Between the 1520s, when John Skelton wrote his great play Magnificence for a company of no more than five players, and 1587, when Christopher Marlowe’s even more amazing Tamburlaine struck the London stage for the first time, played by a company of twelve men and four boys, both the writing of plays and the companies that performed them grew strikingly in their scope and their capacity to grip audiences. When Shakespeare arrived in London near the end of the great decade of the 1580s, he rode the crest of a huge wave of pleasure in playgoing. Through the last decade of the sixteenth century, he helped to generate an enthusiasm for seeing and hearing plays that has lasted through all subsequent centuries.

Shakespeare’s subjects were new, and the whole enterprise was a business of rapid and radical innovation. His plays, built on the success of those produced by writers such as Marlowe and Thomas Kyd through the 1580s, developed their appeal to a wide spectrum of London’s society, literate and illiterate alike, and to the city’s many visitors from overseas. (See Chapters 114, “Christopher Marlowe,” and 116, “Thomas Kyd.”) They made the powerful beat of what Ben Jonson called “Marlowe’s mighty line,” decasyllabic blank verse, into a new norm for dramatic speech. Above them all, Marlowe produced radically fresh subjects to entertain playgoers, in comedy, tragedy, and in plays about English history (Lunney 56–63). London responded with massive approval. Making plays for the new stages that began to appear on the city’s outskirts in the 1570s quickly became a major commercial enterprise.

Acting companies
Acting companies work as teams, each member playing their own part in the shared production. That was particularly true for the playing companies of the late sixteenth century. Each of the eight or more senior players took an equal share in the costs and profits of the company. In a heavily authoritarian society, ruled by a monarch and the lords of the many manors throughout the country, they were almost uniquely democratic, organized as equal “sharers” in their company. Shakespeare began as a player and never rose above the rank of sharer in the fortunes of the companies he belonged to. It was with his help, as a writer and a fellow player, that his main company, founded in 1594 under the patronage of Lord Chamberlain and later to run under the king’s own name, became the greatest of its time or any other. It stood out as the best in London for forty-eight years until, at the outset of England’s greatest social conflict, their patron King Charles, who had strongly favored playgoing, had to flee from London, whereupon Parliament, with the city its main base, closed all the playhouses.

Playgoing
For Londoners, playgoing became the most popular leisure activity from the 1570s on, and its amazingly rapid growth had widespread impact. (See Chapter 13, “Audiences and Playgoing.”) The most pressing was the imposition of government control. As thousands of people flocked to see and hear plays, the authorities found it vital to regulate what was done at the various playgoing venues. First, the Privy Council, chief instrument of Queen Elizabeth’s government, introduced censorship by adding to the duties of the Master of the Queen’s Revels the job of reading all plays before they could be staged. From 1578, he applied his signature of approval to the end of every play manuscript to “allow” it for public staging. Even before that, once London’s first two playhouses were built in the suburbs, successive Lord Mayors started protesting against any plays being staged, ostensibly on religious and moral grounds but equally because they were performed on the afternoons of working days. The aldermen at Guildhall who elected the Lord Mayor annually were all citizen employers, and many of them objected to their vulnerable younger workers’ going to plays. Even more worryingly for the authorities, controlling the crowds plays attracted was...
seen as a major problem, since London then had no regular police force. Checking riotous crowds was the Lord Mayor’s duty, and many letters went to the Privy Council claiming that dangerous plots were being laid by mobs of apprentices meeting at plays.

**Sharers**

Through this early period, the professional playing companies, its sharing members officially servants to a lord whose name and livery they carried around the country with them (though they rarely got any pay from him), used the city’s large inns for their plays as well as the two and later three specially built suburban playhouses. Each venue attracted many apprentices and artisans taking time off from their daily work. Successive Lord Mayors in the 1570s and 1580s sent letters of complaint to the Privy Council and especially the Lord Chamberlain. One of the Lord Chamberlain’s duties, however, was to provide plays to entertain the queen for her Christmas festivities. In 1583, the Council responded to mayoral complaints by strengthening the status of the players. It created a new company made up of all the leading players of the time then haunting London under the patronage of competing lords, eager to exhibit their own grandeur by having their liveried servants stage their plays at court. The Council ensured the new deal by securing the queen herself as the new company’s patron. From 1583 on, it carried the name and livery of the Queen’s Men around the country and in London. With such royal protection, the Lord Mayor, however reluctantly, had to concede their right to play at the city’s inns, as well as taking her colors around the country. At different times, this new company also used both of the existing playhouses recently built in London’s northern suburb of Shoreditch.

Over the next ten years, the Queen’s Men’s primary status gradually eroded as other companies came to outshine them, and their most celebrated sharers, such as the clown Richard Tarlton, died. A ferocious epidemic of plague in 1593 halted all playing for over a year, causing several of the leading companies to collapse. As a result, in May 1594, two of the leading Privy Councillors set up a variant on the 1583 model, this time creating two new companies under their own names, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men and the Lord Admiral’s Men. Each had as patron one of the two Councillors most closely interested in supporting playing.

**The duopoly**

Having two companies gave better assurance that high-quality playing would survive than did the 1583 model. It followed the government’s general principle of favoring monopolies for the control it gave them over their activities, and as a result the two companies created in 1594 have been called a “duopoly” (Dutton, Revels 111). To appease the Lord Mayor, each of the two was allocated not to a playing inn inside the city but to an existing suburban playhouse. This seems to have followed a deal with Guildhall that gave the Lord Mayor what he had long demanded, a ban on any playing at inns inside the city. The Lord Admiral’s company took Edward Alleyn as its leading player and settled at the Rose playhouse, which was owned by Alleyn’s father-in-law, Philip Henslowe. (See Chapter 122, “Edward Alleyn and Philip Henslowe.”) Alleyn, even while playing for other companies, had been wearing the Lord Admiral’s livery for the previous ten years. Similarly, the Lord Chamberlain had been keeping James Burbage, owner of the Theatre playhouse, in his own livery. Like Alleyn with Henslowe, Burbage’s son Richard became leader of the second company. Both companies received the best promise for their futures that the Council and the Chamberlain’s executive officer, the Master of the Revels, could provide. One of the two was given all of Marlowe’s plays and other popular plays already in Alleyn’s extensive repertoire, and the other took Shakespeare and the eight or nine of his plays already staged by then.

This duopoly ruled London’s stages for the next six years, although other companies kept trying to intrude as equal providers of public entertainment. It was a wonderfully prosperous time for London’s playgoers. Through all of those years, until Christmas 1600, the Master of the Revels maintained the pattern of 1594, allowing only the two companies to perform before the royal court. But the pressure from other companies to perform in London remained. By the time James I assumed the throne from Elizabeth I in 1603, three companies, plus two more composed of boy players, were all offering plays. James gave all three adult companies royal approval by making himself patron of one, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. He made his elder son patron of the Lord Admiral’s Men, and he gave the third company to his queen, Anne. Later on, he had two new companies set up for his two younger children.

**Royal patronage**

By the time of King James, playgoing was so dominant a feature of London’s activities that the writers of royal patents, essential to validate the workings of each of the royally patronized acting companies, conceded openly that all the companies had a secondary duty, after entertaining the royal family, to serve the public in London. In his letter patent of May 19, 1603, for the King’s Men, James announced that

> Wee of our speciall grace ... have licenced and authorized ... theise our Servauntes lawrence Fletcher William Shakespeare Richard Burbage Augustyne Phillippes John Heninges henrie Condell William Sly Robert Armyn Richard Cowly and the rest of theire Associates freely to use and exercise the Arte and faculty of playinge Comedies Tragedies histories Enterlude moralls pastoralls Stageplaies, and Suche others like...
as there have already studied or hereafter shall use or study as well for the recreation of our lovinge Subjectes as for our Solace and pleasure when wee shall thinke good to see them duringe our pleasure. (Greg 1.3.264)

The acknowledgment that public playing for “the recreation of our lovinge Subjectes” was a basic function of the companies was an explicit royal assertion that copied the establishment of the Queen’s Men in 1583 in affirming both royal and popular support for this noncivic pastime. The long-running fact of royal support for all the popular appeal of plays was what in 1642 directly inspired Parliament, based as it was firmly in London, to order the closure of all the playhouses.

From the beginning of James’s reign, at least four or five companies performed regularly in London, most of them offering a play every afternoon for six days of the week (daylight was essential for performances everywhere except the court, whether plays were staged outdoors or inside). Each performance was of a different play. The modern practice of running plays for a week or longer did not develop until the last few years up to 1642, when there were enough companies competing with each other to allow any especially popular play to have an extended run. The daily records that survive for the Lord Admiral’s Men in the 1590s show that no play was performed twice in succession, and even the most popular plays only recurred once every two or three weeks. Easily the most notorious of the first long runs was Thomas Middleton’s A Game at Chess, a sensational anti-Spanish satire staged by the King’s company for nine days in August 1624. The company took care not to stage it until King James and the court were out of town for the horse racing at Newmarket. Their absence allowed the play to run to packed houses at the Globe until word, notably from the Spanish ambassador, reached King James.

In earlier years, as the professional companies with senior noblemen as their patrons expanded in size and capacity, they needed to carry only a few plays around the country. The same two or three plays could be performed in each place they stopped. London, however, was a different matter. The demand was massive, and in the nature of playgoing it created a need for constant change. The few companies able to hold a place there had to provide constant novelty. The effect on writers was a sharp rise in demand to keep supplying the companies with new and better plays. By the early 1580s, new fashions and new styles of writing, above all Marlowe’s supreme exploitation of blank verse, brought thousands of people six days a week to the playhouses and city inns.

**Staging**

The tradition the London companies then developed, of staging a different play every afternoon, is known from the one scrupulous daily record of playing kept over three years from 1594 to 1597. It supplies the titles for each play staged every day for three years by the Lord Admiral’s Men. Written by Philip Henslowe, who owned the Rose, where the company performed between 1594 and 1600, the records survive inside his great folio *Diary*, a set of jottings about the companies he ran at his Rose playhouse between 1592 and 1604. (See Chapter 122, “Edward Alleyn and Philip Henslowe.”) The *Diary* is an invaluable account of the financial inflows and outflows for one of the only two companies licensed to perform in London between 1594 and 1600.

That period was unique in London’s history. Playgoing had become hugely popular, and with only the two companies to provide plays, both needed a constantly changing repertory. Henslowe’s *Diary* shows them staging a different play daily six days a week, never performing any one play more than once a fortnight. Each play generally lasted in the repertory for up to six months, the best of them revived thereafter every two years or so. The Rose playhouse brought Londoners more than thirty different plays every year.

Henslowe’s records, together with the few Lord Admiral’s company plays from the period that got into print, show that the company developed some remarkably fresh tricks to cope with their quasi-unique eminence in London. They and their fellow monopolists soon found that the daily audiences landed them a special problem. Regular playgoers went so often to the Rose that they became habituated to recognizing Alleyn in the complete variety of his different roles. (See Figure 170.) One day he was Hieronimo, the next he might be Tamburlaine, Faustus, Barabbas, or any other of the mighty heroes and villains that he made famous. Regular playgoers would also be able to recognize his fellows in the other parts. The company responded to that feature of their playing by developing several tricks to cope with this unique familiarity. The best of them was using disguises, where the same player would openly pretend to be different people in the same play. It was a clever extension of the common practice of doubling minor parts, a routine activity whenever a play called for more speaking parts than the company had sharers to speak them. In a play by Antony Munday first staged in December 1594, *John a Kent and John a Cumber*, about two rival magicians, at one point the two confront each other while each is disguised as his opponent, John a Kent disguised as John a Cumber meeting John a Cumber disguised as John a Kent. Members of the audience familiar with both players would recognize what was going on instantly. Others might be confused at first, but soon learned to enjoy the trick.

**Innovations**

The Lord Admiral’s Men also introduced new topics for their writers to use in their plays. After 1596, they began making contemporary London the subject and the context
for comedies (Howard; Gurr, *Opposites* 38). When he started writing for Alleyn's company in 1596, George Chapman launched the disguise game in *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, giving Alleyn four different disguised roles, three of them parodying his stock roles from the Marlowe plays. In the next year, with *An Humorous Day's Mirth* he initiated the comedy of "humors," a device soon copied by Ben Jonson for the other duopoly company. (See Chapter 127, "Ben Jonson.") Also in 1597, William Haughton began to use contemporary London as a setting for city comedies, and in 1600 he augmented it with the first of a series of comedies about the devil visiting London, another device that Jonson later copied. In 1607, Shakespeare introduced in *Pericles* the new concept of tragicomedy, a mode that John Fletcher developed and that remained popular until Parliament closed all playhouses. (See Chapter 128, "John Fletcher.") By then, of course, the five and more companies performing daily had allowed the demand for new plays to shrink a little. Popular new plays now had short runs day by day. Not long after such runs began, the playhouse impresarios realized that they could pay their writers not with cash in advance but by giving them the third day's takings, thus ensuring that they could pay their writers not with cash in advance but by giving them the third day's takings, thus ensuring that the play was popular before they had to reach into their pockets.

**Timing**

Playing normally occupied what the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* called the "two houres trafficque of our Stage," through the afternoons of the working days in the week, Monday to Saturday. The acting companies normally expected to cut the longer playbooks some writers sold them to fit that length of time, trimming lengthy speeches and eliminating what they felt were scenes less necessary for the plot. Plays would begin, heralded by a flag waving from the top of the playhouse and a trumpet call to announce its commencement, usually at either two or three o'clock in the afternoon, depending on the season, and ended well before dark. Most people only knew the time that was signaled each hour by the church clocks, so the two hours for *Romeo and Juliet* could only have been a rough estimate. The need for vigorous action and rapid speech was essential at the outdoor playhouses, not least because the audiences closest to the stage were all on their feet throughout the performance. Standing places in the yard, the cheapest in any playhouse, were generally occupied by men, women, and children whom Hamlet contemptuously called "groundlings," the word for small fish with great mouths who sucked lichen off stones in the river bed. Gaping mouths must have been the dominant feature of what the upward-staring artisans and apprentices showed to the actors strutting on the stage boards at their head level.

The main feature of such playgoing, largely lost now, was an essential awareness of where you chose to stand or sit, and of the crowd crammed in with you shoulder to shoulder. This, together with the immediately recognizable faces of the players even when they had new roles in a new play, made the development of stage realism far less easy or even desirable than the technology of modern cinema now makes practicable. You could not easily forget that you were part of a crowd, giving ear and eye to a wholly fake imitation of reality. Consequently, the early plays developed what are known as meta-theatrical in-jokes, a feature of playgoing we can too easily ignore. Such in-jokes occur for instance when Polonius in *Hamlet* claims to have played Julius Caesar and was killed by Brutus. As the first audiences knew, the actor playing Hamlet himself had played Brutus opposite the other actor's Julius in the previous year's great play at the same playhouse, *Julius Caesar*. Edward Alleyn, playing Barabbas in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* at the Rose in 1594, claims that his hat "was sent me for a present from the great Cham," a comment that showed he had worn the identical hat when playing the hero in the company's other plays, *1* and 2 *Tamar Cham*. It was easy to make such jokes when the players and their audiences were so closely acquainted.

**Playing spaces**

Other features of staging in the early theaters depended on the shape of the stage and its main features, particularly the doors available for stage entrances from the tiring house, the backstage dressing room. The outdoor playhouses mostly had posts on their stages upholding a cover or "shadow" over it that protected the players and their costly garments from the rain. Normally, two opposing doors gave access from the tiring house behind the stage for the opposing sides in each play. (See Figure 15.) There was probably a more substantial opening in the center, for the entry of authority figures and for harmonious exits hand in hand at the play's close. The stage floor had a trapdoor, serving as the grave in Hamlet and allowing devils to emerge onto the stage from the hell that was assumed to be under the ground. Similarly, the heavens were above, and occasionally gods could be lowered from a trap in the painted "heavens" that covered the stage. Jupiter in *Cymbeline*, accompanied by fiery squibs with their sulfurous stink for his thunderbolts, and Juno's stately descent while others speak thirty lines of verse in *The Tempest*, were both designed to make use of this configuration with the stage as earth, heaven above, and hell below.

Along with the money the company paid for new playbooks, generally costumes were the most costly item they needed. (See Chapter 15, "Costumes.") Mostly they would act in their own clothes, although being "common" players the Tudor Sumptuary Laws barred them from wearing any clothes in the street that denoted a rank higher than their own. Velvet and satin were supposed to be exclusive to the gentry, who had the exclusive right to carry swords, and only the nobility were officially permitted to
wear ornaments of gold. Everyone’s social status was precisely defined by such clothing, and any player, above all one pretending to be a crowned king, could never wear his expensive costume outside the playhouse. John Davies of Hereford, in a sonnet addressed to Shakespeare, rightly identified his lowly status by writing

Hadst thou not plaid some Kingly parts in sport,
Thou hadst bin a companion for a King.

(qtd. in Chambers, Shakespeare 2: 214)

Even after he achieved the rank of gentleman for himself by securing his father’s claim to be a gentleman, and could thus walk the streets wearing a sword, Shakespeare could never use his actor’s noble attire outside the playhouse. Social rank was a matter of public display, and however much London society might admire a player when seeing his face, his pretensions to higher social rank would never have been tolerated outside the theater.

Acting

Playacting was a highly professional activity that took years of training. Senior sharers enlisted boys, taking them as their apprentices and training them in their various duties, including all the women’s parts. The players directed themselves, and an experienced company could take a new play from first reading to performance on the stage within three weeks. (See Chapter 18, “Production Processes.”) That process started with them learning the individual parts, practicing small and large group positioning, acquiring any special properties and costumes, rehearsing special moves, checking entrances and exits through the correct doorways, and establishing the choreography for group scenes and any processional marches the new play might require. Henslowe’s papers include lengthy inventories of costumes, some for clowns, others special outfits such as Lincoln green for the Robin Hood plays. His lists of properties include trees of different kinds, a moss bank, many swords and shields or “targets,” spears, halberds, hatchets (one of them made of wood, presumably for safety when used in executions or as a weapon), crowns and coronets, a pope’s mitre, a variety of musical instruments, and several special items such as a large cauldron for the ending of The Jew of Malta, a wheel and frame for The Siege of London, and a frame for a beheading in Saint Joan. (See Chapter 14, “Properties.”)

Acting companies

The professional playing companies were distinctive groups of self-employed men sharing their work and their assets equally among themselves. The players known as “sharers” took the speaking parts and invested their capital in the company. They took equal shares in both the costs and the rewards from their work. When they could afford it, they hired a playhouse or an inn in London along with a few spare players to augment their numbers. Some senior players employed boys, training them in the art of playing, especially the women’s parts, since no women were allowed to appear on the public stages.

This principle of sharing as a team set the playing groups against the more directly capitalist entrepreneurs in London, the men (and sometimes women) who rented them places to perform. At playhouses such as Henslowe’s Rose, the players paid their landlord half the takings from the galleries for each day of performance. The other half they took for themselves, plus the pennies earned from customers entering the playhouse yard. Their own costs, for special costumes, properties, and the wages of their hired hands, plus transport and accommodation whenever they had to travel outside London, came out of their earnings each day. Not surprisingly, most of the professional players were Londoners, their families based in London while the earning husbands traveled the country. In the Shakespeare company, only Shakespeare himself and John Heminges, who like Shakespeare emigrated to London, in his case from Worcestershire’s Droitwich, were non-Londoners. Presumably, in time they acquired the quasi-London nonvernacular accent that must have been fairly standard in all the companies basing themselves near the city. Regional accents were very strong throughout Tudor England. In London, Sir Walter Raleigh was mocked for his broad Devonshire accent.

The strenuous capitalist economics of Tudor England, and the novel practice of borrowing to raise capital for building, are rightly emphasized by William Ingram (Ingram 315–16). He indicates the 1571 statute against usury as the moment when moneylending at a rate of interest was at last given official sanction. That helped to launch a surge of new building in London and its suburbs. This freedom to borrow for building led directly to the construction of the first purpose-built theaters in the suburbs of London in 1575 and 1576. As Cuthbert Burbage declared in the “Sharers’ Papers” of 1635, his father, James, and then himself with his brother Richard built the Theatre and its successor the Globe “with many hundred pounds taken up at interest” (316).

Playhouses

Theater builders are opportunists, drawn by the carrot of money to reach for the pennies of everyone susceptible to the attractions of playgoing. Two such entrepreneurs reacted quickly to a 1594 injunction limiting the venues allowed for players in London. Up to then, it had been customary for playing companies to use the large coaching inns built around open courtyards in summer and their great upper rooms through the winter for staging their plays. The Privy Councillors most concerned with playing appear to have finally submitted to the pleas of successive Lord Mayors, allowing them to ban all playing
at inns inside the city (Gurr, “Letter” 51–75). Two Privy Councillors set up the new duopoly, making themselves their patrons, and agreed with the Lord Mayor to keep them outside the city, allowing them to play only at two designated theaters in the suburbs.

By November of the same year, two entrepreneurs had moved in. One, a goldsmith, Francis Langley, started to build a playhouse in the manor of Paris Garden on the south bank of the Thames, a quarter of a mile east of the long-existing Bear Garden and the more recent Rose playhouse (Chambers, Stage 2: 411). That was in Surrey, safe from the Lord Mayor’s desire to close all central playing places. That same month, another venture financier, Oliver Woodliffe, took out a lease on the Boar’s Head tavern just outside the eastern boundary of the city in Whitechapel High Street, Middlesex, with the explicit intention of turning it into a playhouse (Berry 24).

London’s suburbs already had three playhouses, two to the north in Middlesex’s Shoreditch and the Rose on the South Bank in Surrey. Langley and Woodliffe were eager to cash in on Londoners’ enthusiasm for plays, and their likely profits. Over the next thirty years, different investors put money into seven or more other playhouses in and around the city. The Fortune, built by Alleyne and Henslowe in 1600, was aptly named, both fortunate in getting the Lord Admiral’s backing and happy in the promise of great profit. That was what eventually enabled Alleyne to build the College of God’s Gift in his name, later known as Dulwich College. Other venues, both outdoor and indoor, gradually shifted playgoing from the suburbs back inside the city.

Besides new open playhouses in the suburbs, the 1594 ban on playing at inns inside the city led to attempts at planting roofed playhouses in precincts inside the city that were, by historical accident, free from the Lord Mayor’s control. One, opened as early as 1575, was a small, roofed structure built on the flanks of the old St. Paul’s. As a church precinct, it was outside mayoral authority. Two companies of boy choristers performed regularly through the 1570s, combining into one group in the 1580s, until their involvement in the Martin Marprelate controversy led to their being closed down in 1590. Both boy groups were revived in 1599 or 1600, one resuming at the tiny Paul’s playhouse, the other leasing the new Blackfriars playhouse built in 1596 by James Burbage for the Shakespeare company but immediately blocked from use by the adult company. The boys had a social respectability that the adult companies never secured. They claimed to be performing at a “private” playhouse, not for the “public” like the adult companies. At first, this left them free from any direct control by the state censor, the Master of the Revels. As a result, and given that their patrons were usually the richer and idler members of society, the boys of the Blackfriars company began to stage outrageously satirical plays, and came under increasing government censure, until the long closure during a plague epidemic of 1608–09 forced them out of business.

**Boy companies**

The boy companies’ social cachet came in part from the pretense that their acting was a natural outcome of schoolboys studying rhetoric and the classics, especially the art of public speaking. A celebrated schoolmaster, Richard Mulcaster, whose pupils included Thomas Kyd, Thomas Lodge, Nathan Field, and other writers, upheld playing as a feature of a good education. Although such a theory was not universally upheld, the fact that the boys were being schooled was thought to make them more respectable than common players. This excited a form of social snobbery that made the indoor playhouses where the boys played seem superior to the adult players’ outdoor venues. Eventually this led gentry to dismiss the main outdoor venues of the 1620s and 1630s, even the Globe, as mere “citizen playhouses.” The fact that from 1609 on the King’s Men used their indoor venue, the Blackfriars, through the winter while performing at the outdoor Globe through the summer did not affect this coloring of the indoor playhouses as socially superior to the great outdoor amphitheaters.

Acting as imitation, and indeed as deception, certainly bothered the more rigid of the many religious figures who spoke out against playing throughout the period. Deception they thought was the work of the devil, and it may well be that to sensitive playgoers the fact of boys pretending to be adults seemed less dangerous than adults themselves, whose whole business was pretending to be what they were not. Tudor rules about correct forms of dress, the so-called Sumptuary Laws, made any play that dealt with the royalty and nobility, as all the history plays did, a matter of thoroughgoing deception. So it was easy to believe that any adult who pretended to be a historical figure must be doing the devil’s work. By their evident physical difference from the adults they pretended to be onstage, boy players were less subject to that charge. As a result, it was easy for the boy companies, because they played at indoor playhouses, to hold onto the early definition of their playing places as “private,” whereas the adults had to play in the merely “public” playhouses. Even after the boy companies disappeared in 1608, the indoor playhouses clung to their social distinction as late as the 1630s while they were used by the King’s Men and by Queen Henrietta’s Men.

**Peripheral citizen playhouses versus privileged city playhouses**

For some reason, probably excessive ambition through the 1570s and 1580s, in the late 1580s London’s playmakers overreached themselves. Plays that have with some reason been called “large” began to appear (Gurr, Companies 22–23). Surviving play texts might demand at least twenty-five players onstage at a time, and some plays written for the Queen’s Men and other “large” companies,
especially histories with their huge casts of notable names, became markedly longer. After the year-long closures in London for the plague of 1592–94, when so many of the major companies disappeared, the standard size shrank again. In the years that followed, the two dominant companies ran smaller plays, with just eight or ten sharers, some boys, and a few hired hands for walk-on or mute parts. Plays rarely needed more than eight or nine speaking parts, which with a few boys and walk-ons could be staged by fifteen players at most. Some later companies, such as Prince Charles's in 1608 and Beeston's Boys in 1638, performed with only half a dozen trained adults and a number of aspiring boys.

By 1610, after the two boy companies had disappeared, their best players already young adults, London was dominated by the King's Men playing seasonally at the Globe and Blackfriars, the Prince's Men at the Fortune, and Queen Anne's Men at the Red Bull. Other companies, notably the two patronized by the younger royal children, Prince Charles's and Lady Elizabeth's, had no secure footing at any playhouse and struggled to compete. The Lady Elizabeth's Men played at several venues, including the Swan and in 1614 the new Bear Garden, called the Hope, whereas Prince Charles's Men played mainly at the old Curtain. In this decade, several entrepreneurs attempted to imitate the Blackfriars by building indoor playhouses, but with little success. The city acquired the Blackfriars precinct and other liberties in 1608 when the king, in urgent need of money, sold it to them. However, royal patronage now gave the companies security against Guildhall, and some of the hopeful sites were inside the city. The first successful venture was built in the city of Westminster, in Drury Lane. This was the Cockpit, later called the Phoenix because when it first opened in 1616 gangs of apprentices attacked and burned it because its high charges for admission put its plays, formerly at the Red Bull, out of their reach. (See Figure 17.) The only other playhouse built before the general closure of 1642 was another indoor venue, Salisbury Court in Whitefriars, south of Fleet Street.

Audiences

In some ways, the biggest factor in England's new enthusiasm for playgoing was the growth and experience of its audiences. (See Chapter 204, “English-Speaking Audiences: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.”) A massive difference stood between the small groups that used to gather in a marketplace or a town guildhall anywhere in the country to watch a visiting company perform and the much larger body of Londoners habituated to plays, such as those who attended the Rose or the Theatre between 1594 and 1603. It was not that the greater rarity of performances in country towns prompted curiosity as well as pleasure but rather that for Londoners playgoing became a regular habit, whereas in the smaller towns it was much more singular and noteworthy. At least two parents who saw performances of Tamburlaine in Shropshire in 1619 chose to baptize their children born in the following year with the great hero's name, an explicit mark of how the play struck home to at least some of the local audience. In the 1640s, Tamburlaine Davies became a mercer and High Bailiff of his town, Ludlow.

As the most famous plays of the 1580s gradually became classics, some but not all play fashions moved on. In the Induction to his Bartholomew Fair (1614), Ben Jonson mocked the old-fashioned taste of “Hee that will swear, Jeronimo, or Andronicus are the best playes yet” (vol. 4. 278–82). Jonson, a radical inventor of new styles in drama himself, thought Kyd's Spanish Tragedy and Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, both first staged around 1590, were outdated after their first twenty-five years. By then, theater audiences had separated into their distinct social ranks and groupings, with different tastes at different playhouses. The old classics stayed on at the outdoor playhouses, whereas the indoor venues developed new styles and fashions. The massive Beaumont and Fletcher canon, fifty or more plays written by a series of collaborators led by John Fletcher for the King's Men, fostered the taste for romance and tragicomedy Shakespeare launched in his last years. New writers appeared in the 1620s and 1630s, including courtiers such as William Davenant, John Suckling, and Richard Lovelace. They catered to the taste of the gentry and even the court, not least Queen Henrietta Maria's enthusiasm for pastoral love plays.

Performing for the Court and at Great Houses

The major professional companies never forgot the tradition from which they grew, when they took their plays on tour. That could be a holiday of sorts, a relief from London's insistence on a different play every afternoon. Work, however, had to be constant to earn income. We know the Lord Admiral's Men went on tour in the dark months of winter, during Lent, when the London playhouses had to close. They were equally ready to go off whenever they could be paid to do so, drawn to perform at the houses of the great, in London and around the country. They gave annual performances at court, in London at Whitehall or Somerset House, or at the outlying riverbank palaces of Richmond, Greenwich, or Hampton Court. Shakespeare's company played The Comedy of Errors at Gray's Inn as part of the lawyers' Christmas celebrations in 1594. On January 1, 1596, in the depths of winter, they took Titus Andronicus north to perform at Exton Hall in Rutland. In a similar mode, they performed one of their new plays, Twelfth Night, for the lawyers' Candlemas feast in Middle Temple Hall in February 1602 (see Figure 13).

No doubt other such evening visits with the Lord Admiral's Men's plays after the regular daytime
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performance have disappeared from the records, for them as for the other London-based companies, although there is a record of the Palsgrave’s Men from the Fortune taking a play to Middle Temple Hall on Candlemas 1616, and Henslowe once noted sourly that he had to pay three shillings to a carrier “for carrying & bryngyn of the stufe backe agayne when they played in fleastreat pryvat & then our stufe was loste” (Foakes and Rickert 88). Fleet Street was where the townhouses of the great stood.

The King’s Men, owning both the indoor Blackfriars playhouse and the outdoor Globe, were unique in owning not one but two playhouses. Extravagantly, while playing at one they left the other empty, except that occasionally they rented the outdoor Globe for sporting events through the winter. Henry Herbert, the last Master of the Revels, left a record of what he allowed to be staged there. It included sword combats and acrobatics such as tightrope walking and other athletic feats. William Vincent used to tour the country with shows of “the Arte of Legerdemain . . . Vaulting, dancing on the ropes,” tumbling and juggling. During the Lenten closure, when the playhouses were not allowed to have plays, he was licensed on March 7, 1635, for “dancing on the Ropes this Lent at ye Fortune” (Bawcutt 79). The King’s Men similarly had a Dutch tumblor showing his skills at the Globe in February 1630 and March 1635.

From the very first year of his reign, Scottish King James made much heavier use of the adult companies for the Christmas festivities than his predecessor. Through his first Christmas, he attended twenty performances, including all eight by the company to which he gave his name. The nine-year-old Prince Henry went to seven plays, five by his own company. Over the following years, the traditional Christmas season at court lengthened, the companies using the indoor playhouses summoned more and more frequently as the “citizen” plays were frozen out. The King’s Men provided more than half of everything staged at court through the 1630s. In the 1633–34 season, for instance, between November and April they played twenty-six times, whereas Queen Henrietta’s Men, then at the Cockpit, staged only two plays and the young Prince Charles’s from Salisbury Court three. Such privileged access to royalty was profitable and reassuring to the players, as well as a distraction from the daily work at Blackfriars or the other indoor venues. According to a note by the letter writer John Pory, the King’s man Joseph Taylor was rumored to be in line for a knighthood in 1632 for teaching the queen’s ladies how to act in a pastoral play they staged.

Music and jigs

The use of music onstage grew as the companies developed London-based resources. (See Chapter 20, “Music.”) Clowns had always used their pipe and the tabor or small side drum that routinely accompanied their songs and dances while they performed their own acts in or around the plays. (See Figure 172.) Their specialty was the jig, routinely performed to close a day’s performance. Either the clown himself or an accompanist onstage would beat the drum and supply a tune with his pipe, the clown and
sometimes other members of the company singing and dancing to the music. Feste’s song at the end of *Twelfth Night* is probably a later version of the clown’s jig. Texts of just a few jigs, one of them allegedly written to an existing tune by Will Kemp of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, have survived (Baskervill 234–38, 444–49).

Music was standard in most plays. Henslowe’s *Diary* (Foakes and Rickert 318) lists several early musical instruments, including three trumpets, a drum, and stringed instruments such as a treble viol, a bass viol, a bandore, a cittern, and a sackbut. For most of the earlier playing companies, drums, bells, and timbrels provided percussion, brass trumpets used their piercing sounds for ceremonial entrances and exits, and hunting horns were employed, usually offstage, to signal hunts. Woodwinds such as cornets, recorders, hautboys, and fifes or other pipes accompanied songs and provided incidental music, as did string instruments, which besides viols and citterns (guitars) included lutes and pandores. The brass of trumpets was evidently thought too strident for indoor playhouses. There the brass trumpet was replaced by the woodwind of a cornet. Stage directions asking for cornets signal the change when a play went from one kind of playhouse to the other.

The use of a consort of offstage musicians providing accompaniments or mood music was a feature of the indoor playhouses that took some time to move into the outdoor venues, if at all. Music was a normal offstage feature for performance at the indoor venues. The Blackfriars had a consort of musicians, who were highly valued for their concerts before the play began. Each afternoon, they would entertain the arrivals for up to an hour. The Duke of Stettin-Pomerania, on his visit to London in 1602, spent an hour listening to what his secretary described as a consort of lutes, mandolins, bandores, violins, and flutes. In the 1630s, Bulstrode Whitelocke, a Parliamentarian who composed a tune that became known as “Witlocke’s Coranto,” found that whenever he entered the Blackfriars, its musicians, recognizing him, would strike up his tune and play it as he walked to his place in the audience. The one play of Shakespeare’s that makes maximum use of offstage music, *The Tempest*, was written with the Blackfriars consort in mind. It is the only one of his plays containing a built-in act break, an essential feature of performances at the indoor playhouses, music playing while the stagehands trimmed the candles that amplified the little daylight that high windows on the walls admitted in such places.

As time went on and as the Blackfriars consort caught the taste of the time, songs and music became more and more a feature of the plays. During the Interregnum, William Davenant for a while even disguised his musical plays by calling them “opera,” the plural of the Latin opus, a piece of music. The word has remained in English usage as a singular term for shows with music ever since.

### The downfall of playing in 1642

Royal protection of professional playing was begun by Queen Elizabeth in 1583 with the first Queen’s Men. Under King James, as the Blackfriars became the prime social venue for the aristocracy in London, its auditorium became a haunt for royalty and its dependents. Whereas plays had always been taken to court, where royalty watched them, four times in the 1630s Queen Henrietta Maria went anonymously to the Blackfriars to see a performance there. For all that she was patron of the company running for ten years at the indoor Cockpit, the company she enjoyed most, or at least the company she thought the most respectable, was at the Blackfriars. One indirect but drastic consequence of this royal and social devotion to playing was that, once Charles had fled from London early in 1642 and set up his base at Oxford against the Parliamentary forces, London became Parliament’s own fief, free from and hostile to the king. As a result, on September 2, 1642, for the first time ever both Houses of Parliament issued their own joint ordinance about public plays. It was quite explicit:

> Whereas the distressed Estate of Ireland, steeped in her own Blood, and the distracted Estate of England, threatened with a Cloud of Blood, by a Civill Warre, call for all possible meanes to appease and avert the Wrath of God appearing in these Judgements; amongst which, Fasting and Prayer having bin often tried to be very effectuall, have bin lately, and are still ajoyned; and whereas publike Sports doe not well agree with publike Calamities, nor publike Stage-plays with the Seasons of Humiliation, this being an Exercise of sad and pious solemnity, and the other being Spectacles of pleasure, too commonly expressing lascivious Mirth and Levitie: it is therefore thought fit, and Ordeined by the Lord and Commons in this Parliament Assembled, that while these sad Causes and set times of Humiliation doe continue, publike Stage-Plays shall cease, and bee forborne. Instead of which, are recommended to the people of this Land, the profitable and seasonable Considerations of Repentance, Reconciliation, and peace with God, which probably may produce outward peace and prosperity, and bring againe Times of Joy and Gladnesse to these Nations.

*(qtd. in Bentley, *Stage 2*: 690)*

Thus banished, regular theater did not return to London for eighteen years, when the restored King Charles II admitted two new companies to play in London. He used a new version of the duopoly-company model first set up in 1594. When official theater returned to London in 1660, its leading inspiration was William Davenant. Claiming to be a bastard son of Shakespeare, he had written a number of plays for the King’s Men at the Blackfriars during the 1630s, before proving himself a gallant fighter for the
king during the civil wars. During his earlier career, his theatrical ambition was declared when he tried to set up a huge new indoor theater in the Strand, designing it with an ample stage intended for music rather than dramatic action, decorated with elaborate songs and dances. Once established back in London in the late 1650s, he launched a new kind of show that he called “opera” (singular), to denote a show quite different from the plays that were then still incurring official hostility. When he was made one of the two leaders of London’s new theater in the 1660s, he altered the Shakespeare texts allocated to him by adapting them with additional songs and dances to reflect his new vision of what he thought good theater should comprise. He staged several plays from the former period, including a version of *The Tempest* heavily adapted by himself and John Dryden in 1667. The same play reappeared in an openly operatic version by Thomas Shadwell in 1674. Besides its Miranda, a girl who had never seen a boy other than Caliban, Davenant added a boy who had never met a girl. Both had allegedly grown up on the one island but were kept apart by their father. Davenant also created a girl for Caliban, transferring his mother’s name, Sycorax, to her.

In this and many other ways, Davenant altered the conditions under which the earlier writers had composed their plays. Raising the number of parts for women in *The Tempest* to more than Shakespeare’s single one, and admitting actual women to play them, was the biggest of the many changes following his and his rival’s immediate adoption of the French theater traditions that arrived from Paris with King Charles and his court after his decade in exile there. Such drastic revisions of Shakespeare and other early writers, along with new scenic accompaniments to go with the innovation of proscenium-arch stages, colorful and elaborate scenes and machines, and complete act and scene breaks, as well as the female actors, came to dominate all new stagings of the early plays from then until the last years of the twentieth century.

**Sources cited**


**Further reading**


