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W.R. Streitberger, *The Masters of the Revels and Elizabeth I's Court Theatre* (Oxford University Press)

Richard Dutton, *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist* (Oxford University Press)

At Shrovetide 1560 the young Queen Elizabeth, just over a year into her reign, was entertained at Whitehall Palace by an impressive double masque of 'Actaeon and his Hunters' and 'Diana and her Nymphs'. There were no fewer than six Actaeons, accompanied by musicians and hunters bearing torches, while Diana was attended by six nymphs dressed in cloth of silver and eight torch-bearing maidens in purple satin. A rock and fountain had been constructed to represent Diana's bathing pool, and an order from Sir Thomas Benger, Master of the Revels, for 'xii dogges Collers for the same Maske' indicates that real dogs may have chased Actaeon after he stumbled across the goddess at her toilette. Another documented item, golden fabric 'cutte in narrowe panes and steyned with blood', suggests that one of the Actaeons was costumed so as to represent the tearing to pieces of the unfortunate hunter by his own hounds.

This spectacular display amply illustrates W.R. Streitberger's contention in *The Masters of the Revels and Elizabeth I's Court Theatre* that our image of Elizabethan drama is incomplete if we think only of a largely bare playhouse stage which relied mainly on the evocative words of an author to create settings and visual effects in the minds of auditors. Such an image has been encouraged by materials such as the injunctions by the Chorus in *Henry V* to let our 'imaginary forces' work to transform the 'wooden O' of the playhouse into Agincourt, and by an often-reproduced drawing by Arend van Buchell of the sparsely equipped stage of the Swan playhouse, Bankside neighbour to the Globe. However, as Streitberger vividly relates, court performances deployed numerous elaborate props, including 'wells, arbours, gibbets, altars, and hollow trees', and made extensive use of

scenery, including two-dimensional painted cloths and three-dimensional structures called 'houses', representing 'cities, towns, houses, battlements, and castles'. It is later Jacobean masquing culture that we tend to associate with elaborate staging and breathtaking visual effects, but Streitberger shows that extravagant masques (or in his preferred spelling, masks) were very much a part of Elizabethan court life too, at least in the first half of the reign. Like Jacobean masques, they included amateur female performers; indeed in 1567 following a 'mascke of wemen' Benger spent some time in the Tower of London, possibly, it was suggested at the time, because some of the women who danced with the Queen were found to be of dubious moral standing. Two of the masquers were named, and sound respectable enough: they were the wives of Richard Grafton, a printer, and John Incent, a proctor of the Court of Arches.

Often the spectacle was not merely for show, but was used as an opportunity to offer counsel to the Queen. Indeed, masques could be intensely political: Streitberger draws on Susan Doran's important book *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (1996) to point out how frequently court entertainments were used to urge Elizabeth to marry. In 1565 a staged debate between Juno, goddess of marriage, and Diana, goddess of virginity, concluded with Jupiter's verdict in favour of matrimony, causing Elizabeth to remark to the Spanish ambassador that 'This is all against me'.

Benger was an enterprising and innovative Master of the Revels, introducing classical imagery influenced by continental Renaissance aesthetics, and incorporating the kinds of surprises and verisimilar effects seen in the Actaeon and Diana double masque. However the cost of all this was ruinous, and became unsustainable as the government was increasingly drawn into expensive international conflicts. After the end of Benger's tenure in 1572 there were a few late survivals of his lavish style, as at Shrovetide 1579 when Baron Jean de Simier, envoy of the Duke of Anjou, Elizabeth's last marriage suitor, was entertained

by 'The Knight in the Burnyng Rock'. This performance involved a huge boulder constructed out of timber and canvas – large enough to support scaling ladders and to contain an elaborate elevating mechanism and trap door – which burst into flames. But this impressive spectacle was an exceptional event to honour a particularly valued guest, whereas through the 1570s the Revels Office, now directed by Thomas Radcliffe, Earl of Sussex, and under him Thomas Blagrave, had been moving away from masques and instead increasingly importing commercial companies to bring their own plays to court. 'Downsizing' and 'outsourcing' were the order of the day, and in this context Streitberger finds no coincidence in the opening of the first purpose-built venues for commercial playing companies, such as the Theatre (1576) and the Curtain (1577) in Shoreditch, in the same decade when the Revels Office was increasingly relying on such companies. The interdependence of court and commercial theatre in the period, he asserts, deserves far greater recognition.

The outsourcing policy was consolidated from 1578 under the tenure of the next and perhaps best-known Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, and by this means significant sums were saved. The playing companies provided their own costumes and equipment, and were usually paid a fee of just £10 per performance. As Streitberger explains, this arrangement typified a general blurring of gift-exchange and commodity-exchange systems throughout the Tudor period. The court fee was minimal in relation to the costs of the playing companies, but their court performances were understood as a gift to their aristocratic patrons, and, on behalf of those patrons, to the Queen. In return the players received the favour and protection of the court, enabling them to operate their commercial playhouses for the paying public in the face of considerable opposition from the authorities of the City of London, who disapproved of theatre as a profane and idle activity. This can be put another way: in Streitberger's words, 'ultimately the public paid for the Queen's revels by patronizing

the commercial venues in which these favoured companies practised for their appearances at court’.

This book is the culmination of forty years’ work by Streitberger, and will be highly valued for the wealth of information that it presents, particularly in a month-by-month calendar of court revels and spectacles for the whole extent of Elizabeth’s reign, and in biographical details for each of the Masters of the Revels. There is extensive reference to ‘A Platte of Orders’, one of several memoranda on the state of the Revels Office solicited in 1572-3 by the Privy Council. The unnamed author specifies that the Master should be ‘A man learned of good engyne inventife witte and experience aswell for varietie of straunge devises delectable as to waye what most aptlye and fitleye furnissheth the tyme place presence and state’. Early in the reign these considerable abilities were mainly deployed in the devising of original shows; later, they were increasingly used in collaboration with the commercial companies, in activities including selecting, editing, producing, and assisting at court performances. Streitberger points out that the Master might make major alterations to a play at various points in its transition from page to stage.

Richard Dutton in *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist* concurs that the Revels Office worked closely with ‘an élite group of court-identified companies’, especially the Lord Chamberlain’s Men and the Lord Admiral’s Men who held a virtual duopoly for much of the 1590s. This, Dutton argues, had a shaping influence on the work of their playwrights, especially Shakespeare. The Chamberlain’s Men, of which he was a member, performed more frequently at court in Elizabeth’s last decade than any other company, then at James I’s accession in 1603 became the King’s Men under direct royal patronage.

Like Streitberger’s book, Dutton’s draws together research and ideas from a long and distinguished career, in his case as an editor as well as a theatre historian. Here, though, the argument is more speculative and more likely to provoke controversy. Dutton tackles the

knotty question that has baffled and intrigued so many Shakespeare scholars over generations: why do a number of Shakespeare plays exist in significantly different states? Often the versions in quarto (early single-play editions) and folio (the first collected edition of 1623) differ considerably in length and in textual details. Dutton summarises various previous theories to account for this: ‘piracy, shorthand transcription, memorial reconstruction, abridgement for touring purposes, and foul papers and prompt copies’. Each of these he finds less than satisfactory, and instead he proposes that textual discrepancies are the result of authorial revisions made in order to adapt plays for performance at court.

The court needed longer versions than the public playhouses: various accounts of Elizabethan and Jacobean playgoing indicate that playhouse performances usually started at 2 p.m. and lasted for no more than two hours or so, whereas at court the privileged enjoyed extravagant revels from around 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. or later. Extended versions for such occasions are, Dutton contends, the form in which we know many of Shakespeare’s plays, including all the great tragedies except *Macbeth*. He supports his case by reference to contemporary sources such as the records kept by Philip Henslowe, theatrical entrepreneur and manager of the Admiral’s Men, which frequently mention revision of plays for court performance. This leads to debate with Lukas Erne, who in *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (2003) accounted for the texts of Shakespeare plays that are too long for playhouse performance by proposing that Shakespeare at times consciously wrote for readers rather than the theatre, expecting his text to be cut subsequently for stage use. This made the ‘literary’ versions of plays not only longer than the performed versions, but also more rhetorically complex. Dutton offers an inverse scenario: instead of longer literary versions being cut down later in the playhouse, he believes that the short playhouse versions came first, then were rendered longer and more rhetorically sophisticated for the court. In the cases of the so-called ‘bad’ quartos – apparently mangled or garbled single-play editions of *Henry VI parts 2 and 3*,

*Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Hamlet* – he suggests that these were poorly reported versions of the early playhouse state of each play, before later adaptation and expansion for the court to form the versions we know and accept today.

While arguing with Erne, Dutton finds himself more in sympathy with the 1986 Oxford edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, with its aspiration of recovering Shakespeare's play-texts as they were performed in their time. Like Wells and Taylor, Dutton objects to the tradition of conflating quarto and folio texts to produce a hybrid edition of 'best bits'; such a composite text, he argues, resembles no version actually written by Shakespeare or performed by his company. Instead 'each version represents – however inadequately – a moment in the play's evolution', which for Dutton often means a playhouse version and a court version, where the court version is the longer and more sophisticated of the two.

Dutton builds on his hypothesis to produce some radical new readings of familiar plays. He regards the Folio text of *Henry V* as a version for the court, partly because of its length, but also because of its clear division into five Acts with opportunities for the candle-trimming that would have been necessary for an indoor evening performance. It follows that the 'wooden O' whose inadequacies the Chorus acknowledges might be not be the Globe playhouse (or the Curtain, another possible early public venue for the play), but the wooden banqueting house at Whitehall, in use from 1581 to 1607. Moreover Henry's soliloquy on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, lamenting that his subjects lay a heavy burden of responsibility 'upon the King', is present in the folio text but not the first quarto: this, suggests Dutton, is 'a surprising departure from the performative rhetoric associated with Henry elsewhere in the play', but the sentiment that the masses know nothing of the sufferings of the monarch might make sense in the context of a performance 're-engineered' for the court.

Also viewed afresh is the deposition scene in *Richard II*, absent from the 1597 quarto, and first published in a quarto of 1608. Dutton, an expert on early modern censorship, questions the received wisdom that the scene was suppressed by the Elizabethan government because of its sensitivity in relation to the intensifying succession crisis and attempts to undermine Elizabeth's authority. Instead, Dutton proposes, it was an addition for the Jacobean court, offering Richard Burbage, the star tragedian who would have played Richard, a moving and rhetorically elaborate set-piece, again dwelling on the sensitivities and sufferings of the anointed monarch.

Dutton underlines the importance of the court to Shakespeare's aesthetic and dramatic development by pointing out that whenever the playwright imagines a performance within one of his own works, it is either at a court (Theseus's in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Claudius's in *Hamlet*) or at the house of an aristocrat (as in *The Taming of the Shrew*), not in a commercial playhouse, suggesting that Shakespeare thought of his art as primarily practised at court and for elite patrons. Shakespeare's creative life, Dutton suggests, was much more focused on and influenced by the court than has previously been recognised. In short, he concludes, 'The court is what made Shakespeare Shakespeare.'

Neither Streitberger nor Dutton goes so far as to suggest that Shakespeare enjoyed a close relationship with Elizabeth I, unlike the many biographers and makers of fictions over the centuries who have liked to imagine a mutually appreciative patronage relationship between Queen and poet, or even more personal intimacies. Even evidence for direct contact between Shakespeare and the Masters of the Revels is scanty: just a passing reference to Shakespeare in a note by Sir George Buc, Master from 1603, quoted by Dutton. Perhaps Dutton is right that Philostrate, Theseus's 'manager of mirth' in the quarto text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is a comic portrait of Tilney, and that this tells us something about their working relationship. Be this as it may, these two books complement each other

admirably and invite us to think in new ways about the operations of the Revels Office and the relationship between the court and theatre in the time of Elizabeth and Shakespeare. Streitberger makes a convincing case for the importance of the court in shaping theatre during Elizabeth's reign, while Dutton builds upon this a set of textual and critical hypotheses about Shakespeare's plays that are sure to provoke interest and vigorous debate.

For notes on contributors:

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