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978-1-107-04188-2 - A Jacobean Company and its Playhouse: The Queen's Servants at the Red Bull Theatre (c. 1605–1619)

Eva Griffith

Excerpt

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## *Introduction: The Red Bull playhouse, St John Street*

In William Pinks' voluminous work, *The History of Clerkenwell*, the nineteenth-century historian wrote of St John Street that it was at first 'a packhorse road' that 'very soon became an important highway'.<sup>1</sup> It certainly was a busy place. In the early seventeenth century, the playhouse that concerns us here was built just off this street: the Red Bull.

Today as then, St John Street is a wide road, beginning close to the thoroughfare of 'the Angel', where you can still find transport to and from the north. Instead of going west today – in order to get into central London – the early modern traveller might have journeyed down St John Street to get into the *City* of London. At that time the City was the central area for work and domestic life (see figure 1) rather than what it represents now – London's financial district.

When the Red Bull was built, St John Street was the direct route to the place where many would want to go and, in truth, where many would not want to go at all. It was St John Street that led into Smithfield Market and then beyond, if necessary, into London. It was a busy, messy thoroughfare that for unwary animals – in some numbers – meant the road to the slaughterhouse. For aberrant humans it would mean the Middlesex Sessions House and then – if found guilty – a journey onwards to Newgate gaol. Other streets, like Aldersgate and Bishopsgate to the east of St John Street, undoubtedly acted as main arteries into the City; however, it would have been this road that was most associated with the traffic of animals, in particular. Smithfield was the district where you could most easily pick up a horse for sale, for example, as well as for-meat-reared livestock. After a herd or flock of animals travelled down this road to Smithfield, then

<sup>1</sup> William J. Pinks, *The History of Clerkenwell*, ed. Edward J. Wood, 2nd edn (London: Charles Herbert, 1881), p. 294. See Eva Griffith, 'Inside and Outside: Animal Activity and the Red Bull Playhouse, St John Street', in *The Cultural History of Animals*, ed. Linda Kalof and Brigitte Resl, 6 vols. (Oxford: Berg, 2007), Vol. IV: *A Cultural History of Animals in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Matthew Senior, pp. 102–19.

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Figure 1 Map of Clerkenwell including Smithfield to the south.  
 William Morgan, *London &c. Actually Survey'd* (detail), 1822.

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London's livestock market (presently its meat market), the produce would be penned and assessed before sale. The purchased cattle and sheep would then be led into London via the gate of Newgate where they would be slaughtered at traditional places like St Nicholas Shambles and then eventually sold on as meat.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to a study of the earliest days of the Red Bull playhouse, animals are not to be taken lightly. For what this book represents is a serious study of this seventeenth-century theatre, situated in the Clerkenwell area of St John Street – a study that, in human terms, focuses on the first company that performed there, the Servants of Queen Anna of Denmark. Animals are emblematically important to our concerns here for all kinds of reasons – contextual, historical, cultural. Coming down from Islington, a seventeenth-century traveller might know that he was approaching streets known as *Turnbull* (aka Turnmill) Street, *Cowcross* Street and *Cock Lane*. Surrounded by a veritable cacophony of animal sounds, this traveller, making his way down this thoroughfare, would not have been surprised at all, for example, by the presence on his right-hand side, of an inn called 'The Red Bull'. He may have been intrigued by the playhouse entrance, however, and, above this, a turret or tower, and, perhaps, attached to this, the flag of the theatre, no doubt depicting a red bull, fluttering in the breeze.<sup>3</sup> From the size of the entrance of the playhouse, a visitor might guess that it had once been a yard where animals like horses were stalled, while their owners, perhaps drovers and farmers, stayed at the adjacent inn. Passing by, the traveller might have jumped at the roar of all-too-human sounds coming from within the venue – a noise made in response to a stage effect, a character's actions, a song or a joke. Yet, ironically, the sounds he would have heard coming from within would be just as animal in nature as those of the passing animal life moving along with him.

A study of the Queen's Servants at the Red Bull needs to address detailed matters like the animal life of St John Street because contextual detail is one factor that has been missing from any account of this company and playhouse heretofore. It could be argued that unless we perceive the fullest contexts available for somewhere like the Red Bull – contexts such as the social and cultural one of animals – we will never properly perceive either this playhouse or, indeed, the complete picture for early modern drama in Shakespeare's day. That a better understanding of the Red Bull during the first period of its existence might aid a growing understanding of early

<sup>2</sup> Smithfield has been London's 'dead meat' market since 1868. Before this, until 1855, when it was moved to Copenhagen Fields, it was a livestock and horse market. See *ibid.*, p. 105 n10.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 3 for further observations on the location, size and layout of the playhouse.

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modern drama is one desired effect of this book. With any evidence of interest in the Red Bull so far, what happened outside it has never been seen as an important factor of its existence. Critics have looked down on the Clerkenwell venue for housing only riotous apprentice/citizen audiences and have had little time for it as a place of serious entertainment, a perspective I would query.

Apart from attitudes, there is also a lack of account when it comes to both the history of the company of players we know as the Jacobean Queen's Servants and the playhouse where they performed. Where available there has certainly not been much that shows any detailed knowledge prompting balanced and objective responses. What do I mean by this and why should this be? Surely by their very name, as under the patronage of the King's wife and, therefore, on the face of it, on a parallel plane with the King's Men – Shakespeare's company – they should have been worth some attention, even if only for the sake of comparative analysis? The lack of an in-depth account is certainly a situation to which this book plans to respond. This can be so in the new era when much to do with 'Shakespeare Studies' has found courage to look afresh at many neglected, misperceived or previously fixed areas for study.

As I write this, English Literature scholars might experience a little sense of irony when contemplating my planned efforts, in that – apart from the scale of the project – challenges have been mounted that would question the very notion of a successful 'narrative' account of anything. In the last decade there have also been calls for some kind of regulation, or an addressing of a situation, when it comes to the field of 'Theatre History' – the very 'discipline' employed for this book. 'Theatre History', emanating out of English Literature departments, would appear to represent a methodologically amorphous area that, it seems, has not borne comparison with history methodology from 'straight' history departments. One of theatre history's great mentors, William Ingram, has spent much time questioning what our internal rules could or should be.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a whole book series has appeared claiming, with its many different perspectives, to interrogate this matter.<sup>5</sup> From the outset of this study, I will be challenging theatre history approaches of the past to this particular playhouse and company,

<sup>4</sup> William Ingram, 'Narrative Concerns: Prologue', in *The Business of Playing: The Beginnings of the Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 1–11. See also 'Introduction: Early Modern Theater History: Where We Are Now, How We Got Here, Where We Go Next', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, ed. Richard Dutton (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–15.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Holland, W. B. Worthen and Stephen Orgel (eds.), *Redefining British Theatre History*, 3 vols. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003–6).

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while also, as occasion arises, interrogating a perceptibly less than flexible approach when it comes to theatre history in general.

The truth of the matter when it comes to a concern about theatre history amounts to two main areas with one overarching problem. The two areas of concern are the lack of evidence when wanted (and the easy misinterpretation of it when found) alongside the fact that human beings need stories. They need them simply in order to structure their comprehension of people, places and events. Because of this need for stories, some kind of consecutive narrative will always be the best form of communication for the twentieth- or twenty-first-century reader, particularly when it comes to a new or neglected story, however sparsely or oddly aligned the evidence appears to be.<sup>6</sup> It is the mode of presentation or interpretation that is the overarching problem. Interpretation of what we have – setting aside the all-too-probable event of completely misreading what we see – will always be multiple in possibility. Therefore, within a responsible field of early modern scholarship, the 'ifs' and 'buts' and 'maybes' are intrinsic to the narrative enterprise. With the subject of this study, not only an offering of a story, but the strange *perceptions* affecting the story need to be addressed, and that, too, will be broached here, in this Introduction, paving the way for an unapologetic previously non-existent narrative.

The rest of this Introduction will do several things. Firstly, it will describe the most basic history of the Queen's Servants at the Red Bull playhouse. It will then outline something of how the Queen's Servants at the Red Bull have been perceived in the past, lending context to largely pejorative perceptions with reference to the recontextualising effort current within general Shakespeare studies. As it continues, it will describe more Queen's Servants/Red Bull history as we have it, indicating the ways in which this book will provide a first detailed account using as yet unpublished research. The Introduction will then give one historical example – one that shows the importance of animals in St John Street – to demonstrate how we can readdress old attitudes concerning the Queen's Servants at the Red Bull. What I am about to do now involves outlining something of the previous outlook on the subject, illustrating this with a selection of the work of past historians and critics.

The basics that we have received so far are these. The Queen's Servants were a company of players who, before James Stuart came to the throne in 1603 as King James I, worked under the patronage of Edward Somerset,

<sup>6</sup> For further observations on theatre history, biography and evidence see Eva Griffith, 'Christopher Beeston, his property and properties', in Dutton, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, pp. 607–22, esp. pp. 621–2.

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fourth earl of Worcester. While working as servants in his name they performed at venues including the Boar's Head in Whitechapel and the Rose on the Bankside, as well as venues around England when on tour. After the death of Queen Elizabeth, the last Tudor Queen, and the accession of King James, they became the players of the King's consort, Queen Anna of Denmark, generally known to the populace as Queen Anne. To the best of our knowledge, some time prior to 1605, an associate of the company, Martin Slatiar, teamed up with an inn-holder called Aaron Holland, to convert a yard to an inn called the Red Bull into a playhouse. Building work was apparently stopped during 1605, but the playhouse must have been finished – at the very latest – by late March 1606, most probably before.<sup>7</sup>

The company moved to their new theatre on St John Street, therefore, sometime during 1605–6. Various pieces of evidence exist as to who held what size of share in both the company and the playhouse. Apart from a period when they briefly played at the indoor theatre called the Cockpit near the Strand (built in 1616), they were to go on performing at the Red Bull as their main house until 1619, the year when Queen Anna died. What was left of them, after some disagreements and divisions, became the Revels Players.

We are fortunate that we live in an era when almost everything within the broad area of 'Shakespeare Studies' has been re-examined. It has become a mantra to claim that in the last fifth of the twentieth century our focus on the very subject of 'Shakespeare' has been interrogated, and this has opened up the opportunity to look at early modern drama and its contexts anew. In terms of the wider study of the entertainment of this time, through the good auspices of hard-working – if questioned – theatre historians, we are certainly now allowed to see Shakespeare as simply one amidst a crowd of actors struggling to make theatre work as an economic enterprise. Shakespeare was an actor among a mass of other actors – friends and rivals at concurrent moments – pursuing their entertainment objectives in commercially orientated playing companies. One of the ways in which the actor Shakespeare effected this success, for example, was by writing for his company. Recent studies emphasising commercial playhouse companies of actors have, in part, sought to redress a balance where it seemed that the study of the work of *playwrights*, rather than the contribution of a company's whole *repertoire* of plays, had resulted in misunderstandings. These misunderstandings, once analysed, reduced down

<sup>7</sup> See Eva Griffith, 'Martin Slatiar and the Red Bull Playhouse', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 74 (2011), 553–74.

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to the all-important *material conditions* within which such textual work was achieved. Because of the evolving dominance of 'the author' – with Shakespeare as the most dominant – critics of former times have given too much importance to a particular author's collected works, and too little to the financially motivated working environment within which those works were produced.<sup>8</sup> Thus it is that a study like this book, which attempts to detail an individual company and its conditions, represents a worthwhile contribution towards redressing a balance.

The obvious company-centred groundwork was addressed in the 1990s by Roslyn Knutson, for example, working on the King's Men's repertoire (all the plays, not just Shakespeare's), and the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project and its acolytes – Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean – on the Elizabethan Queen's Men (a large and significant earlier company).<sup>9</sup> Taking, perhaps, a cue from this kind of one-by-one company approach, more general work of most recent times, laying down direction for detailed actor-and-company research, has been widening in scope. I would mention Andrew Gurr's *Shakespeare's Opposites* on the Admiral's company, and John H. Astington's *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare's Time*, as two examples of the recent generalised trend: one looking at a specific non-Shakespeare company, the other looking at the 'Art of Stage Playing' with particular actor and actor-experience examples from the time.<sup>10</sup>

The total effect of much of this flowering is a useful multiplicity when it comes to the kinds of concentrated recording of early theatre. These range from transcriptions of documents; to the narratives constructed around the complexities of an actor's life; to further studies on particular companies, their venues, their touring practice and their repertoires in books both cohesive and of the essay kind. I would mention Mary Bly and Lucy Munro as both company-interested, producing work on the Children of the King's and Queen's Revels respectively, unafraid to introduce critical approaches such as queer theory and Derridean deconstruction into the

<sup>8</sup> Many works that have recently sought to challenge 'author centrality' were founded on Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', trans. Josue V. Harari, in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 141–60. See also, however, Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time 1590–1642* (Princeton University Press, 1971); and *The Profession of Player in Shakespeare's Time, 1590–1642* (Princeton University Press, 1984). Also Roslyn Lander Knutson, *The Repertory of Shakespeare's Company, 1594–1613* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991); and Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> McMillin and MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays*.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Gurr, *Shakespeare's Opposites: The Admiral's Company 1594–1625* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); John H. Astington, *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare's Time: The Art of Stage Playing* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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equation of particular company/theatre/repertoire history accounts.<sup>11</sup> I would forefront Richard Dutton's *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre* as a particularly useful example of the essay-collection kind of approach, taking us at one moment through different time periods of early theatre, while at another juncture becoming detailed about all kinds of areas of focused importance to early drama as a whole. Cambridge University Press's *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660 (EPT)*, edited by Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry and William Ingram and published in 2000, seems central to a concerted effort to improve our documentary knowledge in the most straightforward of ways. This it did mainly by offering transcriptions of documents from the period of early theatre history. The editors, however, did not avoid interpretations of the material they offered, even if told within given topic areas (three parts: documents of control, the players' lives, the playhouses) rather than with any attempt at an overarching chronological form.

The growing body of work by Dave Kathman, centring on details concerning the lives of actors and their playhouse associates, alongside his new interests in early modern inn-yard performance, is derived from ranges of documents, civic and national in nature. Kathman shows how complex such lives can be, and therefore, by default, the complexities of theatre history itself.<sup>12</sup> Susan Cerasano's long-awaited works on the Rose/Fortune/Alleyn/Henslowe enterprises are anticipated, and we are glad to see Grace Ioppolo's work with the Dulwich College manuscripts, digitising Henslowe's papers, and her new interest in a complete works of Thomas Heywood, which this study can only applaud.<sup>13</sup> For others I would invoke names like Alan Nelson, Richard Dutton and Anne Lancashire, simply as scholars also interested in seeking answers for dramatic literature, not just about the use of the literature itself, but in the context of the historical conditions within which it was produced. William Ingram, in his book *The Business of Playing*, goes further than any: he interrogates our understanding and is detailed about specifics. Somewhere in the mix – if

<sup>11</sup> Mary Bly, *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queens on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Lucy Munro, *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Recent David Kathman works include: 'Alice Layston and the Cross Keys', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 22 (2009), 144–78; 'Inn-Yard Playhouses' and 'Players, Livery Companies, and Apprentices', both in Dutton, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, pp. 153–67 and pp. 413–28 respectively; 'London Inns as Playing Venues for the Queen's Men', in *Locating the Queen's Men, 1583–1603*, ed. Helen Ostovich, Holger Schott Syme and Andrew Griffin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 65–75; 'The Rise of Commercial Playing in 1540s London', *Early Theatre* 12 (2009), 15–38.

<sup>13</sup> Available online at [www.henslowe-alleyn.org.uk/index.html](http://www.henslowe-alleyn.org.uk/index.html).



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lucky – we catch a glimpse of the complex nature of what we study, and are exhorted to remember just how diversely structured early theatre was and – in truth – how we should always regard it as such.

Perhaps the most daring points I have to make about the Queen's Servants concern their not only having the Red Bull in which to perform their plays but the Curtain playhouse as well. This thought is backed up with a considerable body of evidence that others have only occasionally acknowledged and put into print in record form. It is, however, indicative of Queen's Servants/Red Bull difficulties in the minds of theatre historians that, despite knowing of patents for the company including the Curtain and acknowledging how Queen's Servants players owned parts of the Curtain estate, critics have not taken this company seriously as wide-ranging in any kind of multi-venue way. We are permitted to view Shakespeare's company, the King's Servants, as responsible for two theatres at one time, but contemplating similar conditions for the Queen's Servants seems harder to admit. Attitudes like this, and described here, are hangovers of an old-school way of thinking where, unfortunately, Shakespeare-associated company histories insistently lead scholars to believe that business was only manageable, and success only achievable, by particular companies for particular reasons.

Back in 1998, when McMillin and MacLean published their important book on the Elizabethan Queen's Men, their sense of our lack of familiarity with an 'Elizabethan theatre that had never heard of Shakespeare or Marlowe' made them suspect the whole area of their company had 'not been studied firmly enough'.<sup>14</sup> Roslyn Knutson's 1991 comments, on skewed views of Shakespeare's part in the Chamberlain's Men and the nature of company competition, are now accepted, and studies have widened. Today we look at whole areas, not lopsided parts. Sadly, however, the suspicions of recent decades are still recognised by the scholar of the Jacobean Queen's Servants/Red Bull history. In truth, the situation with the Clerkenwell company and its playhouse has always been much worse. At least in the case of the Elizabethan Queen's Men there was a cogent body of scholarship to draw from, much of it received first-hand through ongoing work completed Britain-wide for the Records of Early English Drama; at least, with Shakespeare's company, 'every scrap of information' has been treated 'as priceless treasure'.<sup>15</sup>

The problems for the Jacobean Red Bull company scholar are of a different order in comparison with the difficulties of others. Not only is there a

<sup>14</sup> McMillin and MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays*, p. xii.

<sup>15</sup> Knutson, *The Repertory of Shakespeare's Company*, p. 2.

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scarcity of accounts from which to draw a coherent history of the Queen's Servants, but lying alongside what exists is a strange set of warped, subjective perceptions. These perceptions were brought about a long time ago but supported, I would suggest, in order to focus attention on Shakespeare. Published works that may be termed 'histories' of the Queen's Servants are, as I say, few and far between. Original, transcribed sources that have helped with such accounts are also sporadic and disparately spaced when it comes to publication. A valuable list of such histories and sources could begin with, for example, Frederick Gard Fleay's nineteenth-century transcriptions of the bill and answer to the *Worth v. Baskerville* case of 1623–6.<sup>16</sup>

This was a case where a Queen's Servants player called Ellis Worth, among other players of the company, took the widow of their one-time leader and clown, Thomas Greene, to court, and it contains much information that is useful to an understanding of the company and, in particular, its share-owning systems. When a company of actors was formed at this time, the core members involved would put, in effect, equal *shares of money* into a pool to meet their basic needs for performance – costumes, props and scripts, etc. This portion of the money to start their enterprise was known as their *share*. Because you had a share of the company's economic beginnings, it was understood that you would reap the rewards through access to a pre-agreed proportion of profits at the door. There are instances where traditional playing company values meant a dead actor's estate might retrieve the value of a share, and instances where a non-actor might be offered sums equivalent to a share, yet generally shares were only accessed by active, share-committed players in a company.<sup>17</sup>

A company could only benefit from further funds being put into it by people wishing to invest in its good fortune to gain a return. As my research will show, Susan Greene, the widow of Thomas Greene, was a much more important part of the monetary infrastructure of the company – with an attendant interest in its playhouse – than has been previously thought. Formerly married to the actor Robert Browne, a lessee-actor of the Boar's Head playhouse who died in 1603, she married her second husband, Greene, the leader of the Queen's Servants and sharer in the Curtain theatre as well as investor in Red Bull shares, soon after.<sup>18</sup> When,

<sup>16</sup> TNA C2/JASI/W2/67; Frederick Gard Fleay, *A Chronicle History of the London Stage, 1559–1642* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1890), pp. 270–97.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 7 for matters concerning the estate of the actor George Pulham and the nature of some company agreements with Susan Baskerville.

<sup>18</sup> Greene held the tenure of the Curtain sometime during and/or before 1611. See TNA C54/2075, no. 17; *EPT*, p. 416. The Queen's Servants were allowed to use the Curtain from after the plague of 1603–4. See Dulwich, MS 1, fo. 54; John Payne Collier, *Memoirs of Edward Alleyn, Founder of Dulwich*