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The London scene: City and Court

‘IN the south suburbs’, Antonio tells Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*, ‘at the Elephant / Is best to lodge’ (3.3. 39–40). Illyria may be a geographically remote and fictitious country. Its capital, where the comedy unfolds, often seems to shadow a more familiar city, and not just because there was, in fact, an Elizabethan inn called the Elephant in the High Street of Southwark, that London suburb south of the Thames in which Shakespeare’s Globe playhouse stood. Like London, Illyria’s capital is close to the sea, and also to wooded country in which its ruler can be urged to divert himself by hunting deer *par force* – on horseback, with hounds. According to Antonio, Orsino’s city is renowned for its ‘memorials and the things of fame’ (23): churches, private monuments, and public buildings like those John Stow had described with loving care in his great *Survey of London* (1598/1603). It is a mercantile centre too, its foreign trade sufficiently important that the inhabitants of another state will even compensate for booty taken in war in order not to disrupt so beneficial a peacetime ‘traffic’. In many streets, as Antonio alerts Sebastian when lending him his purse, pretty but unnecessary things are displayed for sale, ‘idle’ luxuries likely to attract a tourist’s eye. Then, as Sebastian will soon (momentously) discover, there is the Countess Olivia’s mansion, the equivalent of those great residences of the nobility (Somerset House, or Leicester House) which lined the Thames from London proper to Westminster, an abode endowed with gardens, a private chapel, and a large, well-staffed household. Orsino’s court too, although ducal rather than royal, is similar to the one at Elizabeth’s and then James’s Whitehall in being a centre not only of fashion but of government.

Behind *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare’s London hovers like a ghost: an outline scarcely visible until you look for it. It can be glimpsed fleetingly in certain of his other comedies as well: at a distance in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in Dogberry’s instructions to the night watchmen of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and above all in the Vienna of that very urban play, *Measure for Measure*. Like Illyria, Vienna is ruled by a duke. But his court too is located in a kind of bastard city: at once foreign and disconcertingly close to home. Before being pulled down at Angelo’s command, Mistress Overdone’s house ‘of resort’ (a euphemism for brothel) was to be found in the suburbs, as were most of London’s own. The whole fracas, moreover, in Act 2 about what was or was not done to Mistress

Elbow in the supposed bath-house (another euphemism) Mistress Overdone now runs – the altercation that impels Angelo to fling out of his own court with the exasperated but scarcely very judicial wish that ‘you’ll find good cause to whip them all’ (2.1.125) – is rooted firmly in the London Shakespeare’s audience knew: from the stewed prunes on offer in the dish that was not exactly china, and the public room called ‘The Bunch of Grapes’ whose fire Master Froth prefers in winter, down to Escalus’ discovery of a well-known brand of civic turpitude. For seven years, any householder in Elbow’s ward who finds himself appointed as local constable in the annual election has evaded the office by paying Elbow to undertake its duties for him.

Shakespeare was not unusual in setting comedies in foreign (or entirely fictional) cities, while deliberately evoking, at least in some of them, a place closer to home. Dekker and Middleton’s two-part collaboration, *The Honest Whore* (1604), supposedly takes place in Milan. Apart, however, from being seamed with local, specifically London references (the Bear Garden on Bankside, the apprentices’ rallying cry of ‘Clubs!’, St Paul’s Cross, or the painted posts customarily set up outside the doors of high-ranking city officials), Part 1 actually ends in Bedlam – the London hospital for mad people outside Bishopsgate – and Part 2 in a similarly undisguised Bridewell, the house of correction for whores and the ‘idle poor’ in Farringdon Ward Without. Only in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in this as in almost all other respects a special case, did Shakespeare allow himself to be topographically so precise in a comedy. But Windsor is only London’s neighbour, not the city itself. He was conspicuous in refusing to participate in that vogue for comedies set quite straightforwardly in London that seems to begin with Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* of 1599, and runs unabated (indeed, with increasing topographical emphasis on particular London localities such as Covent Garden, Hogsdon, Islington, Marylebone, or the Strand) up to the closing of the theatres in 1642. Virtually every other major dramatist writing during these years produced one or more London comedies: Jonson, Chapman, Marston, Middleton, Dekker, Heywood, Massinger, Beaumont, Fletcher, and Shirley. For Shakespeare, on the other hand, London was a place actually to be staged only in his English histories, where it was separated from the present by a considerable gap of time. He was unusual too among his contemporaries in never supplying a text for the Lord Mayor’s Show, the annual progress through London that celebrated the new incumbent’s assumption of office, any other civic triumph or procession, or for a masque at court. Yet London was the place in which most of his working life was spent.

The City

The city in which the young Shakespeare arrived, at some indeterminate date in the late 1580s, was in a number of respects unique among the capitals of Europe. The river Thames, flowing through it from west to east, had contributed to what,

by the end of the sixteenth century, was already an unrivalled commercial success. London enjoyed an easy access to the sea and to trading ports abroad that was the envy of most foreign capitals, and it exploited its position energetically. In 1586, William Camden looked at the harbour and opined that 'a man would say, that seeth the shipping there, that it is, as it were, a very wood of trees disbranched to make glades and let in light, so shaded it is with masts and sails'.¹ The central portion of the city had also developed a system of government, and an independence from the Crown, without parallel elsewhere. Shakespeare's London was really several overlapping cities, not one. At its heart lay the City proper, a densely populated area only about 2 square miles (5sqkm) in extent, stretching north of the river from the Tower of London in the east to Ludgate, just past St Paul's, at its western extremity. It was possible to walk from one end to the other in about half an hour. This was where civic power lay.

The City's twenty-six wards, divided into one hundred and fifteen parishes, spilled over its boundaries in a few cases (Farringdon Ward Without, or Bridge Ward Without) but basically it was contained within mediaeval walls, established originally by the Romans, but later fortified, and pierced by what in Shakespeare's time had become ten gates. Although officially subject to the Crown, the City was essentially autonomous and, over the space of some five hundred years, during which it had occasionally been forced briefly to relinquish some of its privileges, the monarchy (increasingly dependent upon the City for financial loans) had finally learned not to interfere. It was ruled from the Guildhall by a Lord Mayor elected each year from among the twenty-six aldermen, one from each ward, who constituted the Court of Aldermen, and also by the two hundred and twelve elected members of the Common Council, its membership again distributed among the wards. The City's basis was firmly mercantile, vested in the various guilds, or livery companies, into which the merchant classes – the grocers, the mercers, the goldsmiths, the shoemakers, and so on – had organized themselves hundreds of years before. Founded originally to guarantee standards within a particular trade, to regulate the training of apprentices and to safeguard the interests of their adult members, these fraternities had gradually discovered that by co-operating with each other, and setting up a central administration, they could govern the City as a whole – overseeing not only its commercial interests but what they saw as its physical, moral, religious, and social (including hygienic) wellbeing.

The thorn in the flesh of the essentially conservative rulers of the City was what would now be called Greater London: the suburbs steadily expanding outside the walls, and the 'liberties'. These last precincts were mostly extramural as well – but not entirely so. Blackfriars and Whitefriars, former monastic establishments dissolved under Henry VIII, lay within the walls. Both, in Shakespeare's time, housed companies of child actors, with Blackfriars eventually providing an alternative playing place for his own company, the King's Men. Over all these areas the City's jurisdiction was limited, yet it was precisely in

them that activities deeply offensive to the aldermen and the Common Council burgeoned, chief among them being prostitution, gambling, bear-baiting, and plays. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that London was experiencing a population explosion. From about 15,000 in 1550, it had leaped by Elizabeth's death in 1603 to an estimated 140,000 within the limits of the City itself, with another 40,000 inhabiting the suburbs. Expansion continued throughout and beyond Shakespeare's lifetime, until by the mid-seventeenth century the whole untidy sprawl would constitute the largest city of Europe. Immigration, from other parts of England and from the continent, was entirely responsible for this increase. (The influx of foreigners, many of them fleeing religious persecution abroad, was not always welcome to the natives, a problem Shakespeare addressed in his contribution to *The Book of Sir Thomas More* (1595).) Thanks to crowded and unsalubrious conditions – above all in the confined space of the City itself – births in the metropolis lagged well behind burials, and not just during periodic outbreaks of plague. Even London's rulers came to find residence outside the walls desirable for themselves, and it was in those areas that most of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century growth took place. Open fields, where young men had once practised archery and citizens walked to take the air on spring and summer evenings, were inexorably built over – as John Stow never ceased to lament.

Stow's *Survey of London*, compiled when its author was already an old man, is largely the celebration of a city whose antiquity he (like other Elizabethans) enjoyed tracing back – if with a good deal of healthy scepticism – to a legendary past. Even as Rome, Stow points out, dignified itself by claiming the Trojan Aeneas as its founder, so Londoners sometimes entertained Geoffrey of Monmouth's fantasy about 'the town that Brutus sought by dreams' (as Sir Thomas Wyatt put it), this particular Brutus being the lineal descendent of Aeneas. Stow was himself a member of the Merchant Taylors guild, and he dedicated the second edition of his book in 1603 to Robert Lee, then Lord Mayor of the City. He seems to have been acquainted with Ben Jonson, but the *Survey* of 1603 conspicuously refuses to notice particular London playhouses, or those who wrote for them, although a few (disapproving) paragraphs do recognize its bear-baiting arenas, and its stews – including certain brothels in Southwark notoriously under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Winchester. (Hence Pandarus' snide sexual allusion to the hissing goose or prostitute of Winchester in the epilogue to Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.) Stow had himself perambulated all twenty-six of the City's wards, street by street, as well as venturing outside them into Westminster, and some of the suburbs and liberties – including Southwark's Bankside. In 1598, he did record the names of the Theatre and the Curtain in Shoreditch, but only to strike them out in 1603. That edition makes no mention of what Ben Jonson later called 'the glory of the Bank' – Shakespeare's Globe – even though foreign visitors noted the theatre as impressive. It may well, for Stow, have been the last straw.

Stow's accounts are faithful to much of the city as it was at the time of his writing, but also seamed with nostalgia for the older, less crowded London of his youth, with greater breathing space around it, and more traditional as well as cohesive in its observances and ways. Characteristically, he was happy to memorialize the long-since abolished London mystery cycles once performed at Clerkenwell and Skinners' Well – no texts survive – while dismissing the great contemporary flowering of Elizabethan drama ('Comedies, Tragedies, Interludes, and Histories, both true and feigned: for the acting wherof certain public places have been erected') in about the same tone and as many words as he devoted to cock-fights and tennis.² Stow was typical, in this respect, of London's solid middle class, men who thought apprentices wasted too much valuable working-time watching plays, an activity from which they might, in addition, be seduced into attitudes and vices that were anathema to aldermen and members of the Common Council. In addition, they complained, the basest kind of people congregated in the theatre. They would have been happy to shut them down altogether, if only they could, and did manage to do so (sensibly enough) from time to time during outbreaks of plague.

Stow's London, as travellers from abroad amply testified, was a wealthy and beautiful city – at least on the surface, and in certain parts. It was also, on closer inspection, extremely dirty and a hotbed not only of disease but of chicanery and crime. Even Stow felt obliged to chronicle the efforts of London's mayors over the centuries to do something about its increasingly inadequate sewerage system, through periodic cleansings of London's various ditches and water-courses, clogged with filth. (The City's rulers also attempted, through the appointment of official 'scavengers' in the various parishes, to exercise some control over the kitchen middens, piles of refuse, and what was politely called 'night-soil' that tended, especially in the poorer sections of London, to encumber the streets.) Stow's comment, however, at the end of his section on water-courses and ditches – 'I will so leave it, for I cannot help it' – says it all.³ It was also true that as the pressure on accommodation increased in the expanding City, tenements tended to be erected whose jutting upper stories effectively blocked out light and air from the thoroughfares below, turning them into unhealthy warrens of infection. This was the other side of Spenser's 'silver streaming Thames', alive with river traffic, its banks gaily ornamented with flowers, and of the London so often personified in civic pageants as a majestic lady, her head crowned with turrets and towers, to be glorified in plays like Heywood's two-part *Edward IV* (1599) and *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (1604/5) or Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*.

What Shakespeare himself thought of this city of such glaring contrasts can only be conjectured. It was, as it happened, the only place in England for an aspiring, professional actor/dramatist to be. He made both his fortune and his reputation in the capital – like many other provincial men – but he never moved his family from Stratford to London and, when he retired from the theatre, it

was to a rural Warwickshire with which he had never lost touch. He did, towards the end of his life, add a London property to those he had accumulated in or near Stratford – a gatehouse in the Blackfriars area – but it was merely an investment: he seems to have had no intention of occupying it himself. In London, he made do with various rented lodgings, one apparently near Bishopsgate, another with the Mountjoy family, purveyors of head-dresses for ladies in Silver Street, Cripplegate Ward (where he was to become involved in an altercation over the daughter's marriage settlement). He can scarcely have been unaware either of the various plays written to celebrate London, or of all those (including works by his friend Ben Jonson) that dramatized its seamy, criminal side: something also being energetically explored throughout the 1590s in the various rogue and 'cony-catching' pamphlets turned out by Dekker, Nashe, and Shakespeare's old detractor Robert Greene. It was only, however, in his English histories, including *Henry VIII*, where London tended to be unavoidable as (at least) a partial setting that he confronted the city directly, in ways that sometimes permit a glimpse of the metropolis he himself knew, not simply of the mediaeval and early Tudor predecessors recorded in his source material.

Understandably, it is when Shakespeare departs from Holinshed and the other chroniclers and begins to invent freely that his own London sometimes flickers into existence. The carriers at Rochester in *1 Henry IV*, struggling out of bed before dawn in an inn lamentably stingy with its chamber-pots, so that 'we leak in your chimney, and your chamber-lye breeds fleas like a loach' (2.1.19–20), are testimony not only to his own probable acquaintance with inferior hostleries on the road into London, but to the increasing need of the metropolis to provision itself from a considerable distance outside. The second carrier's 'gammon of bacon and two razes of ginger' are to be delivered 'as far as Charing-cross', while the ravenous turkeys (a New World import unknown in England until long after the period of the two tetralogies) in the first carrier's pannier are almost certainly heading for 'the Poultry', a specialized market area between the Stocks and Cheapside.

For the idea that the wild young prince and his cronies visit a tavern in London's Eastcheap, Shakespeare was indebted to the old, anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (?1586), and possibly to Stow's *Chronicles* (1580). The place itself, however, as realized in the two parts of *Henry IV*, he clearly fleshed out from a knowledge of similar establishments in the London of his day. (Indeed, the long-standing tradition that Falstaff's tavern is called 'The Boarshead', although this is never explicitly stated in either play, may indicate some ready association contemporaries made between Shakespeare's fictional locale and an existing Eastcheap tavern of that name.) Under the management of a husband and wife team (the Quicklys) in Part 1, it looked initially like a bustling, prosperous place, employing apprentices like young Francis (presumably in training to enter the vintners' guild) and enjoying a large, well-behaved clientele. In Part 2, things have fallen off badly. The Host is dead. His widow has taken

over the business – as not infrequently happened in London in Shakespeare's time – but trade has apparently dwindled. A tavern dependent upon Falstaff as a lodger, perpetually in arrears with his payments, and given to entertaining not only his raffish followers Nym and Bardolph but Doll Tearsheet the whore, is in danger of being condemned as a disorderly house. Indeed Mistress Quickly has already been summoned before Master Tisick, the local magistrate deputizing for the alderman of the ward, to answer charges that, although previously well thought-of, she is now 'in an ill name' for the 'swaggering companions' who patronize her establishment. The City officials took a dim view of such places. Apart, however, from the extremely doubtful prospect of one day becoming Lady Falstaff, the Hostess retains something of which she can be proud: Hal, the madcap Prince of Wales, can still pay her an informal visit, linking – in however unorthodox a way – the heart of the City with the Court at Westminster.

Stow (quite properly) treats Westminster in his *Survey* as an entity topographically distinct from the City and from its suburbs and liberties. Yet already, expansion westward from the centre was eroding the old boundary. Later, under James I and Charles I, property developments such as the Duke of Bedford's in Covent Garden, master-minded by Inigo Jones, or the proliferation of fashionable residences along the Strand, were to blur the line of demarcation further, while maintaining the City's venerable independence from royal Westminster. Communication remained close between these two centres of London power, something neatly symbolized in the Lord Mayor's Show, which escorted the new incumbent in state from the Guildhall, just north of Cheapside, to Westminster and back, after he had taken his oath of office, and (crucially) been confirmed in both places. This route significantly resembled the one taken by Elizabeth I on the day before her coronation in 1558, when she went in procession through the City along the great artery of Cheapside to St Paul's and Temple Bar, accepting a Bible and a purse of gold from its representatives along the way. James I's coronation procession in 1604 cannily reinscribed her route, this time with Shakespeare and eight other members of the newly patented King's Men, to whom a royal issue of four and a half yards of red cloth apiece had been made for the occasion, probably somewhere in the throng. (Charles I's high-handed refusal to follow the example of his two predecessors, after the City had put in hand elaborate preparations for the event, can be seen as the beginning of a souring of relations with the Crown that would lead to the City's defection to the Parliamentary side at the outbreak of the Civil War.)

The London of Shakespeare's English histories before *Henry VIII* is both rooted in its past, as recorded in the chronicles that were his primary source, and shot through with details and allusions reflecting the capital he himself knew. Most striking here is the Chorus that introduces Act 5 of *Henry V*, with its comparison of the great civic welcome that greeted the victor of Agincourt on his return from France with what would happen now should the Earl of Essex come triumphant from Ireland, 'bringing rebellion broached on his sword'. Again,

London would ‘pour out her citizens, / The Mayor and all his brethren in best sort’. This was not, of course, to be, but the sense of continuity across the centuries matters nonetheless. It was a continuity reinforced by the antiquity of many of London’s landmarks and monuments. ‘Julius Caesar’s ill-erected Tower’, as the Tower of London is mis-described in *Richard II* (in fact it was begun by William the Conqueror), is a sinister and frequent presence in Shakespeare’s histories, just as it was in his own London and remains, to some extent, today. Equally familiar to members of his audience were such venerable structures as the old St Paul’s, Westminster Palace and Westminster Hall, Westminster Abbey, the Inns of Court, the Guildhall, and Baynard’s Castle – not to mention street and place names: Cheapside, Smithfield, Fish Street, Cornhill Street, Eastcheap, or Holborn – all survivors of the late mediaeval London presented in the majority of the histories. Only *King John* stays entirely clear of the metropolis, in terms both of reference and setting.

Whatever he thought of the City’s hostility to his own profession, in *Richard III* Shakespeare took some steps to redeem its credit. It is clear in Hall that Edmond Shaa, Lord Mayor of London, proved entirely co-operative at the time the Lord Protector was plotting to seize the crown from his young nephew Edward V: ‘upon trust of his own advancement, where he was of a proud heart highly desirous, [he] took on him to frame the city’ to Richard and Buckingham’s will.⁴ Shakespeare’s Lord Mayor, by contrast, may be naive – in the end, he is entirely taken in by Richard’s charade of religious piety – but there is no suggestion that he is self-seeking or corrupt. Urged by Buckingham in Act 3 to persuade the citizens of the bastardy of Edward IV’s children, he simply (to the duke’s disgust) summarizes what Buckingham has just said, without adding to it ‘any warrant from himself’. The citizens are not impressed. Shakespeare’s alterations to his source here are interesting because, without exactly falsifying history, he nonetheless has slanted it so as to make plain that these London citizens are in a very different class from those fickle, impressionable Roman plebeians who throw up their sweaty nightcaps in *Julius Caesar* – or indeed from most, though significantly not all, of Jack Cade’s followers in *2 Henry VI*. He had already, in Act 2, scene 3 of *Richard III*, invented an anonymous trio, meeting in the street, who discuss with dignity and considerable political acumen the implications of Edward IV’s death for an England once again to be ‘governed by a child’. Now, the citizens’ ‘wilful silence’ when urged by Buckingham to cry ‘God save King Richard!’ has to be explained away by an embarrassed Mayor: ‘the people were not used / To be spoke to but by the Recorder’ – their own civil magistrate, as opposed to a representative of the Crown (3.7.29–30). The Mayor is, of course, in a tight place, but his excuse brings to the surface something important: the fact that London has to be won over by Westminster, and that its own protocol and governmental hierarchy are things even dukes and kings need to respect.

The Court

It was, however, Westminster, rather than the City, the Court rather than the Guildhall, of which Shakespeare was (necessarily) most aware. Created originally as the royal seat of the Norman kings, Westminster had become by the fifteenth century the centre of administration and government for the country as a whole. In Shakespeare's time, it consisted mainly of a palace – incorporating the great Hall constructed originally by the Conqueror's son William Rufus, nearly 240 feet (73m) long and 40 (12m) in height – the Abbey, and various associated buildings and spaces, the most important of which was the comparatively recent, adjacent palace of Whitehall. As York House (under which name it figures in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*), Whitehall had been built by Wolsey as a lavish residence for himself. After the Cardinal's fall in 1529, it was appropriated and enlarged by Henry, effectively becoming, under him, and his Tudor and Stuart successors, for the greater part of the year, the 'Court'. Much of the monarch's domestic administration, in charge of his Steward, as well as the law courts and Parliament, continued to operate from the old palace complex nearby. Whitehall, however, housed the sovereign's person, in a series of carefully graded spaces extending outward from the intimacy of the Bedchamber and various withdrawing chambers, access to which was denied to all but a select few, to the somewhat more populous but still elite Privy Chamber, the Presence Chamber, where the monarch could sometimes be viewed – by those with any right to be present at court at all – receiving ambassadors and other guests, or dining in state, the Great Chamber, and finally, a Hall. Over all this territory, the Lord Chamberlain held sway.

During holiday seasons, meaning (essentially) Christmas and Shrovetide, plays and masques were put on in the Great Chamber, the Hall, or the Banqueting House, the last a specially designed, freestanding structure within the Whitehall complex. The first, temporary Banqueting House, built under Elizabeth to receive the French commissioners in 1581, was demolished in 1606 by James I, who replaced it with a more impressive but still wooden, galleried structure. This version (which burned to the ground in 1619, to be succeeded by the magnificent Inigo Jones stone building that still exists) is one with which Shakespeare must have been very familiar. He is likely, indeed, to have performed there with other members of his company, not only in plays from the repertory of the King's Men but in court masques, which relied upon professional actors for the speaking parts. As James's own liveried servants, granted their royal patent only a few weeks after he was proclaimed king, Shakespeare's company enjoyed a certain prestige. They had already been fortunate, during the latter part of Elizabeth's reign, in the patronage of George Carey, second Lord Hunsdon, the queen's second cousin and, from 1597, Lord Chamberlain (see also chapter 7, *Playhouses, Players, and Playgoers in Shakespeare's Time*, by John

Astington). Illness, however, forced Hunsdon to retire from this influential post in 1601, and after the death of the queen it was conferred officially upon someone else. It must have come as a considerable relief to the former Lord Chamberlain's Men, whose patron Hunsdon was now of little use to them, to find themselves so rapidly put under royal protection in the new reign.

Exactly why they were so favoured remains a matter of debate, but neither Shakespeare nor the great actor Richard Burbage is likely to have been the immediate cause. Elizabeth had clearly liked plays and, in 1583, singled out her own royal company, henceforth known as the Queen's Men. Indeed, had it not been for her insistence that plays were necessary for her 'solace' at court, the Privy Council would not have been able so consistently to override the City's objections to the public theatres, places in which (so the convenient fiction went) plays had to be rehearsed before the best of them appeared at court. If the courtier Dudley Carleton is to be believed, James by contrast took 'no extraordinary pleasure in them'.⁵ His fit of ill temper during the masque *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618) – 'Devil take you all, dance!' – suggests that it was for the dancing, not Jonson's beautifully structured text, that he had come. Shakespeare may have intended *Macbeth* to compliment James as a descendant of Banquo, the Duke's reluctance in *Measure for Measure* to 'stage' himself to the eyes of the populace as a flattering allusion to James's well-known aversion to making large-scale public appearances, and Prospero's renunciation even of 'white' magic at the end of *The Tempest* as a concession to the monarch's uncompromising views about necromancy. Given the choice, James would almost certainly have preferred to be slaughtering stags at Royston rather than sitting through a court performance of *The Winter's Tale*. That the number of theatrical performances recorded at Whitehall, and at Greenwich Palace and Hampton Court, actually increased during James's reign is almost certainly due to the fact that he, unlike Elizabeth, had a family. Queen Anne, Prince Henry, and Prince Charles were theatre-lovers. All three participated at various points in court masques. Anne is even said to have made a one-off appearance at a public playhouse – something neither Elizabeth, James, nor Charles I ever did – and the royal patent issued to the King's Men in 1603 was soon followed in 1604 by the designation (though as yet without patent) of the former Admiral's Men as Prince Henry's servants, and Worcester's Men as Queen Anne's. On a number of occasions, all three companies were to find themselves summoned to entertain a royal audience at court that turned out not to include King James.

There is no evidence – and small likelihood – that Shakespeare ever enjoyed even that approximation to a personal relationship with King James that Jonson seems to have had. Although (along with other members of the King's Men) he was made a Groom of the Chamber in 1604, this 'honour' – also extended to some members of the Queen's company – implied little more than the occasional need at court for extras to augment the native entourage during the visits of important foreign emissaries. It is improbable that James ever had more than the

slightest idea who Shakespeare was, or that this dramatist who never wrote a court masque, never collaborated with Inigo Jones, and lacked his friend Jonson's freight of classical learning, succeeded in gaining access to royal chambers beyond the relatively public ones at Whitehall, let alone converse with the king. Under Elizabeth, his situation may have been different. Her court, as historians have established, was more distant, less 'participatory', than that of James – a consequence, in part, of the fact that she was a woman, surrounded in the most private rooms of the royal suite almost entirely by other women.⁶ The idea that the queen herself commanded Shakespeare to write *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (in fourteen days), because she wanted to see a play about Falstaff in love, was first recorded by John Dennis in 1702. The story may be apocryphal, but its existence points nonetheless to a traditional association of Shakespeare with the Virgin Queen, more than with her successor, that is underpinned, to some extent, by the plays themselves.

At the end of *Henry VIII*, Cranmer utters a prophecy about Anne Boleyn's infant daughter that many people, a decade after Elizabeth's death, thought had been fulfilled: 'She shall be / . . . A pattern to all princes living with her, / And all that shall succeed' (5.4.20, 22–3). Tact required Cranmer to look forward to the reign of King James as well, but he does so both more briefly and in less hyperbolic terms. The underlying suggestion is that the Stuart reign is to be celebrated as a continuation of Elizabeth's, an affinity that by 1613 was increasingly open to doubt. Although her last years were less than happy, soured by the Essex plot, and by what had become a grotesque disparity between reality and the myth of the eternally beautiful maiden queen, the memory of Elizabeth tended to shine ever more brightly as the seventeenth century advanced, against mounting dissatisfaction with the policies and behaviour of James. Shakespeare's own attitude to the two monarchs his theatre company occasionally entertained is, as usual, hard to discern. It is true, however (although scholars and critics have continually tried to ferret out covert allusions), that James is mentioned explicitly only once in the plays (in *Henry VIII*) while unmistakably direct references to Elizabeth occur not only there but in *Henry V*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and the Sonnets. They are all the more remarkable given what appears to have been Shakespeare's ingrained reluctance to invoke living contemporaries.

That Elizabeth is 'the mortal moon [who] hath her eclipse endured' in Sonnet 107 has almost always been acknowledged and, except for a few recalcitrant proponents of an early date for all the Sonnets, the 'sad augurs [who] mock their own presage' in the following line taken as a reference to the unexpectedly easy transference of rule to her Stuart successor. But James himself is oddly depersonalized and shadowy, indeed present in the sonnet only obliquely through glancing references to the balm used to anoint sovereigns during the coronation ceremony, and to the 'peace' which, in 1603, had belied premonitions of civil war. As 'our gracious Empress', Elizabeth figures unequivocally in the Chorus introducing

Act 5 of *Henry V*. Mistress Quickly may briefly play the role of Fairy Queen in the Herne the Hunter episode that concludes *The Merry Wives*; the 'radiant queen' invoked by Pistol in this last act is clearly Elizabeth herself. The play may or may not have been intended to honour Shakespeare's patron the Lord Chamberlain, Lord Hunsdon, shortly before his installation at Windsor as a Knight of the Garter in April 1597. Certainly this hypothesis makes sense of the elaborate instructions to the fairies about the cleaning and scouring of Windsor Castle, including the Garter stalls, that it should be 'Worthy the owner, and the owner it' (5.5.57). Though the passage may serve too, less glamorously, as a reminder that the continual shifting about of the court from one palace to another, not to mention its various summer progresses through the country, are likely to have been less a product of Elizabeth's or James's restlessness than of the periodic need, in a time of primitive sanitation, to clear up the mess inevitably generated by so many people packed under one roof.

All the various attempts to associate the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a specific noble wedding, at which the queen was present, have so far failed. That is also true of efforts to identify the entertainment described by Oberon in the same play (2.1.158), involving a mermaid on a dolphin's back, and an abortive attempt by Cupid to strike the 'fair vestal thronèd by the west' with one of his love arrows, with a particular and real one attended by Elizabeth. There can, however, be no doubt as to the identity of the impervious 'fair vestal' herself. As for Elizabeth's court, traces of it can be identified, heavily disguised, in the course of the action: the ruler's addiction to the chase – like her father Henry VIII, the queen took much pleasure in hunting – even, in the form of the changeling boy, the disputes that often arose about Wards of Court – well-born orphans legally transferred to someone else's protection during their period of minority. Philostrate, 'our usual manager of mirth' (5.1.35), who has carefully previewed all the various entertainments on offer to Theseus and Hippolyta 'on their wedding day at night', and gives the Duke a list of them, is the equivalent of Henry Tilney, the queen's Master of the Revels. An official under the authority of the Lord Chamberlain, it was his job to select suitable plays for performance at court, censor them (when necessary), and arrange for the erection of a temporary stage, and scaffolding for the spectators, in whichever palace chamber had been designated for the performance. In the earlier Tudor court, his equivalent had also, on occasion, provided props and minimal scenery, but by Shakespeare's time the professional actors seem to have been accustomed to bring their own – although not quite in the sense understood by Peter Quince and his company in the troublesome matter of Moonshine and Wall.

The folly and corruption of courts was a favourite theme of Elizabethan and (especially) Jacobean dramatists. Prudence dictated that they firmly dissociate such courts either in time or place from the one at Whitehall. Yet, even before

the scandal of the Overbury murder in 1613, which would disastrously implicate King James's favourite Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, Italy had often looked suspiciously like a dramatic surrogate for somewhere much nearer at hand. Shakespeare, whether writing under Elizabeth or James, took little part in this. In Le Beau, Duke Frederick's foppish courtier in *As You Like It*, Paroles in *All's Well That Ends Well*, whose soul, as Lafeu snappishly remarks, is his clothes, or the water-fly Osric in *Hamlet*, whose affectations both of speech and dress are so mercilessly pilloried by the prince, he did venture a little way into the territory so enthusiastically explored by Jonson, Middleton, Webster, Massinger, Fletcher, and other contemporary dramatists. But only a little way. His courts, as in the early histories, may be riven by faction, and his rulers – Henry VI, Richard III, or Claudius and Lear – are often wicked or inept. From the kind of satiric anatomy of daily life in the Court that other dramatists so frequently indulged in, he seems to have shied away. Indeed, in the late plays, although Antiochus, Cymbeline, and Leontes behave appallingly, their courts tend to be models of fair-minded (and often dissenting) propriety. Nobody believes that Hermione is unfaithful, or trusts Cymbeline's wicked queen. When Prince Florizel discovers that Autolycus is a rogue, he turns him out of his service. As with the city of London in which he lived, Shakespeare seems to have been determined, in his plays, to reflect only sporadically, and at a distance, the two very different Elizabethan and Jacobean courts whose patronage he came to enjoy, and to do all this with a lack of social detail or animosity that was singular in his time.

Notes

1. See the useful collection, *London in the Age of Shakespeare: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Manley (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 35.
2. John Stow, *The Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1908), 1, 93.
3. Stow, *Survey of London*, 1, 20.
4. Edward Hall, *The Union of the Two Noble . . . Families of Lancaster and Yorke*, in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 8 vols. (London: Routledge, 1957–75), III, 269.
5. Quoted in Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 27.
6. See David Starkey's Introduction to *The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*, ed. D. A. L. Starkey (London: Longman, 1987).

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