

Extract Three

This is an extract from the opening chapter on Shakespeare, 'back in the day'. It comes from the end of the section on his company's touring activities:

It is difficult for us to comprehend the popularity of the boys' companies where all parts in a play are performed by young males. However they had been successful in the 1570s, more so than adult companies, and they were to re-establish this dominance during the years when Shakespeare had reached the full flowering of his abilities. Shakespeare seems alone in resisting the urge or need to write for them, all the other prominent playwrights, including Ben Jonson, wrote for these boy casts who swept all before them in the opening years of the 1600s. Adult companies were forced to rely on touring to keep in existence as the city theatre goers flocked to see the children.

As you would expect, Shakespeare did not take kindly to this usurping of his place in London's theatres. One can only imagine the frustration he felt, when at the peak of his powers he found himself outshone in popularity by them. Or perhaps we do not need to use our imagination as, uncharacteristically, we have what would appear to be direct comments on this situation from Shakespeare himself.

He brings the subject up, very deliberately, in *Hamlet*. There, Shakespeare used the arrival of a touring band of actors to Elsinore to comment on the enforced touring of his own company. Hamlet poses a series of pointed questions on the matter: 'How chances it they travel?', 'Do they hold the same estimation they did when I was in the city?' 'Are they so followed?' To which the answer is a flat negative, 'No indeed are they not.' As the conversation continues, Hamlet, one cannot but presume, outlines Shakespeare's position on the 'little eagles' ('eyases') that have taken over his nest:

Hamlet *How comes it? Do they grow rusty?*

Rosencrantz *Nay, their endeavour keeps in the wonted pace: but there is, sir, an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for't. These are now the fashion, and so berattle the common stages--so they call them--that many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills and dare scarce come thither.*

Hamlet *What, are they children? Who maintains 'em? How are they escoted? Will they pursue the quality no longer than they can sing? Will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players--as it is most like if their means are no better, their writers do them wrong, to make them exclaim against their own succession?*

Hamlet act II scene II

In the first quarto Hamlet's question is answered perhaps less bitterly and more in weary recognition, if not resignation:

Rosencrantz *I'faith my Lord, novelty carries it away, for the principal public audience that came to them, are turned to private plays and to the humour of children.'*

It was at least partly due to this 'turning to ... the humour of children' at the Blackfriars theatre that Shakespeare and his company were forced to go on tour in 1601 which directly resulted in the comments made in *The Returne to Parnassus* that we looked at earlier.

As if the plague and the boys' companies were not enough, there was another feature of London at the time that meant touring was often the only viable route for Shakespeare's company to take, and that was the implacable opposition to the theatres from the civil authorities. A constant battle for survival was waged by the acting profession in London in the face of this antagonism. Royal and noble patronage was their defence against those who saw the theatres as centres for drunkenness, prostitution, crime, and mob violence. The protection afforded the acting fraternity was forever being tested and it proved to be insufficient at times. For example, in 1596 London's authorities prohibited the public presentation of plays within the city limits for a year. In the words of the Privy Council, with the spelling modernised:

Her Majesty being informed that there are very great disorders committed in the common playhouses both by lewd matters that are handled on the stages and by resort and confluence of bad people, has given direction that not only no plays shall be used within London or about the city or in any public place during this time of summer, but that also those playhouses that are erected and built only for such purposes shall be plucked down.

Strong stuff indeed, although mercifully the last threat was not carried out. This stern prohibition, in the Queen's name, is thought to stem from the performance of a play called *The Isle of Dogs* (which unsurprisingly has not survived) by Ben Jonson and Thomas Nashe at the Swan theatre in 1596. This play was immediately suppressed, as apparently it had gone too far in its satire and had caused outrage with its 'lewd' and 'slandrous' content. Imprisonments followed and the theatre owner had his licence revoked.

The list of reasons to leave the city and hitch up the old pageant wagons were many, varied and persistent. Companies could be closed down; the plague could appear again at any time and fashionable trends in the paying clientele could alter. Touring repeatedly became the essential means of survival, and the only way to avoid bankruptcy. This economic necessity was given a financial boost by the added value that plays already performed in London could be replayed to country and provincial audiences. This was more important than it may at first appear, due to the incredible turnover of plays in the capital during the decades surrounding the century changing. Touring allowed the reprisal of popular hits that, although much loved, had enjoyed only short runs due to the novelty-hungry nature of the London audiences of the time.

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