Introduction

In his Preface to *The Oxford Book of Work*, Keith Thomas notes the imbalance between the time and energy we expend on work and its comparatively meagre presence in literature: 'for all its centrality to human existence, work has never been a popular literary theme. By comparison with love or warfare, the business of getting a living has been relatively neglected by poets and novelists.' According to Thomas, classical ideas of aesthetic decorum meant that workers tended to be marginalised, ridiculed or, at best, idealised into pastoral, while popular literature has usually sought to carry readers away from their daily working lives. Furthermore, because work is 'a long, continuing process, rather than a discrete act', it is difficult to capture its essence within the formal confines of a literary text.[1]

On this basis, the treatment of work in the drama of Shakespeare's time ought to be an unpromising subject for a book. Admittedly, the principle of decorum was never wholeheartedly observed on the Renaissance stage, to the dismay of commentators such as Sir Philip Sidney, who lamented plays' 'mingling Kinges and Clownes'.[2] However, the English drama was evidently popular, speaking to a broader audience than any purely literary art was able to: according to one opponent of the theatre writing in 1582, the former playwright Stephen Gosson, 'the common people which resort to Theatres' consisted of 'Tailers, Tinkers, Cordwayners, Saylers, olde Men, yong Men, Women, Boyes, Girles, and such like'. Gosson went on to complain that on the stage 'those thinges are fained, that neuer were', and three decades later another dramatist, Ben Jonson, could similarly criticise the escapist character of English plays, 'wherein, now, the Concupiscence of Daunces, and Antickes so raigneth, as to runne away from Nature, and be afraid of her, is the onely point of art that tickles the *Spectators*' (*The Alchemist*, To the Reader, 5–8).[3] Apparently, the men and women of early modern England went to the theatre seeking something different from their everyday lives; indeed, the very word 'play'

implies that to speakers of English, there is something about drama that is fundamentally at odds with the workaday world. And to move on to Thomas's last point, the formal properties of a play, filling just 'the space of two houres and an halfe' by Jonson's estimate (*Bartholomew Fair*, Induction, 79), make it perhaps ill-equipped to convey the ongoing and repetitious character of work.

In fact, however, a Londoner who regularly visited the theatre around the beginning of the seventeenth century would have been able to view representations of work of many different kinds. At *The Shoemakers' Holiday* (1599), he or she could have watched some actors pretending to make shoes and another pretending to be a young woman working in a shop; characters in *Patient Grissil* (1600) weave baskets and carry logs. In *Thomas Lord Cromwell* (*c.* 1599–1602), the young Cromwell keeps his father's servants awake by studying out loud; the servants then distract him from his work with the noise of their hammers. *Hamlet* (1599–*c.* 1601) depicts a man digging a grave and allows him to speak about the practicalities of his trade: 'your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body' (V. 1. 171–2). The play also includes a theatrical performance by a fictitious troupe of professional actors. And, in an even more striking representation of the labour that goes into the making of art, *Satiromastix* (1601) includes a barely veiled parody of Ben Jonson at work on a poem that had been written by the real Ben Jonson:

> O me thy Priest inspire.
> For I to thee and thine immortall name,
> In – in – in golden tunes,
> For I to thee and thine immortall name –
> In – sacred raptures flowing, flowing, swimming, swimming:
> In sacred raptures swimming,
> Immortall name, game, dame, tame, lame, lame, lame,
> Pux, ha it, shame, proclaim, oh –
> In Sacred raptures flowing, will proclaime, not –
> O me thy Priest inspyre!
> For I to thee and thine immortall name,
> In flowing numbers fild with spright and flame,
> Good, good, in flowing numbers fild with spright & flame.
> (I. 2. 8–20)

The poem's claim to visionary inspiration is tellingly counterpointed by the play's depiction of the hesitations, false starts and authorial labour that have gone into its composition.

This book will argue that the drama of Shakespeare's time was actually very much concerned with the topic of work, for a number of reasons.

Some of these had to do with broader social and cultural developments of the period: as I argue in Chapter 1, while the dominant social theory of the Middle Ages had tended to assume that work was carried out only by one part of society, by the end of the sixteenth century it had become much more common for the idea of work to be invoked when describing the activities of a wide range of groups, from actors to the nobility. I ascribe this partly to demographic factors and the changing nature of England's economy but also to cultural changes such as the Protestant Reformation, with its stress on the idea of vocation, and to the concepts of civic service and statecraft that humanist writers derived from Classical texts. Then, in the final part of the chapter, I address some of the theoretical problems that surround any attempt to locate theatrical production in relation to such developments. How methodologically valid is it to relate early modern play texts to their supposed historical context, when our sense of that context is itself the product of other texts? And what sorts of relationship can be identified between the surrounding culture and the drama, which was not only shaped by wider cultural forces but was also a significant cultural force in its own right?

In Chapter 2, I go on to suggest that one important reason why broader developments and debates concerning work in early modern society came to be played out on stage was because of the drama's own problematic relationship with the idea of work. As the amateur religious drama of the Middle Ages gave way, albeit in irregular fashion and for a variety of reasons, to a more professionalised theatre whose plays, especially around London, were performed regularly and in purpose-built spaces, actors were increasingly accused of earning a living without labouring in a vocation. I examine the way this charge was made both in correspondence between London's civic authorities and the Privy Council and in printed works against the theatre from the 1570s onward. I then turn my attention to the public stage of the 1590s, identifying a number of plays that respond to this criticism by emphasising the industriousness and skill of professional actors.

In Chapter 3, I argue that during the early modern period the concept of work was inextricably linked to social status in that a gentleman was by definition someone who did not perform manual (or, it was often argued, commercial) work. However, while in the Middle Ages this social group had predominantly been conceptualised as *bellatores* or defenders of the realm, its changing social role, as well as the social and cultural changes referred to in Chapter 1, encouraged a redefinition of its activities in terms of work, a phenomenon whose effects are particularly evident in sermons,

religious commentary and the Book of Homilies. In the latter part of the chapter, I focus on Shakespeare's histories of the 1590s as the group of plays most obviously influenced by this new discourse; however, rather than passively echoing it, Shakespeare sets it up against other conceptions of nobility as a means of characterisation and in order to generate dramatic excitement. More complicatedly, in the two parts of *Henry IV* and in *Henry V*, Shakespeare presents Hal as an individual who artfully manipulates ideas of work and idleness in his creation of a public self, thereby suggesting that such ideas are shifting and contingent rather than immutable or universal.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the relationship between the London theatre at the beginning of the seventeenth century and these linked concepts of work and social status, arguing that it was both complex and conflicted. On the one hand, plays such as *The Shoemakers' Holiday* and *Julius Caesar* engaged with the question of whether manual workers should be present in theatre audiences, intervening in a broader debate within the City of London over servants' and apprentices' rights to free time. On the other hand, dramatists writing for the revived companies of child actors playing at St Paul's and the Blackfriars attempted to identify them with the social elite, and, to do so, they invoked the still-prevalent association of gentility with idleness, representing their playhouses as places from which workers were absent and stressing the amateurism of their actors. I compare *Hamlet* and *Patient Grissil* as very different responses to this strategy by dramatists writing for the adult companies; I then go on in Chapter 5 to consider whether the pattern established around 1600, whereby different playing companies positioned themselves in different ways in relation to the concepts of work and social status, is one that persisted during the first decade of the seventeenth century. I end by examining *Coriolanus*, suggesting that in the characterisation of its hero Shakespeare brings together contrasting discourses about work that I have associated with the adult and child companies respectively.

It will have become apparent from the above synopsis that, in this book, I treat the concept of work as a decidedly ambiguous one whose relationship with any given activity is far from stable. Acting is considered by some commentators to be work, by others not; gentlemen and nobles are represented as workers who serve the realm through non-manual labour, but the idea that to be a gentleman is to be idle remains widespread. It might be argued that these instances reflect particular moments of transition in the history of the theatre or of the English class system, but I would suggest that they also reflect the inherently problematic nature

of work as a concept: as Thomas observes, ' "Work" is harder to define than one might think'. If we define working as 'purposively expending energy', in Thomas's paraphrase of the entry in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, then this is to include strenuous recreations such as tennis; if we say that 'work is what we do in our paid employment', then this excludes slave labour. 'It seems odd ... to say that writers have ceased to work when they leave their word-processors and go to do some overdue digging in their gardens'.[4] This confusion is paralleled on the semantic level, where the word 'work' proves to be extremely broad in its range of applications. It comes from the old English *weorc* and has denoted an action 'involving effort or exertion directed to a definite end, esp. as a means of gaining one's livelihood; labour, toil; (one's) regular occupation or employment' (*OED* 'work', *sb.*, I. 4) since the ninth century: in Ælfric's Exodus, 20:9 (*c.* 1000), the Israelites are commanded, 'Wyrc six da[y]as ealle ðine weorc'. However, the *OED*'s more general definition, 'Something that is or was done; what a person does or did; an act, deed, proceeding, business' ('work', *sb.*, I. 1), is of similar antiquity: in his Homilies, I, 318, Ælfric writes, 'þæt weorc wæs begunnen on[y]ean Godes willan'. The verb is equally flexible: in Alfred's translation of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* (*c.* 888), XLI we are asked, 'Hwy sceall þonne æni[y] mon bion idel, ðæt he ne wyrce?' ('work', *v.*, II. 24), but in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, line 497, Chaucer's Parson gives this example to his flock: 'That firste he wroghte, and afterward that he taughte' ('work', *v.*, II. 21). In particular, the transitive verb means primarily 'To do, perform, practise' ('work', *v.*, I. 1): in *Beowulf*, line 930, Hrothgar says that God can 'wyrcan wunder æfter wundre'.[5] 'An Homilie against Idlenesse', one of the homilies added in 1563 to the Book of Homilies first printed under Edward VI, is an important example of how both noun and verb could be used in their narrower and in their more general senses during the Elizabethan period. It talks of 'labouring men, who bee at wages for their worke', but also tells us that 'we are commanded by *Iesus Sirach*, not to hate painefull workes'. St Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians responds to the news that among them 'there were certaine ... which did not worke', but 'the best time that the diuell can haue to worke his feate, is when men bee asleepe'.[6]

What is it that stops an activity from being just 'something that is or was done' and gives it the more specific status of work? Sociologists who have focused on work find it difficult to say, Richard Hall noting 'how slippery the concept of work is' and Keith Grint writing of the

'ambiguous nature of work' and 'the enigmatic essence of work'. The problem is that, as Grint points out, the 'difference between work and non-work seldom lies within the actual activity itself and more generally inheres in the social context that supports the activity': there is nothing inherent in digging a garden, to use Thomas's example, that makes it work rather than leisure. Rather, a task's status as work comes from the social context in which it is done, a fact that is implicitly acknowledged in Hall's tellingly circular definition: 'Work is the effort or activity of an individual that is undertaken for the purpose of providing goods or services of value to others and that is considered by the individual to be work.'[7] Ultimately, an activity is work because we consider it to be so.

This view of work as socially contingent, even socially constructed, is an important point of difference between my approach and that of Maurice Hunt in one of the few other book-length studies of work in the early modern drama that I know of, *Shakespeare's Labored Art: Stir, Work, and the Late Plays*. Hunt argues that 'Shakespeare's dramatization of labor in his late plays ultimately reflects the ambiguous, bifurcated attitudes of different segments of his culture': the early modern period inherited the medieval conception of work as a curse, but the Reformation precipitated a more positive view of work both as a sign of election, in the case of good works, and as having salutary, disciplining effects. In *Pericles* and *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare 'satirizes the sloth of certain (upper) Jacobean social classes' and shows how physical work 'proves redemptive for afflicted characters such as Pericles and Imogen'. In *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest* and *Henry VIII*, the working mind, often represented in terms of birth labour, 'take[s] precedence over physical labor'. Hunt describes Shakespeare's as a 'labored art', not only because it is 'an art recommending the virtues of work of all kinds, from physical labor to the work of the mind', but also because of its highly wrought, 'Mannerist' style.[8] As succeeding chapters will show, my own book shares with Hunt's an assumption that while an animus against labour was still in evidence in parts of the early modern social elite, the Reformation precipitated a change in attitudes towards work, particularly among the middling sort. However, I feel that Hunt may underestimate the extent to which a disdain for work continued to be prevalent even outside the aristocracy. The speaker of Sonnet 111 expresses a strong sense of its power to degrade ('my nature is subdu'd / To what it works in, like the dyer's hand'), while Shakespeare's own acquisition of a coat of arms for his father (and therefore himself) implies a more complex attitude towards the social elite than mere distaste at their idleness. More fundamentally, while Hunt

explores the social and intellectual contexts for Shakespeare's plays, he neglects to discuss their dramatic context – the fact that they were written for a medium that was inextricably implicated in contemporary debates over what constituted legitimate forms of work and recreation. Finally, I would question Hunt's assumption that there is a relatively unproblematic concept of work towards which one can gauge changing attitudes. Rather, I would argue that the whole notion of work is inherently unstable and that ideas of what work means, and what activities constitute work, vary greatly in different times and cultures.

An important example of how the status of a given practice as work or non-work is socially constructed rather than immutable is that of women's work. Even today, women's work inside the home tends to go unpaid, and to some extent unrecognised, while outside it, it remains more poorly paid than that of men.[9] During the early modern period, ideas about women's work often reflected the legal subordination of married women to their husbands. As Amy Louise Erickson summarises the situation:

> Under common law a woman's legal identity during marriage was eclipsed – literally covered – by her husband. As a 'feme covert', she could not contract, neither could she sue nor be sued independently of her husband ... The property a woman brought to marriage – her dowry or portion – all came under the immediate control of her husband.[10]

This subordination was reinforced by religious doctrine: in Ephesians 5:22, St Paul calls upon wives to 'submit your selues vnto your housbands, as vnto the Lord'.[11] The implications of this are evident in numerous books on marriage printed during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in the tradition established by Heinrich Bullinger's *Der Christlich Eestand* (1540), translated by Miles Coverdale in 1541. When the proper division of labour in the marital relationship is discussed, the work of wives, like their goods, is seen as their husbands' property; rather than working for herself, a wife is her husband's 'helper'.[12] As the author of *Covnsel to the Husband: To the Wife Instruction* (1608) puts it, the good wife 'laboureth in her place for her husbands quiet, for his health, for his credit, for his wealth, for his happines in his estate more then for her selfe, and counteth his in all those respects her owne'.[13] Also, while a man's work is assumed to be productive and carried out outside the home, his wife's activities are supposed to lie within the home and consist of saving or spending what he has brought in. Lorna Hutson has shown how this gender division of labour derives 'from a text entitled *Oeconomicus*, written by the Socratian philosopher

Xenophon, and from its derivative, a pseudo-Aristotelian text of the same name'; as well as informing Protestant marriage literature, these texts are closely followed in works as varied as Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (translated 1561), Sir Thomas Smith's *De republica anglorum* (1583) and Thomas Heywood's *Gynaikeion* (1624). As Smith puts it,

> The naturalest and first conjunction of two toward the making of a further societie of continuance is of the husband and the wife after a diverse sorte ech having care of the familie: the man to get, to travaile abroad, to defende: the wife, to save that which is gotten, to tarrie at home to distribute that which commeth of the husbandes labor for nurtriture of the children and family of them both, and to keepe all at home neat and cleane.[14]

In Smith's account, only the practices of the husband are described as labour; the task of the wife is to save and distribute their fruits. From her activities, the idea of work is withheld.

Perhaps because women's work, both in the early modern period and today, has exemplified so graphically the way in which definitions of work are shaped by wider forces in society, critics who have addressed this topic have tended to be free of what I see as Hunt's overly straightforward sense of what work actually means. In the first chapter of *The Usurer's Daughter*, Lorna Hutson examines the construction of women's work in Protestant household manuals, arguing that it served as a site onto which the more morally disreputable aspects of husbandry – the 'ethical stigma of the calculating outlook' – could be placed.[15] In an article on *The Shoemakers' Holiday*, Ronda A. Arab similarly shows how an attempt to valorise the labour of men involves the marginalisation and denigration of women's work. Thomas Dekker's 'exaltation of male artisans' systematically devalues the contribution of women to Simon Eyre's household, and Eyre's wife Margery is repeatedly made the target of sexualised verbal abuse.[16] The dramatic depiction of women's work outside the home has also attracted critical attention. In the course of her wide-ranging survey, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540–1620*, Linda Woodbridge notes that the drama of the period 'is full of women who mind the store – shopkeepers' wives who serve customers, often in their husbands' absence'. Because, other than servants, 'the only other city women who worked and brought in money were whores', plays that depicted such characters tended either to exploit them for the ends of anti-citizen satire or to insist defensively on their chastity.[17] More specifically, Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. suggests that plays likened women's work outside the home to prostitution because they were

influenced by a broad historical trend away from masters relying on the aid of their wives and towards the employment of hired labourers.[18] Although Sullivan sees Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1603–4) as an expression of anxieties about the place of women in the urban economy rather than a conscious attempt at propaganda, Mary Wack's study of the treatment of alewives in the mystery plays of sixteenth-century Chester shows how the drama could be an active participant in the regulation of female labour. She argues that two scenes apparently added to the cycle, one of which shows Mrs Noah refusing to board the ark because she wants to stay drinking with her gossips and the other of which shows Mulier, a tapster and brewster, being dragged back to Hell for trade violations, may have been meant to reinforce and justify laws enacted in Chester during the 1530s which regulated the sale and production of alcohol and forbade women between the ages of fourteen and forty from working as tapsters.[19] Finally, the instability, social marginality and low status of women's work has been a central theme of two recent studies, Patricia Fumerton's *Unsettled* and Fiona McNeill's *Poor Women in Shakespeare*. Fumerton identifies in early modern England a 'conceptual block against multiple or serial and occasional employment as legitimate work (especially when practiced by women)', and this meant that women's work outside the home, when not carried out in a formal context such as apprenticeship, contract or marriage, was often construed as illegitimate, leaving its practitioners vulnerable to prosecution for vagrancy.[20] McNeill contrasts the bureaucratic invisibility and low status of women's work with its economic ubiquity and fundamental importance in the development of capitalism, a state of affairs mirrored in the drama: 'Representations of poor women are everywhere in early modern drama, if not at the center ... They are represented at the peripheries of early modern drama just as they were pushed to the peripheries of early modern culture.'[21]

Although I have written on the topic of women's work elsewhere,[22] I have chosen not to focus on it in this book, partly because I want to concentrate on the narrower question of the relationship between work and social status and partly because this is one aspect of the subject of work that has already attracted considerable critical attention. However, critics such as those referred to above, though varied in their approaches, supply me with three of the basic assumptions of this study: first, as I have already said, that an activity's status as work is not a given, but socially constructed; second, that to see something as work is not necessarily to validate it, as is the case with women's work outside the home; and third, that as in Chester in the 1530s, the stage itself did not just reflect broader

changes in the nature and understanding of work but also was an agent, sometimes wittingly, sometimes unwittingly, in bringing them about, not least because its own problematic position in relation to concepts of work and play made its treatment of those concepts ideologically overdetermined. This final point is one to which I will return repeatedly in the course of this book; first, however, I want to explore more fully the ways in which notions of work were changing during the early modern period.