast. The full minute reads as though there may have been moderating or opposing voices present – which would line up with inferences below about the religio-cultural climate of the early seventeenth century town.

It may be illuminating to diverge from Stratford for a moment. Other towns and cities also issued banning orders about this time. Chester, for example, issued a ban in 1596, one of the earlier prohibitions on record. The really gutsy order comes later, however, in the Chester Assembly Book for 20 October 1615 (Appendix 1). The City, it says, has incurred ‘Common Brute and Scandall’ through permitting ‘Stage Plaiers to Acte their obscene and vnlawfull Plaies or tragedies in the Common Hall of this Citie’ – standard rhetoric, this, from the lexicon of the anti-theatrical writers. A little less derived is the indignation arising from the alleged perverted use of the civic buildings. The Common Hall, we are told, has been desecrated by

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being turned into 'a Stage for Plaiers and a Receptacle for idle persons', whereas it was 'ordained for the Iudicial hearing and determininge of Criminnall offences and for the solempne meetinge and Concourse of this howse'. Such sentiments speak to a relatively new sense of civic dignity and order, as much as to sectarian prejudice. A regard for commercial profit also (unsurprisingly) rears its head: the apprentices 'manie times wastfullie spende their Masters goodes' by attending play performances. What is interesting, further, is that the order concludes not in a universal ban but in a ban on playing, in the Common Hall or elsewhere, 'in the night time or after vje of the Clocke in the eveninge', a restraint not unique to Chester. Admittedly, the expression is ambiguous: a total ban on playing in the Common Hall may be intended. But it looks as if the wretched minute-taker is trying to summarize a lively meeting at which various factions weighed in with their particular stances, without the meeting reaching a coherent outcome. This reflects poor chairmanship, perhaps, but is also characteristic, in my reading, of the complex attitudes to playing obtaining at the time, even in areas of the country known for radical sectarianism.

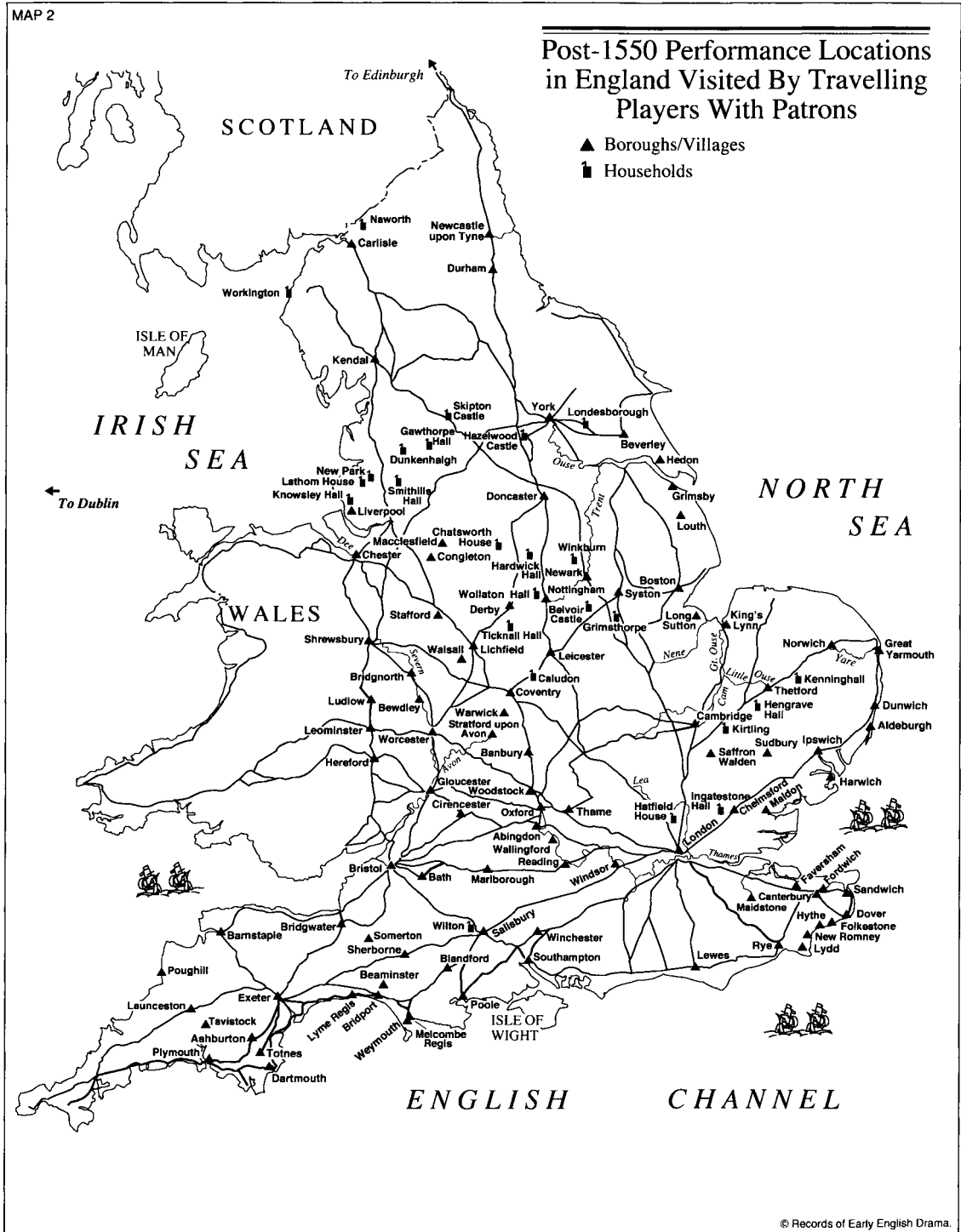
The list of pre-ban visits to Stratford by professional companies (Appendix 2) offers the opportunity for a number of inferences about playing and its context in the later sixteenth century. There were more visits, first of all, than one might expect for a small market town in the midst of Warwickshire. The town authorities paid for thirty-one visits over the period, twenty-five of them by named companies. In the years we are looking at, England was a network of touring routes, as the maps in Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean's invaluable *The Queen's Men and their Plays* graphically illustrate (illustrations 1 and 2). Stratford lay close to the hub of a communications network that linked the important provincial centres of Leicester and Coventry to the north with Banbury and Oxford to the south and Gloucester and Bristol to the southwest. The town-to-town itineraries described in the REED volumes, and detailed also by J. Tucker Murray, Andrew Gurr and, in a less complete form, by E. K. Chambers, show these routes to have been

habitual for the Stratford visitors. The small deviation from the main inter-urban roads necessary to allow the companies to play Warwick and/or Stratford may have been occasioned, we might guess, by the political importance of the former, the seat of the powerful Earls of Warwick. Coventry, less than twenty miles away, was a major city and a major touring centre, the axis of a Midlands network of tour destinations that was among the busiest in the country. In an obvious sense, therefore, Stratford was well placed to play host to professional touring theatre.

A second glance at the list indicates that the visiting companies were in no way marginal to mainstream theatre. On the contrary, these were major players, in every sense of the word. Leicester's Men came early (in 1573–4 and 1576–7) and stayed late – they were in Stratford in 1587, on the brink of the company's dissolution (their patron Leicester died in 1588). When they first visited the town (1573–4) the company was the most celebrated in the land, dominating the court seasons of 1572–3 and 1573–4, during which they gave six of the nine royal command performances.⁷ About their patron Leicester's own eminence, there cannot, notoriously, be any argument. Favourite of Elizabeth, 'practically', in Simon Adams's recent phrase, 'a surrogate husband',⁸ protector of advanced Protestantism, absolute governor, towards the end of his life, of the United Provinces, Leicester exercised from court and from his seat at Kenilworth – even closer than Coventry, a dozen miles down the road from Stratford – an extraordinary influence. Through Elizabeth's generosity, Leicester and his brother Ambrose, Earl of Warwick, became 'the leading landed interest in the west Midlands and north Wales', ensuring a respectful reception for their servants when they chose to visit the Midlands

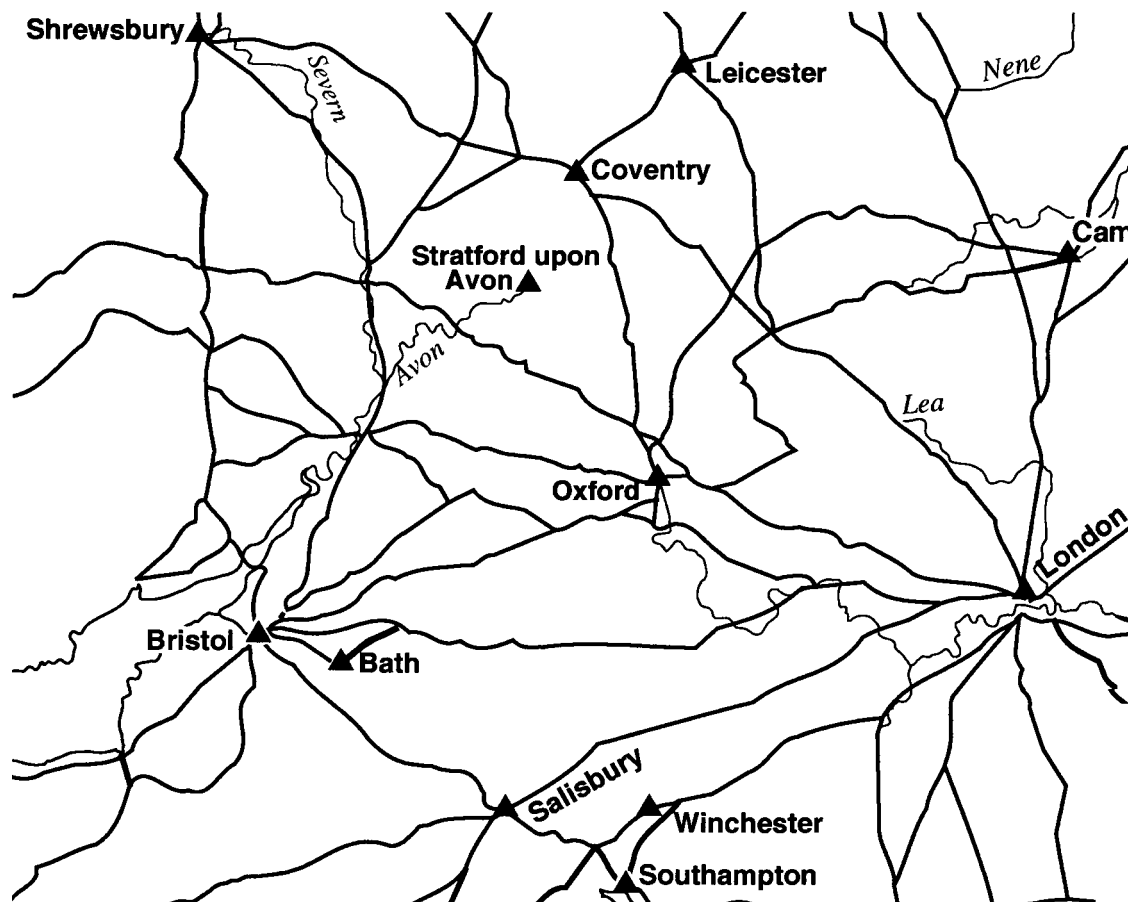
⁷ See E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford, 1923, 1951), vol. II, pp. 85–91, and Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, pp. 185–95, esp. pp. 187–8.

⁸ Simon Adams, 'Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, online edn, May 2006).



1. Post-1550 locations and routes for travelling professional performers in England.

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2. Detail from illustration 1, showing the area immediately around Stratford-upon-Avon, with tour routes to local towns.

town of Stratford. (Warwick's players also came, at the zenith of their court career, in 1574–5.) Whether Leicester's patronage of a theatre company was motivated by political or religio-political considerations, and whether his Men disseminated his opinions and supported his cause on their days in Stratford, it is hard to tell. Richard Dutton has recently written that patronage 'involved a genuine relationship with a patron, whose public face in important ways the actors were',⁹ but just what this particular patron stood for, especially in relation to his protection of the puritan faction and his simultaneous maintenance of a theatre company, is not crystal clear. Eleanor Rosenberg highlights

the paradox of the Earl's position when she reports a letter to Leicester from the anti-Catholic propagandist John Field exhorting him to avoid aiding the players 'to the greate greif of all the Godly'. The rift between Leicester's aristocratic leaning towards display, including the patronage of a theatre company, and his espousal of puritan values was apparent to his contemporaries, it seems, especially those of a Calvinist bent. What is beyond dispute is that up to 1583, in McMillin and MacLean's words,

⁹ Richard Dutton, 'Shakespearian Origins', in Takashi Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne, eds., *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 69–84, p. 75.

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'Leicester's Men were by far the most widely travelled, the most knowledgeable professionals on the road.'¹⁰ And, as MacLean points out elsewhere,¹¹ Leicester was prepared to spend the considerable sum of £20 kitting out his players in expensive silks, satins and taffetas for court performance. They must have seemed to him worth the investment. In Stratford they may have made, in consequence, something of a splash, though we know almost nothing about players' costuming on tour.

The Queen's Men in effect took over from Leicester's. Formed in 1583 through the agency of Secretary Walsingham, with the advice of Master of the Revels Edmund Tilney – who knew the theatre scene in England better than anyone – they swept up the country's most talented actors, including three of Leicester's Men.¹² Whether their formation could be called political is arguable, though it is true that almost nothing Walsingham did was non-political. There are grounds for supposing that in the unsteady 1580s the Queen's advisers felt that theatre-touring in her livery would assist the further integration of the realm, an endeavour parallel to her assiduous distribution of her image by other means.¹³ Whether it was in that spirit or not, the 'new' Queen's Men came three times to Stratford, in 1587, 1593 and 1594, the only professional players to do so in the latter two years. The Queen's company was high-profile, being repeatedly awarded coveted slots in the entertainment programme at court: three performances in 1583–4 and five commissioned (four given) in the following year – shortly before their first Stratford visit. It has been suggested by McMillin and MacLean, on evidence from Shakespeare's re-writing of Queen's Men plays, that the actor-playwright travelled to London and joined the celebrated Queen's company after seeing their performances in Stratford.¹⁴ This is debatable territory, and only one of several hypotheses relating to Shakespeare's early career. Nevertheless, the possibility raised by McMillin and MacLean serves to underline the potential significance of professional theatre in the Stratford of Shakespeare's day.¹⁵

The most frequent visitors were the Earl of Worcester's players, a company somewhat different

in background, and probably in esteem, from Leicester's Men or the Queen's. Worcester's Men came five times to town between 1568 and 1583–4. They were a wholly provincial company, specializing in the Midlands circuit, in contrast to the two companies just mentioned, both of which toured nation-wide and were based in London. The company patron, William Somerset, third Earl of Worcester, was an altogether less prominent nobleman than Leicester or Warwick, or than those of Privy Council status associated with the Queen's Men. His son Edward the fourth Earl, became a more notable figure, sharing responsibility under James for mounting spectacular court masques. The Stratford visitors, we may easily infer, offered entertainment a good deal less remarkable than that afforded by Leicester's or the Queen's companies. This suggests a mixed theatre economy for the town, with standards of performance varying from year to year – except that, in the increasingly regulated and restrictive theatre profession of the later sixteenth century, the standard of performance, judging from the personnel involved, and the limited number of companies, may never

¹⁰ McMillin and MacLean, *The Queen's Men*, p. 21; Eleanor Rosenberg, *Leicester, Patron of Letters* (New York, 1955), p. 255. Field made his views plain in the same letter, dated 25 November, 1581, referring to 'those impure enterludes and playes that were in vse. Surely the schooles of as greate wickednesses as can be.'

¹¹ 'Tracking Leicester's Men: The Patronage of a Performing Troupe', in Paul Whitfield White and Suzanne R. Westfall, *Shakespeare and Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 246–71, p. 260.

¹² For information on the Queen's Men see Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, II, 104–15; Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, pp. 196–217; McMillin and MacLean, *The Queen's Men*, *passim*.

¹³ See, for example, Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (London, 1977), *passim*.

¹⁴ McMillin and MacLean, *The Queen's Men*, pp. 160–6.

¹⁵ The company of 'Queenes Players' mentioned at the head of the list of visitors (1568–9) is an altogether more obscure group, a purely provincial company whose status Gurr is inclined to question, even wondering whether it was a theatre company in the accepted sense, or a group of tumblers. See Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, p. 196.

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have dropped seriously low.¹⁶ The repeated visits of Worcester's Men also suggests an element of habit, or even customary booking, in the structure of sixteenth-century touring.

Some conclusions may be drawn from the town's payments to the named visitors. A pattern emerges, if rather uncertainly. One unambiguous feature stands out. The highest reward – twenty shillings, consistently – is given to the 1583 Queen's Players, suggesting a correlation between the patron's political status and the level of payment offered. To some extent this is followed through, but not without exception. The Earl of Leicester's Men, to take the most obvious example, received a considerable sum, fifteen shillings, in 1576–7, echoing their patron's standing, but only three years earlier had received no more than five shillings and eight pence. In 1587, the same Company's reward falls back from its peak of fifteen to no more than ten shillings. Perhaps this lower sum is influenced by Leicester's mixed fortunes in the Netherlands (1586–7). In the case of the visit of 1576–7, the reward may have been boosted, in contrast, by the acclaim surrounding his staging of a series of spectacular royal entertainments at Kenilworth from 1566 on, climaxing in 1575. The Stratford Borough officials may have been influenced in their relative generosity by the fame of the theatricals just a few miles down the road. The town was getting reflected glory, they may have reasoned, as a result of hosting a company associated with such splendour – a company that may have brought some of the splendour with them, not only in their liveries, but also in their stage costumes and properties. On the larger platform provided by the city of Coventry, Leicester's Men received thirty shillings in 1580 and twenty shillings in 1582, rewards fit for a Queen's Company in smaller Stratford. Rank and file visitors to the town, or rather companies with rank and file patrons (though never less than noble) are good in the Stratford accounts for three, four and five shillings, as indeed such companies are at Coventry, if we transfer the Stratford earnings to a big-city scale: the parallel Coventry payments did not normally rise above ten shillings.¹⁷ Social and political status seems, therefore, to play

a part in the calculation of rewards, even if these are sometimes affected by temporary fluctuations of esteem. A similar pattern of political privilege is replicated in other towns, where the Queen's Men are routinely given the highest sums, not infrequently well above, even double, the Stratford payment.

What looks like an anomaly in the Stratford accounts, the seventeen shillings paid, as early as 1574–5, to 'my lord of warwicke players' tends on the contrary to confirm the payment-by-patronage hypothesis, since, in Christine Carpenter's words, 'the earls [of Warwick] were territorially and politically . . . dominant around Stratford' in the fifteenth century and after. Ambrose Dudley, the current Earl, was restored to favour by 1573 (a year or so before his company's Stratford visit) despite, in 1554, a charge of treason arising from his assistance with the royal ambitions of Lady Jane Grey.¹⁸ The local influence of a company's patron, that is to say, may have affected the level of payment. It is difficult to know, it must be conceded, whether features other than the patron's prestige played a part in calculating rewards, for example how elaborate a show was, or how large the playing company or (in the case of 1587, when the payment to Leicester's company fell) the number of visiting companies paid for by the town authorities during a busy year.

Further analysis of the visitors' list, coupled with information from other studies, will help to reveal the membership of the visiting companies. Borough officials did not think it worth recording the names of actors, a lack of interest shared by other

¹⁶ The regulations on patronage of companies had the effect, even if sometimes flouted or circumvented, of ensuring that a relatively restricted number of companies were in existence to be received by town officials as part of the officially-sanctioned touring network, thus broadly maintaining standards.

¹⁷ For payments in Coventry see *REED Coventry*, ed. R. W. Ingram (Toronto, 1981).

¹⁸ Christine Carpenter, 'Town and "Country": the Stratford Guild and Political Networks of Fifteenth-century Warwickshire', in Bearman, *The History of an English Borough*, pp. 62–79, p. 68; Patrick Collinson, 'Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

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towns – except, for example, in the rare instance when a legal hearing took place. Appendix 3 gives information, from sources such as Chambers, Murray and Gurr, about the three companies discussed above. What this shows – to summarize – is that Stratford audiences had access to performances by some of the leading names in contemporary theatre. The touring companies that came to Stratford may have differed from the touring companies of the same name that visited elsewhere. We have no means of knowing. But it seems probable that Edward Alleyn, the most celebrated actor of his day, came to Stratford with Worcester's Men in 1583–4. This was, admittedly, at the age of seventeen or eighteen, before the triumphs of his later career. James Burbage, theatrical entrepreneur, actor and irascible leader of men, was one of the Earl of Leicester's company in 1572, 1574 and 1576 and probably came to Stratford with them in 1573–4 and perhaps in 1576–7. The famous comic actor Richard Tarlton, a founder-member of the Queen's Men in 1583 who remained with the company until his death in 1588, probably played Stratford in 1587. Given the complex history of the Queen's Men and the company's split in 1587–8 (Gurr says 'by 1590'),¹⁹ we cannot, however, be sure. These are names to conjure with. There were others only a little less high-profile who visited, especially when the star-studded Queen's company became almost regulars after 1587. In brief, experience of theatre in Stratford seems likely to have measured up with the best in the land, so far as casting was concerned, even if shows of high calibre were less regularly available than in London.

Increasing evidence exists that touring theatre far exceeded in scale the four or five men, a cart and a drum of popular caricature.²⁰ This is apparent from documents relevant to the three visiting companies considered above. In 1577, the Earl of Worcester's Men had ten players at Southampton and the same number at Norwich and Leicester in 1583/4. They visited Stratford in 1576–7, presumably with a similarly numerous company as on the Southampton visit of the same year. The Earl of Leicester's Men comprised twelve players at Southampton in

1577, and took in Stratford on the same tour. The Queen's Men were formed with twelve players in 1583 and were in Stratford in 1587 before, so far as we can tell, the company split. These are viable numbers for the performance of even elaborate plays. Whether companies also recruited locally for minor parts and backstage assistance it is hard to say. There is, to my knowledge, no reliable information. In any case, nothing suggests that plays were scaled down from their London performances when they came to Stratford, or were under-cast. The evidence in fact tends to the contrary.²¹

One minor feature of the list of visitors suggests what is apparently the case: that Stratford had a particular talent for attracting the more robust companies at their more robust moments. The 1587 entry records payment 'for mending of a forme that was broken by the queenes players xvj d.', a token of the risk to civic property that hosting theatre entailed. Robert Tittler notes that records of damage are widespread, at Bath, York, Bristol, Leicester and Canterbury, and speculates that the decline in – and bans on – Guild Hall performances after 1590 may have been connected with defensive local pride in increasingly elaborate civic buildings.²² However that may be, Stratford's visitors are connected with some of the more spectacular run-ins with authorities elsewhere, just at the time they visited the town. In 1583–4, the Earl of Worcester's Players got into hot water with the Mayors of both Norwich and Leicester, accused of defying their official authority. They were in Stratford during the same accounting year. The Queen's Men, right at the start of their illustrious career (June 1584), precipitated the most notorious theatrical incident of the period when three of their leading actors, Tarlton, Singer and

¹⁹ Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, p. 71.

²⁰ See, for example, Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, pp. 42–3, and David Bradley, *From Text to Performance in the Elizabethan Theatre* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 58–74.

²¹ The figures for company numbers given in this paragraph are taken from Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, and Murray, *English Dramatic Companies*.

²² Robert Tittler, *Architecture and Power: the Town Hall and the English Urban Community* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 146–7.

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Bentley, stage-swords in hand, were involved in a brawl at Norwich that led to the death of an innocent local. They may have cooled off by the date of their visit to Stratford four years later, but the incident serves to suggest that at this period Stratford theatre was in all likelihood a full-blooded activity, as well as theatrically high level and relatively well-resourced.²³

It is inviting to attempt to map the list of theatre visits on to Stratford's local history. The discussion will, however, be short and, in the absence in a majority of cases of unequivocal evidence, more gesture than substance. The overall pattern of the century from 1540 countrywide was, to quote Alan Dyer, 'marked by rising social and economic stress caused by an expanding population and price inflation, coupled with rapid economic change'.²⁴ In Stratford, this pattern was particularly marked, and was exacerbated by local disasters such as famine, fire and epidemic. Bubonic plague struck in 1564 (Shakespeare's birth year), just before the period of theatre visits, when 13 per cent of the population died. Mortality from disease, probably typhus and dysentery, linked with malnutrition and crop-failure, peaked from November 1596 until the spring of 1597. Does the cessation of playing after 1597 have anything to do with the town's distressed state (there are no recorded visits after that year up until the ban on playing in 1602), or were the deaths, which occurred chiefly among the poor, irrelevant to hosting players? There may be a glimpse here of the select nature of Stratford audiences, though the evidence is too slight to support a conclusion. The town burned in 1594 and 1595, when, it was claimed, 'over 200 houses were destroyed' and total damage, including goods spoiled, was estimated at the huge sum of £12,000. Collections for the relief of the Stratford poor were taken in the neighbouring counties, in Oxford and in London.²⁵ Yet as many as six (unnamed) companies visited in 1596 and 1597, as if nothing of fiscal significance had happened. In all probability, the Queen's Men were not among them, since the rewards do not look Queen-sized. The reward of 19s 4d in 1596–7 is, however, anomalous for a sin-

gle, unnamed, company, so we cannot be sure. The likely absence of the Queen's Men may, it is true, be explained by the fact that by 1594 they were, in Gurr's words, 'ripe for reallocation'.²⁶ There is another possibly significant item in, or rather missing from, the visits list. Jeanne Jones's study of the Borough Chamberlain's accounts reveals that in the sixty years from 1570 to 1630 the accounts were in deficit on only twelve occasions, three of these being the years 1570, 1571 and 1572.²⁷ There are no records of players in the town in those years. Is there a correlation, due to the depletion of the treasury, between the deficit and the absence of visiting players? Overall, these scraps of information are intriguing, but, in the absence of more detailed documentary evidence, not easily woven into any local-history explanation for the irregular pattern of visits.

What, then, are we to make of the more obvious fact that Stratford was one of the earlier towns, a few years after Great Yarmouth in 1595 and Chester in 1596, to impose a ban on playing in the Guild or Common Hall? Historians are agreed that an accelerating trend towards Puritan attitudes made itself apparent in the town in the last years of the century. Jeanne Jones writes: 'the puritan faction within the [Stratford] Corporation became more powerful at the turn of the century. It began to

²³ For further information about the incidents mentioned, see Appendix 3.

²⁴ Alan Dyer, 'Crisis and Resolution: Government and Society in Stratford, 1540–1640', in Robert Bearman, *The History of an English Borough*, pp. 80–96, p. 80.

²⁵ Alan Dyer in Bearman, *The History of an English Borough*, p. 95; Levi Fox ed., *Minutes and Accounts* v, pp. xix and 133; *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Warwick* (London, 1945) III, pp. 221–82. Lewis Bayly, vicar in 1597 of Shipston-on-Stour, a few miles from Stratford, attributed the fire in his hugely popular *The Practice of Piety* (12 edns by 1620) to 'prophaning the Lords Sabbaths, and . . . contemning his word in the mouth of his faithfull Ministers', suggesting that the godly did not hold unrestricted sway in late sixteenth-century Stratford (quoted Fox, *Minutes and Accounts* v, p. xix).

²⁶ Gurr, *The Shakespearean Playing Companies*, p. 71.

²⁷ Jeanne Jones, *Family Life in Shakespeare's England: Stratford-upon-Avon 1570–1630* (Stroud, 1996), p. 124.