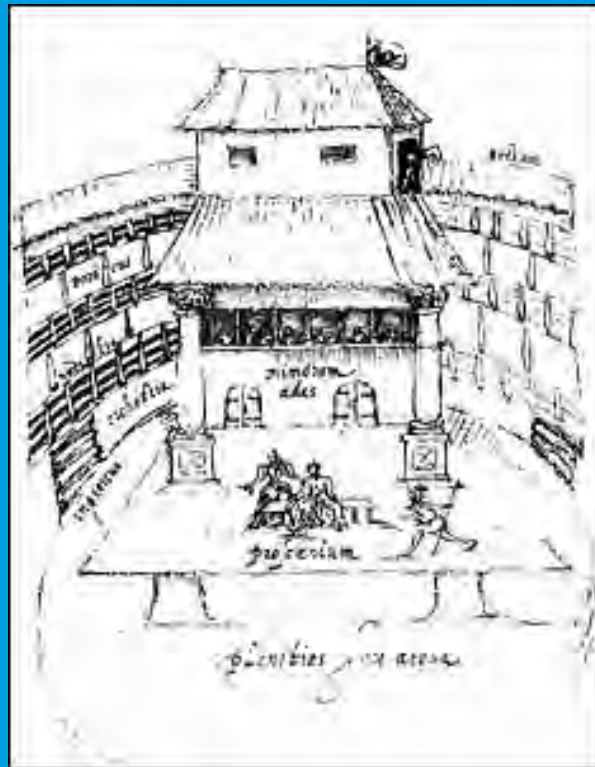


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*English Renaissance Drama:
a Very Brief Introduction to
Theatre and Theatres in
Shakespeare's Time*

C. W. R. D. Moseley



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English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare's Time

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A Note on the Author

Dr Moseley is Fellow and Tutor of Hughes Hall, Cambridge, and Director of Studies in English both for that College and also for St Edmund's College. He lectures and teaches in Classics and in Mediaeval and Renaissance literature in the English Faculty of the University of Cambridge, and is the author of many books and articles, not all in his specialist fields. For many years he was Programme Director of the University of Cambridge International Summer Schools in Shakespeare and in English Literature, and is Director of the University of Cambridge Institute of Continuing Education's Advanced Diploma in Shakespeare Studies, and University Moderator of its Diploma in Theatre and Theatre History. He has lectured frequently in the United States. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, a Fellow of the English Association, and is also a member of the Society for Nautical Research and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. He has travelled widely in the Arctic, and is a member of the Arctic Club

Introduction

Shakespeare and his contemporaries were not writing ‘literature’. They were writing plays, and plays were a pretty low-status form of writing, hardly worth committing to print. True, by the year Shakespeare died his not uncritical friend, colleague and competitor, Ben Jonson, was trying to change all that. In 1616 Jonson dared to print his *The Works of Ben Jonson* – a title challenging comparison with the *Opera* of the [poetic giants of the Latin](#) past – and did it in the smart, expensive [folio](#) format, the format usually reserved for works of high seriousness: and he got a good deal of unkind ribbing from literary men not only for daring to do all this, as a writer in the workaday medium of English,¹ but also, especially, for including in that book something as downmarket as his plays. For most of Shakespeare’s life the writer was only one, and not always the most important one, among many people who made a play: sometimes the writer was called simply a ‘play patcher’, someone who cobbled a play together for the actors out of odd old ends; sometimes there were several authors co-operating in a script² – a far more helpful word – and neither Shakespeare nor Jonson thought it beneath them, for substantial periods (perhaps most) of their lives, so to work. And they were working to earn a living in a world that owed nobody anything.

Our attitudes to theatre, to writers, and to reading are unimaginably different to those of that time. It is imperative before we go any further that we try to recapture some of that vanished mindset. If we do not, we shall consistently misunderstand both what those players and writers were trying to do, and how their work might have been watched – as well as how it operated in its society. For it did so operate: nobody but a fool writes for posterity, and these men wrote to make a living – quite a good one, in many cases – out of the tastes and enthusiasms and concerns of their contemporaries. It will be as well to bear in mind the crucial importance of that

¹ The development of English vocabulary, syntax and resourcefulness, in prose and verse, to the point where it would equal or surpass the Classical languages is a conscious and often openly stated aim of many writers.

² Jonson, Chapman and Marston all wrote together on the comedy *Eastward Ho!*, and you can hardly see the joins. Peele almost certainly wrote the first act of *Titus Andronicus* – which is included in the canon of Shakespeare’s works.

audience, and to try to discover something of what the experience of going to the theatre in Shakespeare's time was like. But before we go further, let me outline the aims and concerns of this book.

Nearly all students come to the plays, and the literature, of the last third of the reign of Elizabeth – say from 1585–1603 – and from the reign of James I – say up to 1625 – through Shakespeare: often through one play. That is about the worst possible way to do it, though people do have a remarkable capacity of surviving, and even flourishing, afterwards. For Shakespeare's work has over four centuries acquired overtones and values, and a cultural authority, which it never possessed in its time, and it makes a very poor lens through which to view the rest of the period's writing. Moreover, Shakespeare is in many ways, simply because of what he did, fundamentally untypical of his period, even though he is most certainly a man of the late Renaissance in the peculiar form it took in England – and we do him a great disservice if we ever pretend otherwise. There is a vast gulf between 'Shakespeare', where the word denotes a cultural locus of ideas and values of great complexity, affecting notions of Englishness, of education, of morality, of art, of the very language we speak, and William, son of John Shakespeare, born probably in 1564 at Stratford, where he died in 1616, a man variously referred to as an 'upstart crow',¹ 'our Roscius', 'sweet Mr Shakespeare' and known as a poet, a writer of more or less successful plays, and a very shrewd buyer of real estate. If we could only come to Shakespeare through the reading of his contemporaries, not only would we recognise his genius, the nature of his originality, more clearly, but we would also recognise the excellence of those men whom he knew, with whom he competed, and drank, and did business. We would still read and enjoy them even if Shakespeare had never existed.

The first job of this book, then, is to attempt to provide something of that context of the working life of a dramatist writing against time to earn a living. This will entail, necessarily, consideration of a number of factors:

1. Where English drama came from, so to speak – that must affect what an audience expects it is going to get;
2. The expectations and tastes, values and concerns of their audiences – audiences bought the theatrical experience, and if they did not, the company had no dinner;

¹ It was the dying playwright Greene who referred jealously to Shakespeare the newcomer – without a university education, too! – as an 'upstart crow, beautified with our feathers'. Roscius was a famous Roman actor.

3. The nature and resources of the physical spaces in which plays might be staged;
4. The way the companies worked, and the effects of such a group of people working together for a long time on how things could be written;
5. Concepts of character;
6. The different sorts of plays, and how they might be recognised and received.

We also have to recognise the provisionality of our knowledge about the past, the unconscious myopia of our own mindset. Our statements and opinions, whosoever they are (including those of people who write books), should always be followed by a sort of unspoken question mark. As T. S. Eliot remarked, in every statement we make about the past there is an unquantifiable amount of error, simply because we cannot un-be four centuries.

This short book cannot replace, or remove the need for, serious committed study and exploration in the period. A vast amount of material is easily available, and among primary sources for our study of the period are not only the large numbers of plays in print, and many on line, but also the very useful [Records of Early English Drama](#). Contemporary accounts of theatre and theatre-going are less common than one would wish, perhaps because so many people went that a visit was hardly worth remarking. Among the most interesting, though their witness is often annoyingly oblique, are Thomas Dekker¹, Simon Forman², Henslowe's Diary³, Johannes De Witt⁴, Thomas Platter⁵, Baron Waldstein⁶. There are plenty of source books, like Tanya Pollard's excellent *Shakespeare's Theater* (2004), anthologising contemporary

¹ *The Gull's Hornbook* (1609) describes behaviour in the theatres. Possibly it exaggerates for comic effect.

² Dr Simon Forman attended productions of four of Shakespeare's plays. Extracts from his diary are available at shakespeare.about.com/b/a/197345.htm

³ Philip Henslowe, entrepreneur, moneylender, investor in playhouses, bearpits and brothels, and father-in-law of the great actor Edward Alleyn, who was famous for the skill with which he delivered the 'mighty lines' of Christopher Marlowe, kept an invaluable diary in the 1590s. It contains much important material about the plays that were performed, their takings, and the stock in trade of the companies. See edition by R. A. Foakes, *Henslowe's Diary*, second edition, Cambridge University Press.

⁴ In 1596 a Dutch traveller and student, Johannes de Witt, saw a play at the Swan Theatre and sketched the inside of the Swan.

⁵ Thomas Platter was a Swiss traveller who came to London in 1599. there is an extract from his diary, which gives a pungent whiff of London life at <http://www.evergreen.loyola.edu/~cmitchell/platter.htm>.

⁶ Waldstein, a Czech, come to London in 1600. His diary has been translated by G. W. Groos (London 1982)

writing about theatre – in that case, mainly negative and theoretical. And finally there are the Cambridge Companions to English Renaissance Drama and to Shakespeare.

Finally, a warning. I am deliberately stressing the competitive, topical co-operative context, and in which the plays were created because too often it is simply ignored. It is actually a lot of fun to think in this way. But you could lose sight of the uncomfortable fact that a lot of Elizabethan plays are very fine works of art, and stand reading and re-reading as does the very best poetry. They sometimes have a structural coherence and patterning which seems to belie the idea of their having many makers. In fact it does not, anymore than do the coherence of a cathedral, where we know hundreds of hands worked, or many voices and instruments coming together in musical symphony. Lukas Erne (*Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, Cambridge, 2003) maintains strongly that Shakespeare (and by implication the company of which he was a sharer) intended the plays for readers as well as audiences. (One might note in passing that to read a play in a printed text was itself a relatively new thing, which raises all sorts of questions of its own, in Shakespeare's last years.) Ben Jonson certainly seems to have had his eye on that option. But here, as all too rarely, one can have one's cake and eat it, for the intensely co-operative creation of a performance neither excludes the single reader later, nor does the text s/he reads deny the multitude of cooperative interpretations that may later be made of it. Furthermore, a 'play patcher' of genius, as we may, perhaps, assume Shakespeare for example to have been, may write very well indeed even when under the intense pressure and constraints of working in that theatrical environment for that discriminating and unforgiving market. The plays can be judged as art too: and perhaps we must allow far more for the idea of 'Genius' – it was far more difficult writing in the conditions I have outlined than in a tidy study where you can invent your own worlds, and then, only then, find someone to body them forth on the stage. The more we think about the constraints of the context, the higher we shall find ourselves rating those who worked and wrote in it.

The time we shall concentrate on is one of the most uncomfortable in English history. The period of the growth and high noon of English Renaissance drama is from, say, from 1576 to 1642. In 1576 the entrepreneur Burbage built The Theatre, the first purpose built permanent building in England designed for the playing of a plays if we discount John Brayne's Red Bull¹ of 1567, which was simply a modified

1 Brayne was Burbage's father in law. The Red Bull was outside the jurisdiction of the City magistrates in Stepney.

inn court yard. In 1642 Parliament imposed what it said would be a temporary ban on the public theatres throughout the land – and put the companies who depended on them out of work. Within that period the years 1585–1615 – roughly the years in which we have knowledge of Shakespeare’s theatrical life, and of Ben Jonson’s most innovative drama – may be seen as a high point. Certainly, the overwhelmingly majority of Renaissance plays a cultured, even fairly specialist, English speaker today would know would come from between those narrower dates. This period coincides with one of the tensest, most worried and unhappy periods of English life, from what has been called the [Nasty Nineties](#) (by Patrick Collinson and Katherine Duncan Jones among others) to the first rumblings of that clash between Parliament and Crown which would culminate in 1642 in the kinstrife of the Civil War.

It was period of war. England was at war with Spain, and feared invasion several times – the panic caused by rumours of the arrival of the third Armada (see chronology below) in 1599 had everyone able-bodied under arms when they ought to have been getting in the sparse harvest. The Privy Council¹ nearly panicked itself into sinking block ships in the Thames to stop an invading force. England was at war in Ireland, desperately trying to contain the serious threat to her control posed by the very able O’Neill, earl of Tyrone. Civil War was a real fear, not least because the Queen had no clear heir, and refused to let the matter be discussed. Moreover, Pope Pius V in the Bull *Regnans in excelsis* of 1570 had delegitimated Elizabeth and released all her Catholic subjects from their allegiance to her in what must surely be one of the most politically inept pronouncements ever to come from Rome. Overnight, this turned the up to 40% of her subjects who were secretly or openly Catholic into potential traitors. Her cousin Mary of Scotland, her eventual successor’s mother, had been the focus of Catholic plots, real or imaginary, and had had to be executed in 1587. There were seriously advanced claims for the restoration of a Plantagenet heir, since the Tudor title to the throne was very dicey: that heir was, by descent, the Infanta of Spain, the Archduchess Isabella. As Francis Bacon, a rising star in her later years, and to be James’s Lord Chancellor, put it, in one of those books which one is grateful he never finished:

[many said] after Queen Elizabeth's decease there must follow in England nothing but confusions, interreigns, and perturbations of estate, likely far to exceed the ancient calamities of the civil wars between the houses of Lancaster

¹ The close circle of just about a dozen advisers and ministers around the monarch, who with the Prince were the supreme executive (as opposed to legislative) authority.

and York, by how much more the dissensions were like to be more mortal and bloody when foreign competition should be added to domestical, and divisions for religion to matter of title to the crown.

(As it happens, James' succession was beautifully handled, and he was welcomed to London with much rejoicing: the Londoners had lit bonfires in the streets when news of the old unpopular queen's death broke, but within a few years James and his Scottish hangers-on were nearly as unpopular as she had been.) Command of the war in Ireland had been fatal to Elizabeth's last favourite, the glamorous but hot-headed Earl of [Essex](#), whom many would have like to see succeed her – he had royal blood, indeed. But his abortive rebellion led only to his ignominious trial – where Bacon, once his protégé, was prosecutor – and execution. The Irish war had drained the treasury, and the settlement of it by Mountjoy, burning and starving the Irish into surrendering and their leaders into exile, horrified even many who applied that settlement. But James, wiser than many in his Parliaments would have had him be, made peace with Spain in 1606, and kept his realms out of a European war, to be sure: but that looks more secure in hindsight than it did at the time.

This was, too, a period of poor harvests, food riots, inflation, recurrent plague – and the aftermath of a revolution in the patterns of worship and devotion which had affected and still affected every single person in the land, when loyalties and affections and duties might be agonisingly split. It was period of religious strife and friction, and just over the water, in France, many had seen in the Wars of Religion an awful foretaste of what they feared might happen between Catholic and Protestant in a very divided England. Those wars were an anticipation of the terrible Europe-wide conflict of the Thirty Years' War which erupted in 1618.

Nobody knew what was coming, and as always most were walking backwards into the future, regretting the time past and fearing that to come. But all guessed that, even if the real possibility of civil war might be avoided (which in the end it was not), what was to come was not only still unsure, but might also be pretty nasty. Tennyson's 'spacious time of great Elizabeth', the myth of that happy sunlit merrie England, is just that: myth. But, at the same time, this was is a period of great innovation and some hope for the future, and such contradictions and complications are evident in, mirrored by, the plays and the issues they raise in the oblique but penetrating way that art does.

When you have something as popular, in all senses, as the drama of the period I shall call, for convenience, 'Jacobethan', it must have engaged with contemporary issues and concerns, and be in a profound sense 'political' – to do with the polity

and its values and management. You can relocate the problems of the present, which are too sensitive or too dangerous to discuss openly, into a fiction, a narrative, a history of the past. That does not make that narrative an [allegory](#), but it does suggest a perspective in both directions. The topicality of a lot of Jacobethan plays is now lost to us, when the issues over which people fought and killed and for which they died have gone cold: they were not cold then. A change of monarch, as with the accession of James in 1603, can alter the whole tenor of things, for a pressing concern, with a new royal family on the throne for the first time in 60 years, and an assured succession, will no longer be who will inherit England, as it had been for so long. And the tastes, concerns and interests of the court will filter down to the public theatres. The taste for what I call post-tragic plays – plays which explore what happens next, if people get a second chance – like *Pericles*, or *Winter's Tale*, or *Tempest* – fed directly on the hopefulness of the new political climate, when James hoped to secure a European peace through the marriages of his children. But that is a long story.

1. The roots of English drama

The film *Shakespeare in Love* was a huge box office success, and its picture of the physical conditions and dynamics of the theatre was based on good, up to date research. Just so, nearly sixty years earlier, Laurence Olivier's film of *Henry V* began in a Globe Theatre, and used some features of [acting style](#), consonant with the best inferences from research then. Nobody is going to go far wrong if they start their exploration of the physical basis of the remarkable cultural phenomenon of English Renaissance drama with those visual images.

But the reality, in so far as we can perceive it, is more complicated, and I think more interesting. Those who have the chance should try to visit the New Globe, built in the 1990s on London's South Bank near the site of the original Globes, for that building, though not without its controversial aspects, has got scholarly and archaeological – not necessarily uncontroversial – warrant for every feature. It can give a sharp awareness of the sort of material setting for plays and the consequent physical constraints on them – which were, after all, not a book, or a text, but a felt, heard, seen and (given the diet and personal hygiene of those days) smelt communal experience, shared with other people you could see – not, as in a modern theatre, masked by, isolated in, darkness. That makes a huge difference, for you interact with those watching – and are not only very close to, but get eye contact with, the actors.

Initially, I want to concentrate the discussion on the 'public' rather than the 'private' theatres – terms the significance of which will be clear later. What is however common to audiences, and plays, in both, is the sort of expectation an audience might have of what a play was, and how it worked, and with that we shall begin.

Recent scholarship has rightly stressed that the roots of Elizabethan drama lie in the [cycles of mystery plays](#), and the later [Morality](#) plays, that were such a feature of town life in the later Middle Ages in northern Europe. On the Continent these continued to be a regular part of the yearly programme until long after our period, and the best painting (by [van Alsloot](#)) of a pageant cart with a Nativity play being performed comes from Brussels in 1618. In England, because of their implicit and often emphatic Catholic ideology, the Privy Council, dominated by aggressive and

doctrinaire Protestants¹ in the last years of Henry VIII and in the Protestant reigns of Edward VI and later Elizabeth, attempted the total suppression of these plays. That suppression was in many places in England resisted with varying degrees of success. For example, in Coventry the cycle plays, covering the drama of Man's fall, Redemption and Salvation from Creation through to the Last Judgment – the history of the future – were being performed well into the 1570s – that is, into the early teens of young Shakespeare, who lived just down the road in Stratford. There is evidence of many more towns having 'le play' (as the records of tiny Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire, call it) than there are surviving texts – and in the Beverley (Yorkshire) records we can glimpse people being auditioned for the parts. There are records of performances of more or less complete cycles in Kendal, in Chester, in Norwich until even later, and some evidence that the memory of these plays was vivid and first hand in the areas of the country further from easy government control as late as 1644. The fact is that the religious plays formed the theatrical language of Shakespeare's and Jonson's generation: we moderns often do not even notice it.

The cycle of Mystery plays, usually performed in midsummer around the feast, or 'holi-day' of [Corpus Christi](#), were a communal effort, in which the various organisations, guilds and fraternities making up the community took both responsibility and pride. Moreover, the plays often were the occasion not only for expenditure, but also for the collection from the crowd of substantial amounts of money for the purposes of the church or community. The nearest they had to stages was, in some cases, the pageant cart – we might call it a float – often very elaborate and frequently with three levels which at need could signify Heaven, Earth, and Hell. Scenery there was, to all intents and purpose, none: though props might be elaborate and spectacular. Mostly the drama took place with amateur actors drawn from the community, whom you would recognise as your neighbours, in the everyday space of the street: the whole world was the stage on which the drama of salvation was enacted. When permanent theatres come to be built (and why they were is an interesting question), that symbolism is carried over seamlessly. They can't help drawing on this inheritance – and it is interesting, as we shall see, to look at the names people call these buildings.

¹ The earthquake of the Reformation, which split Europe into (Roman) Catholic and Protestant camps, is an extremely complicated business, and no summary can be adequate. Protestants, as they were called, followed the theologies of Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli, whom Rome regarded as heretics, especially in the acceptance of the Bible as the sole source of revelation, in justification by faith alone, and in the universal priesthood of all the believers.

The cycle plays' narrative was fundamentally religious, the morality plays' tools allegorical. In both there was a mix of the comic and anarchic, the serious and holy – they are interdependent, inextricably mixed, as they are in life itself. The narrative is very stylised, and – as it had to be with amateur actors – it had to rely year after year on fixed ways of performing roles, of doing things, on a recognisable and familiar iconography. With an audience gathering, shifting, reforming and talking in a street this formulaic pattern is crucial, and the inheritance from it lasts a very long time. Think of a play where you have a scene in the castle of Hell. There is a banging on the barred gate. The porter is drunk, and in his cups he jokes about who he thinks that is – 'Oh, it's old so and so – we've been expecting him for years'. (Good, clean fun that plays with the names and characters of people even in the very audience.) Then the door is burst open, and in comes – who?

Most people would answer 'MacDuff', assuming the play to be *Macbeth* (1606). It could be, but in fact it is the Play of the *Harrowing of Hell*, where Christ breaks down the gates of Hell and frees those held unjustly. That memory will completely alter the way you can read or see *Macbeth*. One can cite other examples: the silent suffering Lavinia in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1592?) reminds of the suffering Christ, the Man of Sorrows, whose picture was in every church in the land before – and in some cases after – the Reformation, and whose Passion was the heart of the cycle plays. Lear with the dead Cordelia in his arms in *King Lear* (1605) deafeningly echoes the *pietà* of the Virgin with the dead Christ. Falstaff in *King Henry VI Part One* (1597), playing King Henry in II.iv, or with Doll on his knee in Part 2 II.iv, visually is a very clear echo of the iconography of the [Deadly Sins](#) of Sloth and Lechery respectively. Our attitude to him must correspondingly be affected. One consequence of this must be for us to recognise in all Renaissance English drama a readiness to see individuals against a type, to think symbolically and allegorically: we are dealing with a non/naturalistic, but very vivid, drama. We should accept that stock characters, like the familiar [machiavel](#), can be very potent ways of releasing ideas and allow a considerable variation to be played on them. The cycle plays, whose story, with all its mixture of intense importance – relevance! – and grim humour and often broad comedy, was repeated year after year, provided a ritual space where a community explored its own identity, myths and values, and allowed, within the ritual structure of the year, and within the prevailing structures of order, an area of [Bakhtinian 'carneval'](#) – an area of licensed disorder, topsyturvydom. That attitude to and expectation of drama did not die overnight: it is part of the expectation of plays Shakespeare's contemporaries took for granted.

Once we have clearly established that that is the matrix in which the imaginations of the audiences were formed – and dramatists are often members of audiences – one can then acknowledge the importance of other influences: the Latin tragedies of Seneca, a gloomy, very stylised, but gripping homage to the Greek tragedy lost throughout the middle ages and which only a few educated Elizabethans would know; the [Roman comedies of Plautus](#) and Terence, much studied and performed in the schools and universities, which will be discussed later; and the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, itself deriving from Plautus' 'clever servant' comedies, which Italian troupes brought to France (establishing themselves in Paris in the Théâtre des Italiens) and occasionally to England – the mark of these is to be seen in Jonson's comedies, and in Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and *Taming of the Shrew*. But all of these different traditions of theatre converge in forming an expectation that a new play would be very alert, sometimes ironically, to its predecessors, borrow their dramatic languages, and often play variations on their recognised themes – just as soap opera, or the Western, has done for our generations.

Shakespeare's and his contemporaries' customers differed from us in another way. Renaissance audiences (Lat. *audire* = to hear) were just that: you went not to see a play but to hear it. 'Spectator' is first recorded in English in 1586, and its first use of drama is after 1600. We must posit an audience of very skilled listeners alert to the slightest nuances of [versification](#), of prose style, of [rhetoric](#) and of tone: much as today audiences are skilled in listening to a concert of serious music. It is also important that we recognise the primacy of words rather than vision in Elizabethan culture: there are good ideological reasons for this. For the Protestant reformers set their faces against the wealth of painted, carved and glazed representations of the saints and martyrs with which pre-Reformation churches were filled, to the exclusion, they thought, of the attention due to the holy Word of God in the Bible. It is a small step from that to accusations of idolatry in breach of the Second Commandment of Exodus XX; and in a culture where many believed that literally indeed the Devil roamed about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he might devour, and appearing in the likeness of an angel of light, there was a distrust, even fear, of visual illusion. That is one reason why in plays of the period players quite often stress that they are players, not the people they pretend to be.

For most members of the audience, plays did not tell a new story – and anyway, on the second visit you knew it already. You did not go – we do not go – to know what happened in a play: you went to see what burden it could be made to carry. A good example is the history play – and there are far more plays we might loosely

call 'history plays' than any other in the entire corpus of English renaissance drama. You knew the story: but historical themes allowed you all silently to confront the questions it would be too dangerous to open up publicly, for you relocated the problems of the present into the narrative of the past.

This complex inheritance is the bedrock on which the plays we are considering are built. Sometimes that foundation is almost openly acknowledged, as it is in the procession of the Seven Sins in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, or when Shakespeare's Falstaff is made to refer to the dagger of lath of the Vice in the old morality; sometimes it is much more covert. But it is never absent, and affects the way things could be seen even when the world of the mediaeval cycle drama has gone for ever.

2. The new theatres

In what follows, the discussion must concentrate on London. That is where the most serious innovations happened, and it is where most of our material and evidence originates. But it is important to keep in mind that there was a theatrical culture outside London as well, and we shall come to this later.

Collection of money during open air performances in the street, like at a Punch a Judy show, is often chancy: people suddenly find they are not watching after all, and drift away as the box comes round. It was John Brayne who conceived the idea of turning the yard of the Red Bull Inn in Stepney into a dedicated playing space, where people could not enter until they had passed the – box office. That strategy was the basis for the new building of the new public commercial theatres which made so many fortunes and attracted so much opprobrium in the next sixty years.

John Brayne's brother in law James Burbage (father of Richard and Cuthbert) recognised an opportunity. James, a joiner by trade, and later an actor, leased in 1576 some land in Shoreditch from Giles Allen and erected on it the first purpose-built permanent commercial theatre. (Finsbury Fields and Shoreditch were then well outside the built up area of London, and outside the jurisdiction of the City magistrates, who were consistently opposed to the public theatres.) He called it by a name that has completely lost its importance for us. 'The Theatre' was a provocative name. It is a relatively new word in English, first being used in 1548, but without any connotation of plays and acting. That is the sense it acquired because of James' enterprise. For the word he chose meant to contemporaries something much more like 'encyclopaedia', or 'overview'. The Greek word means 'seeing place'; in Renaissance book titles like that of Abraham Ortelius' great atlas *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1546?) it means a comprehensive view. So James' name suggested, in fact, that as in the *News of the World* 'All Human Life is There'. Quite a claim; and it picks up the already clichéd idea that 'all the world's a stage' – and by reciprocal implication, the [stage is the world](#). It is very interesting to find that the archaeological evidence suggests from what has been recovered since 1988–9 that the very shape of the buildings of the Rose and the Globe, the ground plan, was mathematically determined to figure the proportions of the universe itself. The motto of the Globe, rebuilt in Southwark from the timbers of the demolished Theatre in

1599, was ‘totus mundus agit histrionem’ roughly, ‘all the world plays the actor’ – a quotation from the twelfth century political philosopher John of Salisbury. Its flag seemed to have been Atlas supporting the great globe itself. It seems as if theatre buildings themselves were a palpable symbol of, or at least claim to, high seriousness – but a high seriousness, that, like the real world in its inevitable progress to apocalypse, could include the anarchic and subversive within its walls. The whole building can become a metaphor: the stage, like the pageant carts of the mystery plays, can be a world between the canopy/heaven, and the ‘cellarage’/hell, and the men on it play out their lives in the eye of eternity. Where the plot is a known one – as in a history play – the audience can hardly escape the idea that their vision of events is similar to that of Divine Providence. The possibility of the theatre as moral metaphor is demonstrated also by the very titles of books of emblems¹, moral pictures plus verses, intended to help one to live a virtuous life: the collection by the Dutchman Jan van der Noodt was Englished (perhaps partly by Spenser) in 1569 as *A Theatre for Worldlings*, while a man from Stratford, Thomas Combe, whom Shakespeare may well have known translated Guillaume de la Perrière's collection as *The Theatre of Fine Devices* (1593, 1614). ([Emblematic pictures](#) which symbolise in fairly standard ways abstract moral ideas clearly affect staging and performance, as we shall see.) The implications of this theatre/world metaphor extend further. For the moral judgment demanded by the watching of a play bounces back on the audience, for they too are actors and their very language never allows them to forget the fact. Sir Walter Raleigh puts it succinctly in a short poem that exploits this commonest of conceits with a wry perception of when the playing has to stop:

What is our life? A play of passion,
 And what our mirth but music of division?
 Our mothers' wombs the tiring houses be,
 Where we are drest for this short comedy.
 Heav'n the judicious sharp spectator is,
 Who sits and marks who here doth act amiss.
 The graves that hide us from the searching sun
 Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.
 Thus playing post we to our latest rest,
 And then we die, in earnest, not in jest.

¹ See my introductory Anthology, *A Century of Emblems* (Scolar/ Ashgate, 1989) and Michael Bath, *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem books and Renaissance Culture*, (Longman 1994)

(This issue is clearly integral to the concept of character – though that may well be changing – we need to assume in the period.) Elizabethans talked of going to the playhouse, not the theatre – if they said ‘The Theatre’, they were going to Finsbury Fields. ‘Playhouse’ also gives us an important clue to attitudes. ‘The Playhouse’ suggests ideas of playing, of ‘pretending’, like children ‘play at’ something, of ‘in play’ – i.e. semantically, it suggests playing with that which is not real and known not to be so. It cuts right against our ideas of theatrical illusion, and makes quite anachronistic [Coleridge](#)’s wonderful phrase about the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’.

Burbage’s Theatre was very successful indeed, and several other theatres sprang up in imitation in the next decade or so. The men who had interests in these commercial theatres were often involved in other enterprises to do with what we could call entertainment, like bull- and bear-baiting, cockfighting, and the management or at least leasing of brothels. Several died very rich; not all playwrights and actors did. But this convergence of interests did nothing to help the reputation of the playhouses in the eyes of the moralists, who had other reasons to distrust them as well, and it would have been very easy for the company to have provided the bear Harry Hunks for the most famous stage direction in Shakespeare, ‘Exit pursued by a bear’.¹ The new theatres were used for other things besides plays: for exhibition bouts of fencing, for example, with the old English broadsword that in the nineties was superseded, for gentlemen at least, by the new point weapon, the Italianate rapier. Indeed, the most famous player of clown parts of his generation, Richard Tarleton, was a Master of Fence: you won that title by defeating twelve other masters in twenty four hours. In the seventeenth century the English community at Gdansk had a theatre, which we know was used for such exhibition bouts. Audiences watching a stage fight were connoisseurs, and what the Royal Shakespeare Company puts on would not have passed muster with them.

Several important theatres were in Southwark. Nearly all the public theatres were outside the territorial limits of the jurisdiction of the magistrates of the City of London, who were consistently hostile to plays, playing and theatres, and petitioned the Privy Council frequently for the playhouses to be closed down. Southwark, on the South Bank of the Thames, was connected to the City by London Bridge, with its houses and shops, like the Ponte Vecchio in Venice, and its gatehouse at the south

¹ For an introductory discussion of bear baiting, go to:
http://www.crhs.rsb.qc.ca/teachers/Ivan_Andrea/shakespeare/bear_baiting_2.htm

end, surmounted by the rotting severed heads of people executed under the draconian treason laws.¹ By 1600 Southwark had about 10 per cent of London's total population of around 200,000, and it was the second largest urban area in England. The difficulty of controlling this area – you can see a close up of it in the Visscher engraving (see note 1) – divided as it was between several landholders and several legal jurisdictions, of which the largest was that of the Bishop of Winchester, made it the natural place for all sorts of noisome trades, like tanneries, soapboiling works, bleaching grounds – all pretty smelly. (Our ancestors lived in a very smelly world – smoke and sewage were the dominant smells of towns.) Tanneries used rotting oak bark and dog excrement to pickle the already smelly raw hides; the smoke from soapboiling was mainly coal smoke, and bleaching used not only sunlight but also sour milk, which can smell appalling. One interesting thing that came out of the excavations a few years back at the Rose Theatre was the discovery that the ash from the soap boiling, and the hazel shells from the nuts that were crushed for oil to make the soap, were used by the ton as a very effective and nearly waterproof flooring for the yard, laid slightly sloping to allow draining of rain and other less innocent liquids into the drain.

But as well as its industry, Southwark was noted for all sorts of pleasures. It had one of the most famous of inns, the Tabard, whence Chaucer's pilgrims set off for Canterbury, and which stood till the 1830s. It was on the edge of a pleasant semi-rural pattern of lanes and gardens, and it was noted for bear and bull baiting, and for its brothels. Ironically, the ground landlord of many of the brothels was the Bishopric of Winchester – hence the cant term for a prostitute 'a Winchester goose'. In 1583 Southwark was cited as a place for 'unchaste interludes and bargains of incontinence'. Modern street names, like Maiden Lane and Cardinal's Cap Alley, just by the new Globe, record the ironic attitude to the pleasures there offered.

Naturally, already a place for popular pleasure, it was where the theatres would gravitate: The Rose was built here in 1587, and the Globe in 1599, outside the very hostile control of the City magistrates – as all public theatres, for their own good, had to be.²

¹ Do look, before you read further, at the beautiful engraving of London by Claus Visscher, which appeared about 1616. It's not as reliable in detail as some others, but it is a lovely piece of work: you can see it, and enlarged sections of it, at <http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com/tlondon.htm>.

² A very useful map of the location of the theatres, with detailed notes on each, is at <http://www.william-shakespeare.info/william-shakespeare-visiting-new-globe-theatre-london.htm>.

Allegory

Allegory is a form of extended metaphor, in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative, are equated with the meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. The underlying meaning has moral, social, religious, or political significance, and characters are often personifications of abstract ideas as Charity, Greed, or Envy, Truth, Good Counsel, England, Nobility, Clergy. Thus an allegory is a story with two meanings, a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning.

Examples:

Spenser, *Faerie Queen*

Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*

Orwell, *Animal Farm*

Carnival

‘Carnival’ has come down in the world. The word implies a celebration of the flesh (Latin, *caro*, *carnis*), and the carnivals that exist today are mild compared to the unbridled lusting, bingeing, and general physical mayhem that occurred each year in pre-Reformation Europe. Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* is a wonderful discussion of the phenomenon and offers a persuasive interpretative model to scholars. His starting point is the French Renaissance author François Rabelais. Within the scatological writing of Rabelais – for example a monastery called Thélème (Greek for ‘desire’) where the signal for dinner is when a monk beats a nun’s bare bottom – there exists, he claims, the necessary evidence to discover the history of folk humour, as well as the actual practices of the Renaissance carnival. (Paintings like those of the Bruegel family and Hieronymus Bosch offer good evidence too.) The Renaissance carnival culture involves the ‘temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men ... and of the prohibitions of usual life’ (p15). Those who took part in the carnival immersed themselves in eating, drinking and the pursuits of the flesh that often follow those activities – and, by convention, no questions asked afterwards when everyone sobered up. Bakhtin divides the **carnivalesque** into three forms: ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various genres of abusive language. Although Bakhtin separates the forms of the carnivalesque, they are often connected within the carnival.

Coleridge, 'willing suspension of disbelief'

Coleridge: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Chapter XIV, uses this wonderful but sometimes misleading phrase in his description of how *The Lyrical Ballads* came to be written. The whole passage is worth quoting:

‘During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves.

In this idea originated the plan of the ‘Lyrical Ballads’; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet **so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.** Mr. Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.’

Convention

Convention: all societies, all art forms, operate on conventions. They are essential to understanding. In terms of art, poetry, music and drama, convention may be defined as an area of agreement between audience and author where the terms of the discussion are taken for granted, and the focus of interest lies in what will be made with those terms. And they can be used negatively or positively, and are equally powerful in either direction.

What in fact we are here touching on is a most important concept, to which this book will return many times. The use of coloured drapes on the stage, or flags on the tower, as a signal is an example of that non-verbal language, that area of common assumption, of convention. Anyone who does not share that common ground, and relies only on the spoken or written words, is highly likely to get things awry. In our own day, we have conventions every bit as complex as those of earlier periods; to take one example only, the Western film as a genre tends to employ a certain type of plot, with certain set features: the shoot-out as climax, the ritualisation of conflict, a moral frame where the good guys usually win over impossible odds. For example, imagine a scene: a bar with a man quietly drinking. Suddenly the swing doors are kicked open and everyone turns round. You know exactly what is going to happen, and who has come in. But if the newcomer comes in and sits down and asks for a nice cup of tea, the convention has still been used – negatively. The convention may even extend to details like giving the villains black hats. Of course, once the language is established, a director can play with it, even invert it, in the sure knowledge that his audience's acceptance of the norm allows him this freedom to play variations on it. Convention, properly used, is a liberating rather than restricting thing. But to learn the convention one does not run to critical works on Film; one watches films. It is exactly thus with the drama, poetry, painting and music of periods other than our own; the shared language can in considerable part be recovered by alert experience of many works, which is how it was developed and used in the first place. But sometimes one needs a short theoretical discussion, even classification, to get started, much as we would look at a map to understand the country we have to traverse.

Essex

The Earl of Essex, Robert Devereux, (1566–1601) was the last of Queen Elizabeth's favourites. On his father's death in 1576, Lord Burghley became his guardian and his mother married the Earl of Leicester, whom some think Elizabeth at one point nearly married. At Court, where he arrived in Elizabeth's fifty-fourth year (1586), the Queen indulged in many flirtations with him, but also in many quarrels, in the course of which his hot temper and jealousy always allowed her to get the better. But she had genuine affection for him, probably more of a maternal than an amatory character: she was always anxious when hotheaded Essex went to the wars, which he often did (sometimes against her express command) and in which he always behaved himself with conspicuous daring if not with the prudence becoming a general. Essex was always calling for open war with Spain and for an efficient army, but was also perpetually quarrelling with his rivals at Court or in camp – now with Raleigh, now with Blount, now with the Cecils; and his idea of a quarrel was to fight a duel to the death if possible. (Which uses up a lot of courtiers...) In 1591, he commanded, with more valour than discretion, a small English force sent to France to help Henry IV against the Catholic League. Whenever he was abroad, he was always complaining of the way his rivals, especially Burghley's son Robert Cecil, were undermining his influence at home.

All Essex's enemies were delighted – not many others were – when he teased the Queen into giving him command of the great expedition to Ireland in 1599. Ireland was the grave of his brilliant father's reputation – and of many more people. He had to face the worst rebellion yet known in the island, with the certainty that Spanish help was near. Once in Ireland, he made a pretty mess of things. Instead of driving at the Earl of Tyrone's power base in Ulster, he made a useless progress through Munster; and, when at last he turned northwards, Tyrone trapped him into a parley in which he concluded a wholly unauthorized truce and undertook to present Tyrone's demands to the English government. The Queen was furious and Essex made matters worse by deserting his army and hurrying to England.

He was under semi-arrest for nine months. In June 1600, he was brought to trial before a special court. No sentence was passed beyond dismissal from his offices and imprisonment in his own house, and he was set at liberty in August. However, he had lost the favour of the Queen for good, and this disgrace was one he could not stomach. He knew that Cecil and other courtiers were his sworn enemies and he now entertained the absurd idea of using force.

Essex intrigued with James VI of Scotland to induce him to support a rising, and he begged Lord Mountjoy, who had succeeded to his command in Ireland, to land troops in Wales. Essex was a bad head for any rebellion, though, and the London mob, with whom he really was popular, was not so foolish as to rise in his support. Essex was beheaded on 25th February 1601. Vain and rash, lacking any statesmanship, Essex's birth gave him a position of authority for which he was wholly unfitted. But he did possess qualities which endeared him even to those with whom he quarrelled: frankness, warm affection and generosity and, in war, the courage of a hero of Romance. Some thought – perhaps Essex thought – that in him was an answer to England's woes, a Bolingbroke to Elizabeth's Richard. His idea of nobility, the glamour of the fighting man, was much more attractive than the patient, detailed, managing and intriguing of really able men like Burghley and his son Robert Cecil. The fundamental clash between the parties was a clash between two ideologies, between what the French called *noblesse de robe* and *noblesse d'épée*: on the one hand, a myth of military glory and chivalry such as, Essexians and romantics argued, had made England great in the past – the 'England of Henry V'; on the other, a modern emphasis on government, law, accounts, record keeping and money. The future lay there, and Essex did not to his cost realise it.

Folio

Paper was made by hand in single sheets in a mould. Unfolded, that was a broadsheet – and the size was not constant, but varied from maker to maker with the size of the mould. (Hence old names for paper sizes like Demy, Foolscap, Royal, Crown, Elephant.) Folded once, it made four folio pages. Folded twice, it was quarto (a quarter the size of the broadsheet) and gave eight pages. Folded three times, octavo, is gave sixteen pages, and so on down to duodecimo and 16^{mo}. Roughly speaking, broadsheet was too big to handle comfortably – it was about the size of a poster. Folio was the top of the range, smart format; and the smaller the format, on the whole, the cheaper – you had less work to do in the actual printing in the press, if you think about it.

Gestures and body language

A seminal discussion of Elizabethan acting styles is in B. L. Joseph, *Elizabethan Acting* (Oxford, 1951). Critics have argued that styles of acting may be inferred from the way plays are constructed: Clifford Leech, for example, argued that for Marlowe there was only one manner, depending primarily on the set speech and secondly on the choric use of comedy. The realistic – in props and even the depiction of emotion – might jostle with the stylised. (Alan Downer argued this well in ‘Prolegomenon to a Study of Elizabethan Acting’, *Maske und Cothurn*, X (1964) 625–36). But over the period of our study, when everything else is changing so fast, there must have been changes, of emphasis at least. As Andrew Gurr has pointed out, from about 1600 the convincing portrayal of ‘character’ becomes important enough to require the use of a new term in the language of acting: ‘personating’ (the coinage is Marston’s). No longer is the delivery and modulation of the voice the only thing to be admired. (Andrew Gurr first advanced this argument in *Studies in Philology*, LXIII (1964) 144–5.) Nevertheless, stylized gesture remained important. John Bulwer (1606–56) wrote five books on the semiotics of the human body, with most attention given to gesture. Gesture was an important element in rhetorical theory. In *Chirologia, or the Natural Language of the Hand whereunto is added Chironomia, or the Art of Manual Rhetoric* (1642; reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1975); he has page after page of detailed woodcuts showing how precisely meaning can be conveyed by gesture. (He also wrote a book to help deaf and dumb people.) I reproduce here three plates:



FIG. 1



FIG. 5



FIG. 4

Nasty nineties

Conditions were worsening at the end of Elizabeth's reign. There was a lot of anxiety, of social tension (which may be reflected in *Julius Caesar*, and echoed in Bates and Williams in *Henry V*), there were bad harvests, which some linked to the infertility and barrenness of the Queen. There was starvation, inflation, and ecclesiastical unrest as well.

There were wars in the Netherlands, wars against Spain. The second and third Armadas (1591, 1599) sustained a constant sense of threat. There was panic mobilisation in Summer 1599, leaving the harvest at risk, and Privy Council almost had its way to sink ships to block the Thames.

In France, there was religious war. In Ireland, Tyrone's rebellion was a very serious and nearly successful challenge to English suzerainty and settlement. There were fears that war might escalate, and involve Spanish invasion. There are many Plays representing current wars and battles, with real people represented, and after 1600 there is a lot more scepticism about glory and war. (Consider *Troilus and Cressida* and *Coriolanus*) The morality of war was very much the material of sermons, and books about the godly man's duty to Prince and country.

Furthermore, the nineties saw the deaths of the old guard, the people Elizabeth had relied on for years: Leicester in 1588, Mildmay in 1589, Walsingham and the Earl of Warwick in 1590, Hatton in 1591. The great Burleigh himself died in August 1598. The new elite, the new court, was factious, and the bad temperedness of Court was well-known. Above all, there was the uncertainty of the succession to Elizabeth, and a lot of debate about the right type of government or polity. Discussion of the succession was forbidden.

1599–1603 were especially fearful, tense years.

Poetic giants of the Latin past

Renaissance Education was based on a command of Latin, which educated people (mainly male) started at a very early age. Most serious discussions, in art, literature, philosophy, law, theology were conducted on a Europe-wide basis in Latin until well into the eighteenth century. The great poets and writers of Rome – Vergil, Horace, Livy, Ovid, for example – were central to the curriculum, and formed the taste and standards, common frame of reference of the Renaissance. To emulate and surpass ‘all that Glorious Greece and haughty Rome brought forth’, as Ben Jonson put it in his poem on Shakespeare in the First Folio (1623) of Shakespeare’s Works, was the ambition of a Christian society newly confident that it had learned as much as it could from the great pagans of the past.

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