

## The Elizabethan Theatre as Early-modern Television

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1600), the following dialogue occurs in act I, scene ii:

*Enter Charles [the court wrestler]*

*Cha.* Good morrow to your worship.

*Oli.* Good Monsieur Charles! What's the new news at the new court?

*Cha.* There's no news at the court sir, but the old news. (ll. 95-98).<sup>1</sup>

And Charles narrates the news of a duke banished by his younger brother, and so on. This piece of dialogue indeed reflects aspects of the spread of news in early-modern England: a country gentleman such as Oliver had to be informed of the news by visitors from the capital, or still better, from the court – and this news tells often “sad stories of the death of kings: / How some have been depos'd, some slain in war, etc.”<sup>2</sup>

The irony, of course, is, that these very stories told in the drama by the characters, were the at the same time the flesh and bones of the stage, where audiences saw such actors impersonating usurpers, murderers of Kings, or Kings as murderers, and so were informed both of representations of the past as well the present. There is much ‘news’ in the early-modern theatres, even though it often is nothing but the old news in a fashionable coat.

At the meta-level, this also counts for writing an essay on the Elizabethan theatre (which label defines the theatre in London, 1576-1642).<sup>3</sup> There is no area in British drama and theatre so intensively studied, in fact so hugely overstudied, as the times of Shakespeare. With an army of lecturers, led by a top-heavy staff of generals (some 200 professors on Shakespeare alone), producing over a thousand publications per year, the term ‘Shakespeare industry’ is well-chosen. Therefore news about the Shakespearean stage, itself *is* old news newly dressed. The new dress today is to explore heuristically whether the Elizabethan theatre can be compared with present-day television, both in function and repertoire. It will by its nature be another ‘cut-and-paste’ essay, relying heavily on work done earlier, by myself and others, among whom Andrew Gurr

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<sup>1</sup>) Latham, A., ed., William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (London, 1975).

<sup>2</sup>) Ure, P., ed. William Shakespeare, *Richard II* (London, 1956), III.ii.156-157.

<sup>3</sup>) There is a tendency to subdivide the period in the Elizabethan (1576-1603), Jacobine (1603-1625) and Caroline (1625-1642) stage, and indeed this does some right to the development of dramatic style as well as that of the theatrical infrastructure in London, where the division between court culture and popular culture increased, particularly after 1625.

here takes a central position.<sup>4</sup> This is thus, an instance of the Puritan dictum ‘the dog always returns to its own vomit’, or in modern terms, ‘the postman always sins twice’. The fashionable coat of this essay is to heuristically compare Elizabethan theatre with present-day television.

### 1. *The Contours of Elizabethan Theatre, ca. 1576-1642*

For sake of space, I must assume that Elizabethan theatre culture is familiar, but for some contours the following might perhaps help: the first of the public amphitheatres in London was built in 1576. The origin of their shape is unknown, but they resembled somewhat the bear baiting rings or jousting lists. Shortly after 1576 the first private theatres opened. These were hall theatres. About 1600 London had some four operative public and two private theatres. These constructions were owned by entrepreneurs in amusements, who let them to companies of players. The kernel of such a company was formed by the sharers (twelve by 1600), who trained boys to play the female parts and could also use hired extras (hirelings). Such a company organization resembled a guild, but its legal status was far from that. These players were formally unpaid household servants of the high aristocrats and, hence, the troupes were called livery companies, named after their protector.

Sixteenth-century Londoners were not wholly unfamiliar with the phenomenon of ‘theatre’. It was at least part of their historical knowledge. They knew that theatres were important in Greek

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<sup>4</sup>) Gurr, A.J., *The Shakespearean Stage* (Cambridge, 1980); Gurr, A.J. *Play-going in Shakespeare’s London* (Cambridge, 1987); Gras, H., *All Semblative a Womans’s Part? Studies in the Staging of and Audience Response to Boy Actors in Sexual Disguise in the Elizabethan Theatre, 1580-1615* (proefschrift, Utrecht, 1991), supervised by A.J. Gurr. Basic for the study of Elizabethan theatre remain Nungezer, E., *A Dictionary of Actors and Other persons Associated with the Public Representation of Plays in England before 1642* (New Haven, 1929); Chambers, E.K., *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 Vols. (Oxford, 1923); Chambers, E.K., *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 Vols. (Oxford, 1930); Bentley, G.E., *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7 Vols. (Oxford, 1941-1968); Chambers, E.K., ed., J. Munro, et al., *A Shakspeare Allusion Book*, 2 Vols. (Oxford, 1932); Tucker Brooke, C.F., “The Reputation of Christopher Marlowe,” in: *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, XXV (1922), pp. 347-408; Bradley, J.F. and Adams, J.Q., *The Jonson Allusion-Book* (New Haven, 1922). The *Toronto Records of Early English Drama* (ongoing), chronicle archive documents per county, from the earliest findings to 1642. To be convinced that much modern historiography just reworks old data in a fancy theory-dress, see Lander Knutson, R., *Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare’s Time* (Cambridge, 2001), largely rehearsing an argument presented by Baldwin, T.W., *The Organisation and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (Princeton, 1927), and Dawson, A.B. and Yachnin, P., *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare’s England. A Collaborative Debate* (Cambridge, 2001).

and Roman times; that they were related to heathen religion, and therefore highly suspicious in the eyes of strict Christians. Elizabethans, too, had access to drama texts from that period, although mainly in Latin. They used Terence, Seneca, and to a less extent Plautus, for teaching Latin and rhetoric. The Londoners were also familiar with the traditions of Church drama on Biblical history and the theatre of the state (royal entrees, etc.). At first the new-found theatres hardly used these traditions, however. The Reformation made it impossible to play religious drama in the new medium of the standing amphitheatre. The Greek and Roman tradition was far too intellectual for the early theatre entrepreneurs and the players.

The first theatre shows had the characteristics of a revue, a gallimaufry as it was called. Sometimes there was a story line, taken from a Biblical story such as Samson, or from chivalric romances, such as *Amadis de Gaula*. But such a story was interrupted with spectacle, trained animals, fireworks, magic, sword fighting, acrobatics, songs, dance and – clowns. Clowns were the leads in this theatre. The name ‘clown’ referred to a stupid peasant, who could not behave in a the decent environment of court and city. The type developed into a ‘fool’ or ‘jester’, who acted as a sort of stand-up comedian and variety entertainer. Extempore gags were their fare. The most famous early clown was Richard Tarlton, who gained the favour of Elizabeth I.<sup>5</sup> Also therefore, he accumulated wealth and court functions.

Such early shows could only be staged on Sundays, the only weekly ‘holy day’ Protestant London recognised, since the abolition of the Saints’ calendar. Puritans, sometimes paid by the city government, wrote against such profanation of the Lord’s Day and did so the more vitriolic, since *Deuteronomy*, 22:5 forbade that men dressed up as women.<sup>6</sup> Puritan opposition was directed at the paying time and at the contents of the shows. In 1580 they were successful in the first point: the privy council forbade Sunday playing, but allowed the players to stage plays on the other six days. This was of course not what the Puritans had in mind, but there it was: the tie between theatre and festivity was broken, never to be reinstalled.

Puritan agitation against the physical character of theatrical shows led the players to reconsider their fare. Acting companies sought for a more acceptable theatrical show, hence, for more text. The solution came from the exchanges between men of the theatre and intellectuals from the universities and the inns of court. These institutions all had their own festive traditions, during which plays were performed. At the universities, drama in Latin was no problem, but at

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<sup>5</sup>) See on Tarlton: Bradbrook, *The Rise of the Common Player*, *passim*. and Gurr, *Elizabethan Stage*, pp. 32, 84-87, 157-158.

<sup>6</sup>) The most notorious treatises against the stage were, Gosson, S., *The Schoole of Abuse* (London, 1579); Gosson, S., *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (London, ?1582); Rainoldes, J., *Th’Overthrow of Stage-Playes* ([Middelburg,] 1599); Prynne, W., *Histrion-Mastix* (London, 1632).

the inns of court the classical tradition was less secure. In that environment translations were made and sent to the printer. Here, Seneca was Englished and Senecan plays were framed. Courtiers, more cultivated than their medieval counterparts, also wrote plays. From the first years of Elizabeth's reign stem the interludes of John Heywood, short comic-moralistic plays. These were pushed aside by adaptations of Italian carnival comedy, as for instance *Bibiena* and *Arisosto* wrote it. The courtier George Gascoigne imitated them and we find them also at the universities and the inns of court, where such plays were privately staged. In the 1580s the courtier John Lyly coined a particular drama for Elizabeth's court, acted by the children of the Chapel Royal.<sup>7</sup> In short, from about 1560 onwards a tradition of high-status English-language drama came into being, however, with a small audience. If such a tradition could be brought to the commercial amphitheatres, the Puritan protests could at least partly be answered.

The decision to forbid Sunday plays accelerated the development of new forms of theatre enormously. Instead of a weekly play, the actors now had six days to fill, and since the audience was relatively small, plays could not be performed in runs. After 1580 there was a huge demand for drama, and hence, there was money in providing it.

This demand for drama was initially taken up by underprivileged Arts students from Oxford and Cambridge. They knew their classics, they knew how to write and they had to earn money, since getting a job in late sixteenth-century England was hard. The first generation drama writers in the Elizabethan theatre, therefore, is known as the University Wits (Thomas Kyd, George Peele, Robert Greene, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe). They wrote plays on the basis of romances, chronicles, and classical drama. Around 1590 they were seconded by less-schooled writers, who also explored the rising genre of the news pamphlet. I think of for instance Thomas Dekker and a Thomas Heywood (Nashe in fact specialised in that genre, too), and the host of hacks, exploited by the theatre entrepreneur Philip Henslowe. William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson stood in between these two traditions. Shakespeare had a grammar-school training and probably some experience in private teaching. Although he had small Latin and less Greek, he probably understood some French and Italian. His cultural baggage was probably extended through his contacts in inns-of-court circles, and, possibly, via noblemen such as the Earl of Southampton. Ben Jonson, trained at Westminster school by the best of teachers, developed a huge knowledge of classical literature, which he eagerly displayed.

In order to stage this new sort of commercial drama properly, a new type of actor was needed and indeed at the end of the 1590s the old extemporizing clown was criticised, and - as Will Kempe did - left the livery companies. The old 'clown's' successor was a 'fool' of a

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<sup>7</sup>) See for the tradition of Choristers' theatres Shapiro, M., *The Children of the Revels* (New York, 1977).

different kind: a wise, melancholic type such as Robert Armin was, Kempe's successor in the Shakespearean company. The 1590s witnessed the rise of the declaiming, if not ranting, heroic actor, such as Edward Alleyn or Richard Burbage. Both were also deeply involved in the management of the theatres and ended as gentlemen.<sup>8</sup> Actors now strove for immersion of the spectator in his show.

## 2. *Facts and Fictions*

The repertoire after 1580 was extraordinary diverse, and it was given at an institutionalised theatre, which was also a novelty. Londoners lived in exciting times, and the writers and players experimented with all sorts of materials. There was a fascination with the possibilities of this new commercial theatre, which we find not only in London, but in Spain, too, and on a far larger scale. I think what happened in that period was comparable to the excitement of television in post-WWII Western Europe. The topic of the workshop, which lied at the basis of this essay, we focus on the mixture of entertainment and information, and the idea of 'a window on the world'.

The restricted space demands selectivity. Thus we cannot, here, pay attention to the mass of topical allusion contained in Elizabethan drama, to which must be added the unknown extemporary remarks for which particularly the clown was assumed responsible. We also cannot elaborate the measures in which fiction (as we regard it today) was taken to be true history. This counts for such heroes as Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear, who were all in the chronicles, and therefore, history. Also the ways in which court culture was spread by way of the actors, cannot be detailed. The King's Men, as Shakespeare's troupe was called the accession of James I in 1603, performed the comic plot-line in the Court Masques, known as the Anti-Masque. They restaged the dances in their own venues, but never with the expensive Italianate perspective scenery, which they could not afford. Also elements of the Lord Mayor's Show could be displayed in the theatre, sometimes leading to scandal. Ben Jonson ended his first comical satire, *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), with an effigy of Queen Elizabeth, which was taken ill. In the printed version, Jonson defended his device with a reference to the Lord Mayor's Show, where such effigies were common. There is no room to narrate in some detail the broad-scale reflection on history and politics, such as the sudden sentimentalising of the rule of Elizabeth I in the reign of King James. The old Queen was not popular at her death, but one year after she passed away, Heywood wrote the two parts of *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody* in 1604 and 1605, in which the Queen's reign was staged, and she herself impersonated. This was

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<sup>8</sup>) Alleyn built Dulwich College, where he received a begging-letter from the minister Stephen Gosson, who as a student had written two treatises against the stage.

followed in 1610 by his *The Fair Maid of the West*, part One, a ‘melodrama’ in which the brave and patriotic ‘maid’ reflected the former Queen. This helped romanticise the Queen and her reign. Last but not least, we will not discuss censorship at length. All theatres and all plays had to be licensed by the Master of the Revels, who charged the players for doing so. This period knew three Masters of the Revels, the rather strict Sir Edmund Tilney, who was the first to be given authority to censure plays in 1581, and held the office till 1597. His successor and nephew Sir George Buc was more indolent, so that some scandals occurred.<sup>9</sup> Sir Henry Herbert, who succeeded Buc in 1622, was not only strict, but raised the censorship and license fees considerably. Politics and Religion were the main concerns in censorship and far less attention was given to ‘decency’.

Like modern television, most of the theatre repertoire consisted of fiction. These mainly derived from existing narratives such as classical and medieval romances, Italian *novellae*, and classical tragedies and comedies. Quite soon the authors developed the sequel and the remake. Marlowe’s *Tamberlaine*, part I and II tell the history of the fourteenth century despot Timur Lenk. It got its sequel as a result of its success. A tragedy of *Hamlet*, most likely by Thomas Kyd (1589), was remade by Shakespeare in 1601; like Shakespeare also remade *King Lear* (1605) from the old *True Chronicle History of King Leire* (ca. 1590). History plays, based on chronicles, could form continuing stories. For reason of popularity with the audience, an author could be forced to have a character return. Shakespeare’s Falstaff, a fat, cowardly, but comic knight, appeared for the first time in *I Henry IV* (1597). He returns in a quite different context in the sequel, *II Henry IV* (1597), perhaps under the pressure of the audience, for Shakespeare has him harshly banned at the end of that play. Yet, we see Falstaff once more in the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (earliest date 1597?) and tradition wants that Shakespeare was ordered to do so by the Queen, who wanted to see Falstaff in love (and some traditions should not be scrutinised). Finally, the title page of *Henry V* (1599), prominently announces Falstaff’s return in the play – but the audience only see him die. Shakespeare, apparently had enough of him.

Comparable is the return of themes and stage gags in plays acted in different theatres. Most companies had plays on the English history, particularly of the history from Richard II to Henry VII. These dramatise the conquest of and the defeats in France, which led to the civil wars (Wars of Roses), till Henry VII Tudor, grandfather of Elizabeth I, established peace and good rule again. These plays, however, had also more sinister political aspects, to which I will return.

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<sup>9</sup>) Such as the staging of the *Isle of Dogs* (1597, by ?Nashe, and collaborators); a lost play on the 1600 Gowry-plot against King James of Scotland (1604), and Day’s *Isle of Gulls* (1606), which satirised King James, who was also attacked by the Children of the Revels, protected by Queen Anne.

Companies of players also tried to milk successes of their rivals. It is generally believed that Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* did so with the success Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* had in its 1594 revival, when Elizabeth's Jewish court physician was executed on accusation of a murder plot. On a smaller scale such piracy was frequent. Around 1600 plays of diverse companies contained Welsh-speaking comic persons and farcical sword fights between two cowards. Sometimes it concerned more subtle borrowing, which commented on rival plays. Thus, Dekker, in *Blurt, Master Constable* quoted at some length the Rosalind's speech of the signs real lovers show (in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*), in order to underline the homoerotic impact of the boy actor playing Rosalind disguised as Ganymede, courting Orlando (Ganymede was Zeus' "ingle", as Dekker stressed much more explicitly than Shakespeare).<sup>10</sup>

This reference makes us aware of the spicy eroticism of the theatre, a topic much discussed in the 'puritan' attacks on the stage. A particular Elizabethan erotic devise was made possible because female characters were played by boys, between eight and twenty-two years of age. As the stories of plays were often based on Medieval and Renaissance romance or Italian *novellae*, which engrossed in travesty (particularly females in male attire), plays acted by an all-male cast, could provide piquant situations, for in these 'sexual disguise' plays, the boy actors, playing a lady, disguising as a male, in the end displayed his own boyish body towards the audience, and the male actor/character with whom this disguised lady was infatuated. The master-mistress relation was subtly changed into a master-page relation, in which only the fiction of female characterisation protected the actors.<sup>11</sup> There was quite some awareness of the homoerotic (or as it was termed 'disorderly' love) in such plays, and authors had to take care not to overplay their hand.<sup>12</sup> Curious is the diversification of such ambiguously erotic plays over the companies.

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<sup>10</sup>) The word 'ingle' if used for a boy was most often synonymous with 'catamite'. Gras, *All Semblative a Woman's Part?*, pp. 183-186, and 220-224. Shakespeare refers also to *Orlando Furioso*. Robert Greene had depicted him in his 1591 play *Orlando Furioso*, where he wooed the (male) clown.

<sup>11</sup>) The cult of regarding young adult male beauty to be interchangeable with female beauty is a topic everywhere in Renaissance Europe and very many literary and 'real' instances not only of female impersonation by young men. See my *All Semblative a Woman's Part?*, and "Traditions of Female Impersonation in Early-Modern Theatre," in: Martin Gosman and Rina Walthaus, eds., *European Theatre, 1470-1600. Traditions and Transformations*, *Mediaevalia Groningana*, Vol. XVIII (Groningen, 1996), pp. 159-169.

<sup>12</sup>) This might be an overstatement. 'Disorderly' or 'unnatural' love was in fact downright 'sodomy'. The homosexual infatuations of adolescence and early adulthood were often not put in that severe category. See on the topic Bray, A., *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London, 1982); Smith, B.R., *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England* (Chicago, 1991); Gras, *All*

Shakespeare's company, the Chamberlain's, later King's Men, went by far furthest in such devices. Think of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, or Fletcher's *Philaster* (surprise disguise), or the multi-authored *Honest Man's Fortune* (apparent disguise). Shakespeare's company is often regarded as catering for a more enlightened elite. The companies with a reputation to cater for 'the city' indeed were far more careful and prude and therefore, dull, in using sexual disguise. The choristers often were provided by their authors with highly explicit language regarding their appeal on their male audiences, but rarely did display it in acting.<sup>13</sup> In the Jacobean and Caroline era, boy actors playing women were exposed to explicit sex scenes, even rape (as in Webster's plays). Puritans raged against travesty on stage, but went berserk when suggestions were made to allow actresses on the stage. All in all the companies watched each other carefully so that - maintaining our TV-metaphor - every channel had more or less the same fare, but this fare often differed in the way it was seasoned.

Besides fiction much non-fiction was staged and that made the theatre also a news-medium. The most serious crimes and hot political facts were dramatised as soon as possible and staged as 'true History'. Sensational murders soon reached the stage as domestic tragedies as for instance Heywood's *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599), about a murder sough of London; the *Yorkshire Tragedy* (1605), in which a father murdered his children, believing they were bastards; or the murder of Arden of Feversham, the play of that title by some believed to have been written by Shakespeare. Such documentary dramas caused fictions (such as Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607)). They tended at first to stress that fortune is fickle, but were reprogrammed to show God's retributive justice on the vicious -- a more proper Protestant conception of the news. Both the pamphlets and the dramas which were based on them have a clever sense of journalism in common.<sup>14</sup> Particularly the Yorkshire murder inspired awe: two pamphlets, a ballad, a chronicle record (Stowe), and two plays were based on this event.

Cases of witchcraft were also likely to reach the stage. An interesting example was Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) about a recent execution of a witch, or Heywood and Brome's *The Late Lancaster Witches* (1634), which was staged while the accused were in a London prison, waiting for their trial. This play is peculiar, since the playwrights were given the text of the Lancaster hearings, most likely by someone of the Privy Council, who sided

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*Semblative a Woman's Part?* (1991).

<sup>13</sup>) Ben Jonson went furthest, see his *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), the *Induction*, and *Poetaster* (1601), the scenes with the players.

<sup>14</sup>) See also Sturges, K. "Introduction," in: Sturges, ed., *Three Elizabethan Domestic Tragedies* (Harmondsworth, 1969), pp.7-49.

with the accusers (probably the Earl of Pembroke, Lord Chamberlain, who also blocked another play on these witches, thus favouring the Globe).<sup>15</sup> The players sexed-up the case and showed the witches in their nightly gatherings and in transforming humans into horses. That will probably not have made the case more believable. Nathaniel Tomkyns, a former MP and later registrar of the Queen's council, who wrote a report on the play, was very sceptical of the case, and so was archbishop Laud, also a Privy Councillor, and the opponent of Pembroke. In such instances the theatre rivalled directly with the ascending hype of 'journals'.

Actualities could also be found on the level of 'human interest'. Dekker's *Keep the Widow Waking* (1624) was also a play based on 'news'. One of the intrigues concerns the murder of a mother by her son, but the title refers to a more comic event, at least if you were in for coarse humour. A young man without much of a future tries to force a well-to-do widow to marry him. He succeeded to lure her into a private room in an inn, where he intoxicated her with strong liquor and kept her in that state, for three days his prisoner, till she consented to marry him. Rescue came just in time. A particularly interesting specimen is Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* (1612), which tells the feats of Marion Frith better known as Moll Cutpurse. Marion Frith was known as a virago (her finishing touch was a long pipe which she used to smoke), and reputed a whore. The play, however, is mild on her and with a reason: Moll was in the audience while the play was staged, and reports run that at the end of the play she entered and sung songs, accompanying herself on the lute.<sup>16</sup> The players could be more nasty: Chapman's *The Old Joiner of Aldgate*, played in 1602 by the boys of Paul's, staged a local fraudulent wooing, which was witnessed by the main victims involved in it. In court, they said they did not recognise it was about them...<sup>17</sup>

The repertoire of history plays, based on the chronicles of for instance Holinshed, Hall, and More, was by its nature politically biased, but contained themes, which could endanger the theatre, or the company of players. Particularly the deposition and murder of Kings, such as Edward II by Mortimer and Richard II by his nephew, the Duke of Lancaster, later king Henry IV, was political dynamite. Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (1592) is dynamite, since it not only staged the deposition and murder of a King, but quite openly alludes to Edward's being sexually attracted to men. Marlowe managed to circumvent possible problems not only by depicting the

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<sup>15</sup>) On the Lancaster witches: Barry, H. "The Globe bewitched and *El Hombre Fiel*," in: *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 1 (1984), pp. 211-230; also Gurr, *Play-going in Shakespeare's London*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>16</sup>) See Gurr, *Play-going*, pp. 61-63.

<sup>17</sup>) See for *The Roaring Girl*, Gurr, *Play-going* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 60-63; and for *Keep the Widow Waking* and *The Old Joiner*, C.J. Sissons, *Lost Plays of Shakespeare's Age* (London, 1936).

malcontent nobles as caught in a process of moral degeneration, whereas Edward's affections have an ennobling effect on the men who are touched by them, while he is also morally rescued by the support of his son, the later hero-King Edward III. Marlowe structured the play, just as he did in *Dido*, not only in the traditional discourse of the precedence of love over friendship, but also depicted the male heroes (Edward II, Aeneas) as caught in a dynastic line, which robbed them of their individual freedom.<sup>18</sup> That does not take away some uncomfortable elements in the play, such as the reference to lascivious Court Masques with naked boys, and the reference to the way the murder was committed by putting a red-hot spit in Edward's anus.<sup>19</sup> The history of King Richard II was potentially more dangerous, since it referred to a deposition and murder, after which the 'guilty' party succeeded on the throne. Moreover, it concerned the Queen's direct ancestors. Shakespeare circumvented the dangers in his *Richard II* (?1595), by having King Richard take all the initiatives himself, so that in fact he deposes himself: "What must the king do now? Must he submit? / The king shall do it. Must he be depos'd? / The king shall be contended. Must he lose / The name of king? A God's name, let it go" (III.iii, ll. 143-146). The theme of justification haunts *I Henry IV*, *II Henry IV*, and *Henry V*, where it appears that God approved of the deed by giving Henry V the victory at Agincourt. The deposition of Richard II, scene, IV.i, ll. 154-318, was not printed in the first three Quarto editions (1597-1598), but were, perhaps ominously, included in the fourth Quarto of 1608.<sup>20</sup> The potential danger of such plays was real. At the eve of the *coup d'état* of the Earl of Essex, February 8, 1601, followers of the Earl paid the

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<sup>18</sup>) In an, alack, unpublished paper at the 1992 conference of the American Shakespeare Association (*Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est*. on the Man-Friend-Wife Triangle in Marlowe's *Dido* and *Edward II*), I developed these themes, and compared the discourse about the triangle (man-wife-friend) in *Edward II*, with Edwards' school play on *Damon and Pithias*, where the two title heroes state to value friendship over love. Gonno, a comic character, played by an adult, then exclaims: "Here is a madman! I tell thee, I have a wife whom I love well, / And if ich would die for her, chould ich were in hell. / Wilt thou do more for a man than I for a woman?" To which (child-actor) Pithias replies: "Yea, that I will, " for, "true friends should be two in body but one in mind, / As it were transformed into another, *which against kind / Though it seem*, yet in good faith, when i am alone, / I forget I am Pithias, methinks I am Damon" (Hazlitt, W.C., ed., *Damon and Pithias*, in: *Dodsley's, A Select Collection of Old English Plays* (London, 1874-1876), Vol. IV, pp. 30-31). My *italics*, which make clear that contemporaries were well aware of a 'homosexual' element in the discourse, which, of course, derives from ancient Greek and Roman sources (Tatius, Pseudo-Lucian, Plutarchus).

<sup>19</sup>) Likely only referred to in speech, the staging suggests that the King is just smothered.

<sup>20</sup>) In 1592 a notice was fixed on the door of King James, then James VI of Scotland, warning him to beware the fate of Richard II. For this and other allusions see Ure, P., 'Introduction', in: Ure, ed., *Richard II*, pp. lvi.

Shakespearean company forty shillings to stage a play in the Globe on the deposition and murder of Richard II. It is not sure that it was Shakespeare's play, though such authorities as E.K. Chambers and Peter Ure find it likely. The players were at once interrogated, probably after one of them informed the authorities. Augustine Philips, sharer and housekeeper in the Shakespearean troupe, used a traditional defence, saying that the play was "so old and so long out of use that they could have small or no company at it. But at their [the followers] request [the actors] were content to play it."<sup>21</sup> This statement should convince the authorities that the players just suffered in their act to please their betters (stage a worthless play in an empty theatre), and that it, moreover, could not have stirred many. "I am Richard II. know ye not that?" Elizabeth is reported to have said, adding that "this tragedy was played [forty] times in open streets and houses." It is curious that Essex himself was sensible for the use of the stage as a means of political influence, for he complained to the Queen, a year before his rebellion, when he was tried for his failures in Ireland, that "shortly they will play me in what forms they list upon the stage."<sup>22</sup> Such incidents show the weak spot of censorship. A play, once licensed, could be applied to any context, and as Ben Jonson in particular was aware of, "application is grown a trade."<sup>23</sup> Once an incident had happened, authorities saw dangers where they might not be seen. Just after the Essex rebellion the Privy Council punished the poet Samuel Daniel for supposed reference to Essex in his choristers play *Philotas* (1604).<sup>24</sup> It indicates how directly these histories were taken to comment on actual politics.<sup>25</sup>

Actual world news was also dramatised, such as the imprisonment and execution of the marshal Byron of France, a former general of Henry IV, who plotted the murder of his sovereign who, with his peace policy, had bereft him of the best part of his living and sense of having a life. Such plays most times had a very short run: they were quickly forbidden by the Master of the Revels (who censured plays), under the pretext that no living monarchs were allowed to be impersonated on the stage. So, these were often a *success de scandale*. In the case of the Chapman's two *Byron* plays (1608), King James closed the choristers theatre at the Blackfriars,

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<sup>21</sup>) See Ure, P., 'Introduction', pp. lvii-lix.

<sup>22</sup>) Gurr, *Play-going*, p. 146.

<sup>23</sup>) Jonson, *Volpone*, dedication. He would elaborate the point in his *Staple of News* (1625).

<sup>24</sup>) Gurr, *Shakespearean Stage*, pp. 51-52; *Play-going*, p. 146. Daniel himself licensed the choristers plays at that time, hence the intervention from the Privy Council.

<sup>25</sup>) It is puzzling what the Queen meant by forty performances of the tragedy. Some scholars think she referred to puppet plays.

after a complaint by the French ambassador. The result was that the Shakespearean company could at last stage plays in what had been their property since 1596. Here, as so often, the complaint was that a living monarch, here Henry IV, had been put on stage. This was also a reason to ban the play on the Gowry plot of 1600 against King James VI of Scotland, which was played in 1604, just after this monarch had become James I of England as well. In some cases direct depiction of living persons, not monarchs, in a context of political struggle, could lead to highly offensive symbolic humiliation. In Middleton's *A Game at Chess* (1624) a scene occurs in which the black and white pawns (respectively standing for Spaniards and Englishmen) take each other in the back, leading to a highly unusual visual image on the stage,

*White Pawn:* We three look like a bird-spit, a white chick / Between two russet woodcocks.

*Black Jester Pawn:* I'm so glad of this!

*White Pawn:* But you shall have but small cause, for I'll firk you.

*Second Black Pawn:* Then I'll firk you again.

*White Pawn:* And I'll firk him again.

*Black Jester Pawn:* Mass, here will be old firking! I shall have the worst on't, for I can firk nobody. / We draw together now for all the world / Like three flies with one straw thorough their buttocks. (ll. 377-384)

And so *exit*. Fuck the enemy! It was a huge success as long as it lasted.<sup>26</sup>

More subtle but not less severely reacted on was Day's comedy *The Isle of Gulls* (1606), a farcical reworking of Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, in which the weak spot of the new King James I Stuart was in a covered way revealed: his attraction to beautiful young men. The King's displeasure was aroused not so much by the text, which could be held innocent, but because the players appear to have imitated James' Scottish accent (although that part of the play cannot be found in the printed text of the play) – such forms of allusion are the theatre's privilege over printed texts. In order to escape imprisonment playwrights took refuge to allegory, an old device to circumvent censure. Even crude forms of allegorisation were not considered to harm the reality-reference. In *A Warning for Fair Women*, for instance, Heywood included allegorical characters, which are not supposed to spoil the documentary character of the play.

The theatre also reflected on the news of the day in a sort of 'reflections-on-the-news' programs. The *Witch of Edmonton*, for instance, was based on a rather straight-way witch-trial pamphlet. Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's, play does not just dramatise it, but reflect on the events as well. And their reflections are a sharp social critique. Their play has three intrigues. One is that of Elizabeth Sawyer, supposed to be the real witch. The other focusses on the local manorial gentleman, who persuades the young middle class man Frank to marry his mistress, not informing him that she was already with gentle child. This Frank is the link to the third intrigue: his father

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<sup>26</sup>) See the letter John Chamberlain to Dudley Carlton, quoted in Gurr, *Play-going*, p. 235.

marries him off to one of his friends' daughter. Caught in bigamy, Frank murders his wife. Meanwhile the witchcraft intrigue has made it clear that belief in witchcraft was just believing old women's fables, and that the village community had done better to take more care of poor Elizabeth Sawyer, who mistakenly believed she indeed caused harm with the help of the devil in the shape of a lap dog. The real village devil, Dekker has no doubts about it, is the local gentleman, whose responsibility for the murder and hanging of Frank is underlined. The common people have more to fear from devilish noblemen than from old women, is the message of Elizabethan Nova.

Critically reflective on news or not, such a play must also be set in its context. However ridiculous witchcraft was made on stage – and the playwrights felt protected here by King James's growing scepticism with respect to witchcraft – there was an element of spooky mystery in the matter as well, which the playwrights did not want to tempt. The real witch of Edmonton learned from the devil a *maleficium*, or incantation, to wit the second line of the Paternoster, "sanctificetur nomen tuum". Yet, in *The Witch of Edmonton*, this line is never properly spoken and in the text changed in "sanctibicetur nomen tuum". My suggestion is that playwright and/or players did not want to bring misfortune down over their heads. There was an age-long tradition not to speak operative holy lines on the stage. In the Medieval religious drama, for instance, the *absolve te* is never spoken by actors. A *maleficium* was likewise regarded as an operative 'command', although one coined by the forces of evil. The best-known evidence regarding such matters is of course Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Already around 1600 it was reported that Edward Alleyn, who acted Faustus, wore a cross under his stage costume, obviously to protect himself from demonic harm.<sup>27</sup> A tradition of anecdotes, of which the earliest was set down by William Prynne in his *Histriomastix* (1632), report that while playing the demons' scene, the players noticed a real devil on the stage. Other anecdotes, which take the action less serious, still centre on nervousness in the audience.<sup>28</sup> It would be typical for the Renaissance, this sort of intellectual reflection and crude superstition, but we may wonder to what extent we ourselves have just invented other fields of mystery about which we deal in the same way.

In the context of the rather interchangeable repertoire the diverse theatres staged, a kind of arty avant-garde TV also developed – theatre that reflected upon theatre, upon the traditions of mimesis, and genre. Theatre, hence, that is funny if you know a lot about theatre. The choristers'

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<sup>27</sup>) I do not believe this cross was part of the stage costume. The title plate of the text shows a protective cross besides the circle but not on Faust himself.

<sup>28</sup>) The materials have been gathered in Tucker Brooke, C.F., "The Reputation of Christopher Marlowe", in: *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, xxv (1922), pp. 347-408.

repertoire in the early seventeenth century (ca. 1599-1608), particularly those by John Marston are notorious. Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* satirises Arcadian drama inspired by Philip Sidney; his *Antonio's Revenge* satirises Senecan tragedy and more in particular *Hamlet* (probably the ur-*Hamlet* thought to be Kyd's). In his *What You Will* he comments on the limits of literary conventions when set in incongruous philosophical paradigms: a romantic device as a faithful female who follows her untrue lover, disguised as his page, becomes ridiculous in an Epicurean context, where the soul does not survive. It belongs to Platonism. Such dramas are forms of meta-theatre. As a form they survived themselves quickly.

The theatre often commented on other rivalling news-media, too. In Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* the audience watches Autolycus, a seller of - among other things - news ballads. The village women readily buy them, for what is in print is true. The scene, of course, is satirical and might tease us to believe plays are truer – until we see a statue come alive. Shakespeare repeatedly comments in his histories on the untrustworthiness of handed down historical knowledge. Ben Jonson, however, is far more uncompromising with respect to the printing industry. In 1625 he wrote a comedy in response to the first printed newspapers in London: *The Staple of News*. In it, some clever Londoners (to be compared with present-day New-Yorkers with respect to deviousness), found an institution which gathers 'news' (and hence the 'staple'). This news, however, is not sold as printed papers, but is only sold by word of mouth, under the motto: printed news is no longer news. Customers, then, pay literally for baked air - and just like *dot.coms* the Staple quickly lost its creditworthiness. The complication is in the nature of Jonson's message: that the theatre is a more effective medium than the printing press or reading aloud. In the theatre one can hear *and see* how the world turns. And ocular proof was the word in new physics.

This brings us to the point where we, of course, must draw attention to the sharp distinction between theatre and television, to wit, television as the window to the 'real' outer world in our drawing room. Theatre is always representation by means of actors – TV shows reality. I, of course, will not go into the question of how real TV-reality or, more suspect, reality-TV is, but I want to stress that Elizabethan theatre makers strove for the 'real'. In the Elizabethan theatre many sorts of depiction (representation, mimesis) were used to create an illusion of reality. Some of them were completely artificial, like allegorical characters in documentary drama, or when Tritons enter when someone is drowning (complete with tridents and shells), or when they pretend to stage desirable women - using boys! On the other side, theatre makers could go great lengths in their strive for realism. As, e.g., real sheep entrails are displayed on the stage in a torture scene, liver and guts and all (and I am pretty convinced that the heart on the dagger which ends John Ford's drama on brother-sister incest, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, was a real one). Particularly in personal satire players tried to copy reality, for instance, by laying their hands on

their victim's clothes. So they staged Ben Jonson, in 1601, 'in his true attyre' (SD, 2.2.0). More drastic was the depiction of the Spanish ambassador in the political satire *A Game of Chess*. The actors had not only stolen a costume of the ambassador, but meticulously remade his close-stool (the ambassador suffered from fistulas and had a special chair) and acted out all his manners.<sup>29</sup> In that way reality came into view. *A Game of Chess*, to be sure, was closed down by the censor after a crazy run of nine days. There was also a sense of reality in the audience's experience, although we only have bits of information. It is for instance curious that reports on performances almost never refer to the actors as persons or 'stars'. They refer to the characters as if they were living persons. The highest praise an actor could get was that he had been invisible on the stage. The best piece of evidence to that effect was written by a servant of Sir Robert Sidney, who fought the Spaniards in the Low Countries, and just had won the battle of Turnhout (1599). He writes to his master that the actors have made a play of the battle and that he will go see it. Some days later he writes that he saw Sir Robert Sidney upon the stage, slaying and killing Spaniards.<sup>30</sup> The illusion worked apparently very well.

Again, I do not pretend that Elizabethan theatre *was* TV. The cultural context and technology differed widely. But I am pretty convinced that the way in which the human mind deals with the succeeding forms of mediated representations is rather stable and that, hence, my metaphor was not completely an Aristotelian mental game. The Elizabethan theatre had the intention to be a window on the world and was experienced as such, although the technological means lacked. Elizabethans could surely think it and tried to approach it (with that respect I am an intentionalist). Jonson was fond of quoting Cicero on that point. The drama (or theatre) was not only an *Imitatio Vitae* but also an *Imago Veritatis*. Researchers in the media landscape familiar with older forms of mediated communication, sometimes get the feeling 'what's new'. The relatively new medium of commercial and professional theatre incorporated into itself existing written and oral traditions. The play longtime remained 'a tale told in two hours'. The theatre was incorporated in opera, film, television and the internet. What's new. I recall seeing Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo* in the 1980s with Piet Kroon, the now reputed maker of animation films (who thus now needs less introduction than his sometime teacher). He remarked: Shakespeare did not do this sort of things – while I remarkable at the same time thought: this is exactly what Shakespeare did in *As You Like It*. — I hope you do.

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<sup>29</sup>) See the letter of John Chamberlain to Dudley Carlton, August 21, 1624, quoted in Gurr, *Play-going*, p. 235.

<sup>30</sup>) See for this and other instances, Gras, *All Semblative o Woman's Part?*, pp. 51-53. Gurr, *Play-going*, p. 145, unfortunately cites an eighteenth-century abridgement of this record.

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