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New Allusions to London ‘Shewes’ and Playhouses, 1575–1605

The Court of Governors’ minute books for London’s Bridewell and Bethlem Hospitals contain a number of allusions to playgoing in the Elizabethan-Jacobean era. In five folio volumes, currently held at the Royal Bethlem Hospital Archives and Museum, Beckenham, Kent, England (with microfilm copies available at the Guildhall Library, London) minutes are entered for the following years: (1) 1559–62, (2) 1574–76, (3) 1576–79, (4) 1597–1604 (5) 1604–10.¹ Records for the intervening years are unfortunately lost. The volumes contain clerked depositions, confessions, and witness statements taken in the prosecution of vagrants, pickpockets, runaways, adulterers and prostitutes. A very small number of prosecutions make reference to theatrical activity. Since these allusions principally involve persons of lower social status, they have some bearing on the controversy over ‘privileged’ and ‘unprivileged’ playgoers generated by Ann Jenalie Cook’s influential work, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare’s London: 1576–1642*. Cook’s thesis that Elizabethan audiences comprised almost entirely of the ‘privileged’ or wealthier class has been strenuously criticised by Martin Butler who argued, in *Theatre and Crisis, 1632–1642*, that the public playhouses attracted far more socially diverse audiences than Cook suggested. In a subsequent essay, Cook has gone some way towards conceding Butler’s argument. More recently, Arthur F. Kinney has cited further evidence in favour of the view that ‘Shakespeare’s playhouse attracted men and women from all the social strata’. Andrew Gurr’s *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London*, the most thorough study of the subject, gives names and details of several apprentices, serving men and women, butchers, sailors, a waterman, and an alebrewer, all attending plays in early modern London on at least one occasion. The Bridewell allusions add to these sources but since they arise as fragmentary incidental detail in the course of an examination, they give only slight indication as to the possible social composition of audiences attending plays in the Tudor and Stuart periods. That so few references to theatre attendance should occur in the Bridewell archives is noteworthy and plainly at odds with a complaint by the Lord Mayor to Sir Francis Walsingham

in 1583 that playhouses such as the Theatre and Curtain attracted ‘great multitudes of the basist sort of people’.²

The earliest reference to playing so far found in the Bridewell archive touches on official anxiety about springtime festivities and their potential for provoking civic disturbance. On 8 June 1575, Simon Williams, a tailor’s apprentice, was arraigned ‘for his evell speaches & Raylinge againste certen of the Doctors of Civill lawe’. In particular, the governors wanted to know what part he had played in planning or celebrating recent ‘may games’ about the city. Williams’s response was a flat denial:

He saieth he knewe of no maye game that sholde haue bene broughte into London, & was not broughte, but onelie that *which* was in Southe warke, *which* was in whitsoniondaie last, he knewe of none to be *without* Temple Barre, he saieth he knewe of no other Maye game, he saieth he knewe of no Maye game *which* was broughte into Escheape on Sondaie last, nor to his knowledge he harde of none, And also he saieth he knoweth of no other greate Maye game intended to be broughte into this Citie, he saieth he *neuer* reported of anye suche matter intended, nor *neuer* vttered anye talke of anye suche vnless he were either Droncke, or madde, he saieth he is acquainted with one Thomas Allen a Tailor, And that hee sawe him a while since, for he was at home at his *Masters* with him, and that they wente together to drincke, but he denieth that he had anye take³ with him consernyng anye suche greate Maye game, or that he saide there shold be sene a Maye game, as the like was not sene this Cth yeres. He saieth further, at suche tyme as the same Thomas Allen and he were together, the said Thomas asked him as he saieth, what sporte was about this towne in the hollie daies, but he saieth he knewe of none but two or three drome & Aunsientes & suche like shewes in Southwarke, & other take he saieth he had none.

(2.114v–115)

This statement was, of course, taken before the building of the Theatre and Curtain playhouses in 1576, at a time when the city authorities had relatively little precedent for regulating public entertainment. The prospect of a processional may game ‘as the like was not seen this Cth yeres’ seems to have caused particular concern. Topographically, the interrogation sweeps from without Temple Bar by the liberty of Westminster to the much more central city location of Eastcheap, but Williams declared that the only ‘shewes’ of which he knew were harmless spectacles, one involving ‘drome & Aunsientes’ (ie, drum and insignia or colours, *OED* ancient, *n*, 2, 1) at Whitsun in Southwark. Suspecting that the defendant protested rather too much, the governors ordered Williams to be detained pending further investigation, and three days

later he was imprisoned indefinitely.⁴ His examination clearly highlights official sensitivities regarding apprentice-boy festivities that could easily get out of hand. Unruly apprentices frequently came before the Bridewell bench. Edward Nightingale, one of the hospital inmates and apprentice to Mr. Ballard, the hempmaster, was whipped on 18 November 1604, having ‘absented him self from his said *Masters service* all one after noone beinge a working Day and went to a play and att night came home Drunck’. When Ballard attempted to give him ‘correcsion’ the next morning, ‘the said Edward with a hitchell touth *which* he had before *provided* stabde at his *Master & stabde* him into the brest’. After punishment, Nightingale was returned to his Bridewell master (5.3v).

Although by popular assumption the public playhouses enjoyed a close connection with the London stews, relatively little historical evidence supports that view. It is important to bear in mind that, after the Bankside hot-houses closed under Henry VIII in 1546, the majority of Elizabethan brothels operated on the north side of the Thames. Amid hundreds of investigations conducted at Bridewell into prostitute activity, only a tiny handful show any sign of a link with the theatres. Suspected of prostitution, ‘Johane Barnes singelwoman’ was brought in on 19 December 1576, being ‘*with childe*’ and claiming to have been deceived by a promise of marriage: ‘the said Gabriell resortinge to her promysed to marry her but witnes she hath none’. Barnes stated that ‘one Gabriell Northe a Shipwrighte dwellinge on the bank syde’ was the father and that ‘yt was begotten in *westminster* in the howse of Henry Cartwright a player where she was *servant*’ (3.112v). Almost nothing more is known about this Henry Cartwright, ‘a player’, beyond the fact that he dwelt in Love Lane (3.136). Mark Benbow brought to light details regarding the Dutton brothers – Lawrence and John – both players with wives of doubtful reputation.⁵ They are cited in the deposition of John Shawe, a notorious brothel-keeper, who alleged on 2 January 1576/7 that ‘little margarett’, a harlot, resided ‘at the Bell beyond shoreditch church and there one Lawrence dutton kepes her he is a player & there is two brethren and by reporte both ther wyves are whores’. A further statement made two years later by Anne Tringough on 9 January 1578/9 may refer to either of the brothers’ spouses, identifying John Shawe and his wife as being ‘of Est Smythfeilde’: ‘Ther is one A players wiffe that cometh thether and Shawes wiffe fetcheth her’ (3.359v).

A dramatic performance was also a social occasion for early modern playgoers, and the Bridewell records give details of individuals meeting both during and after performances. On 8 May 1577, Anne Jervis testified against

a particularly notorious prostitute and procuress, Thomasyne Breame, who was also well known to Shawe:

Thomasen Breame on seuerall nightes in the wynter tyme about A yere sens laye at Thomas wises house in whytefriers one night she had bene at a play And then she came thether and one George Rowles a denshere[man] gentleman supped with her And then she lay ther all night wises wiffe lay with Thomasen Breame this was the second night.

(3.214v)

We do not know which playhouse Breame attended, nor the play performed, but the statement hints at a late afternoon show finishing before supper, which was usually around six o'clock. That performances sometimes ran late is indicated by the lord chamberlain's request to the lord mayor in 1594 that plays be scheduled between two and five o'clock, and not from four in the afternoon as was customary in summer months.⁶ No further details regarding the play are given.

It was not only prostitutes who took advantage of post-performance liaisons. Plays could provide opportunities for male sexual predation. Although the Bell Inn was officially licensed by the city corporation in 1583 as a location for the Queen's Men to play 'at the sygnes of the Bull in Bushopsgate streete and the sygne of the Bell in Gratioustreete, and nowheare els within this Cittye', it had hosted plays throughout the 1570s.⁷ On 28 February 1578, Elizabeth Everys dwelling in Bishopsgate confessed that 'at A playe at the bell at Bysshopsgate', she met '[Beniamyn] one mr Gunston whoe askinge wher she dwelte he gave her a piece of golde of v s. and bid her buye her A payre of gloves and were them for his sake' (3.374). About a year later, on 12 June 1579, Jane Wolmer, alias Dover, who for an unspecified offence had already spent three days in the Marshalsea, explained that she went with 'one ffrier of Glostershere and one of my *Lord* of Lecesters men' to 'a playe to the curtayne wth one Chambers and his wife of tholde [balye] chandge wher she laie' (3.393). The company playing at the Curtain at this time is not known. E. K. Chambers recorded in a footnote Fleay's supposition that Sussex's played there in the years 1576–83, only to add, 'But of course, this *is* guessing'.⁸ Although the Bridewell deposition tells us much less than we would want to know, the allusion to 'one of my *Lord* of Lecesters men' does at least associate Leicester's retinue with London at this time. Leicester's players were on tour throughout 1579–80 at Ipswich and Durham, and it is possible that they returned to the metropolis for the summer.

Another case involving post-performance intimacy concerns Alice Pinder, wife of 'William Pinder of London gentleman'. On 7 November 1600, Alice confessed that 'one Mathew Eaton a barbersergion' had 'thuse and Carnall knowledge of her body two seuerall tymes about Midsommer last past before the grate herth in his house'. She also confessed that,

one mr welche whose Christen name she taketh to be Robert lyeng in the Blackfryeres gentlemen taking acquaintance of her comming from a playe did send for her by his man at midsommer last past to Mr Eatons howse where she laye to come to him in Smythfeild where he had a Cooch redy and tooke her into the said Cooch with him and carried her to Stratford the Bowe where he had thuse and carnall knowledge of her bodye

(4.190v–191)

In all likelihood, Pinder was returning from a performance at the second Blackfriars, a private theatre that one might expect members of the gentry to attend. Established by James Burbage in 1596, and passed on his decease to his son Richard, it was subsequently let to Henry Evans and Nathaniel Giles in 1600 for performances by the recently revived Children of the Chapel. Hitherto, their earliest recorded performance has been understood to have taken place at court on 6 January where, in addition to three plays (including Shakespeare's 'Twelfth day at night'), the Queen had 'a show with musycke and speciall songs', prepared by the Chapel Children, which Chambers took to be Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels*.⁹ But if Blackfriars was the theatre from which Pinder returned on that evening prior to 'midsommer last' when Welche's man sent for her, then the Children at Blackfriars must have been revived earlier than has been supposed, plausibly even as early as 1599, prior to the change of year at Lady Day on 25 March 1600.

Playhouses were prominent London landmarks, and could serve to designate an address or dwelling-place. Joan Bassett, 'A harlott', was arrested with Stephen Coke, a cobbler, 'at a barnside nere the Theator suspitiously by the constables'. Brought into Bridewell on 21 March 1578, she confessed to the constable 'that he woulde haue abused her if tyme had served'. Both Bassett and Coke were 'ponished' and released (3.379). A more distinctive case occurring near the Theatre involved another cobbler, John Gosse, sent in by Sir Owen Hopton on 15 August 1579 to be punished,

for that he toke 2 seuerall yonge childrene one william Perpointe and another which he mett in the stretes and carried them into the feildes by the theator and ther cruellye whipped them with willoe rodde verye villenouslye abused them

with stripes, and did it of A delighte that he had therin as Sir Owen Hopton writeth.

The governors deemed Gosse's offence so heinous that they notified the London recorder, and sentenced Gosse to be 'whipped at a cartes taile on mondaie next through London' (3.413). Just over a month later, one John Brone (or Brown?), a 'ropemaker of the theator' was brought into Bridewell 'for cosonedge' on 3 October 1579 (3.428). The tantalisingly brief allusion suggests merely that Brone was an occupant of one of the tenements that stood close by the playhouse named the Theatre.¹⁰

Lastly, the Bridewell Minute Books make two references to the Rose in a period when it seems to have been in decline. An entry in Henslowe's diary for 25 June 1603 records his willingness to countenance pulling the playhouse down if he were forced to pay £20 per year rent and 'a hundred marckes upon bildinge' demanded by 'Mr Pope'.¹¹ Aside from the *Diary*, all that attests to the Rose in the years 1604–6 is a brief series of fines regarding its lease. Some new detail occurs in the deposition of Frances Fisher on 17 November 1604, 'formerly ponished for' falsely 'accusing diuers gentlemen to be father of her Childe'. Fisher had first accused a 'Mr Carye' but subsequently changed her story to assert that 'one Mr Palmer is the true ffather thereof'. The governors thought fit to release her, 'for that she *promiseth* to be the meanes to apprehend one Stephen Haward a *keeper* of the playe howse dore called the Rose on the banckside whoe hath bynn the causer of her thus to wronge Mr Carye' (5.2). If the Rose was still functioning as a playhouse at this time, it may not have been a year later when Frances 'Fishe' – presumably Fisher – was again arrested and brought in on 17 September 1605, this time as a pregnant vagrant woman. Under examination, she claimed that 'one Richwell a doorekeeper of the Rose Playhowse is father of her childe *which* she now goeth with, and hee is now in the Countrie: Shee saith she was married at St Dunstones to him deliuered *per* Curiam great with Childe' (5.54v). No trace of this marriage has yet come to light.

Overall, the Bridewell allusions confirm the impression that London's public playhouses were places of resort for most though not all classes of Elizabethan and Jacobean society. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we still have no evidence of persons from the very poorest social levels, for example vagrants, single women with child, beggars, or invalids, attending plays. It seems also that apprentices risked punishment if they absented themselves from work to see plays, though clearly it was a risk that a few were willing to take. Moreover, the playgoers mentioned in the archive tended to be people of some, if limited,

means. The Bridewell allusions thus suggest not exactly a *via media* between Cook and Butler's positions but that early modern playgoers probably included few apprentices and belonged mainly to social strata from the lower 'middling sort' upwards. It would naturally be a mistake to build too much upon these few brief references to the major playhouses of the Elizabethan-Jacobean era since they evidently conceal a great deal more than they disclose. Yet limited as they are, these examples add local colour to our understanding of playgoing among the 'middling' and lower levels of society, and illumine those whose connection with the early modern theatres may have been slight but not immaterial.

Notes

- 1 All citations from the Court of Governors' minute books for London's Bridewell and Bethlem Hospitals (hereafter BCB) courtesy of Bethlem Royal Hospital, Archives and Museum, Beckenham, Kent. Microfilms at Guildhall Library, London, MS 330001–433. Brackets in transcriptions indicate crossed-out words; upper half brackets indicate insertions; and italics indicate expansions.
- 2 Ann Jenalie Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London: 1576–1642* (Princeton, 1981), Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis, 1632–1642* (Cambridge, 1984), 293–306, Ann Jenalie Cook, 'Audiences', in John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (eds), *A New History of Early English Drama* (New York, 1997), 305–20, Arthur F. Kinney, *Shakespeare by Stages* (Oxford, 2003), Ch. 3, Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge, 2004), Third edition, see Appendix 1, 224–46. For the lord mayor's letter to Walsingham, see E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford, 1923, rpt. 1974), 4. 294.
- 3 This occurrence of 'take' (ie, talk) was written over an erasure.
- 4 BCB, 2, f 116v.
- 5 R.M. Benbow, 'Dutton and Goffe versus Broughton: A disputed contract for plays in the 1570s', *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter* (1981: 2), 3–9.
- 6 Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4.316.
- 7 Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4.296. Duncan Salkeld, 'The Bell and the Bel Savage Inns, 1576–1577', *Notes and Queries* 249 [n.s. 51].3 (September 2004), 242–3.
- 8 Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 2. 402, 3n.
- 9 Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 2. 42–3.

- 10 Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 2. 386.
- 11 Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 2. 409–10.