

The Closure of the Theatres

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Like the Protestant Schism (or Reformation, depending upon which side you were on) around one hundred years earlier, the cataclysmic events of the English Civil War (1642–51) and the resulting Interregnum (1649–60) did not create an entirely unbridgeable rupture in the nation's history, its collective consciousness, or even individuals' personal experiences. Anthony Kitchin, the Bishop of Llandaff (1477–1563), for example, had the extraordinary experience of being a Roman Catholic bishop under Henry VIII, switching with him to the Protestant side in 1534, switching back when his daughter Mary I reinstated Roman doctrine in 1553, and switching to Protestantism again when Mary's half-sister Elizabeth ascended her throne in 1558.¹ Likewise, some people involved with theatre before the Civil War attempted to pick up where they left off when the eighteen-year closure ended in 1660. These included the state censor of plays Henry Herbert who held the role of Master of the Revels for half a century, from 1623 to 1673. This article will reconsider just what it meant for Caroline society to have its theatres abruptly closed (at least, officially) during the crisis of 1642, and what that meant in practice for particular members of the theatre industry.

Until the 1980s, theatre historians usually told a quite straightforward and uncomplicated story about how the theatres came to be closed, and the story's longevity is explained by its elegant simplicity and its ability to account for most of the known historical facts about theatre across the decades of English history from the Reformation to the Restoration and beyond. The story is that the English monarchs loved theatre and formed a power bloc with senior aristocrats who shared their relatively moderate religious views, while the English public,

¹ C. G. Mortimer and S. C. Barber, *The English Bishops and the Reformation, 1530–1560* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1936); Madeleine Gray, 'Anthony Kitchin [Name in Religion Dunstan] (1477–1563)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew, Brian Harrison and Lawrence Goldman, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/15689 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). A running gag in the comic film *Carry on Henry [VIII]* has Sir Roger de Lodgerley (Charles Hawtrey) always precisely one step behind official doctrine; he is repeatedly tortured until he recants his dissent, only to find that by this time the official 'truth' has moved on and he must be tortured again to make him recant his last recantation; *Carry on Henry*, dir. by Gerald Thomas (Rank Organisation/Peter Rogers Productions, 1971). Kitchin would have appreciated the point of this grim humour: what matters is not one's eventual flexibility but how quickly one adopts the latest thinking.

many of whom also enjoyed theatre, were riven by religious factionalism between secret Catholics who still cherished the old ways and rabid Puritans who hated theatre and thought the Roman religious ceremonies little better than public spectacles (and vice versa). With little variation, this story can largely account for the rise of professional theatre in the 1570s–80s (good queen Bess loved to see a show), its vicissitudes through the flourishing decades of the 1590s–1630s — and especially the trouble between a theatre-loving Court and a theatre-hating London Corporation — and its demise in the 1640s when the Puritan anti-theatricalists finally won and the Court lost.

Fifteen years ago, Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean exploded the first part of this narrative.² A major turning point in the development of professional theatre was the formation of the Queen's Men's company in 1583, when privy councillor Sir Francis Walsingham foresaw what could be achieved by taking the best actors from the leading playing companies (all patronized by barons) and putting them together as an all-star royal troupe to present royal propaganda. The official explanation for doing this was that the queen loved drama and that the privy council wanted to make sure that it was always available for her. This official line McMillin and MacLean called the 'queen's-solace argument' and they thought that theatre historians should never have been taken in by it.³ Rather, as their book showed, the situation was rather more subtly political than that. Walsingham was not a lover of drama but he saw opportunities in it, especially in strengthening moderate Puritanism against the anti-theatrical extremists. The first wave of the Reformation used art, drama and music as propaganda, but the second radical wave in the late-sixteenth century rejected these media. This must have looked threatening to the Puritans on the Privy Council (Walsingham, the Earl of Leicester, Sir Francis Knollys) who could see this 'iconophobia' as threatening to 'drive the reform movement apart from a developing English culture'.⁴ Ultra-Puritanism has no place for a monarch-primate, so for men like Walsingham the challenge was to reconcile religion and royalism. The Queen's Men's plays, and especially their history plays (a genre this troupe more or less invented), showed extreme Protestantism as unpatriotic. The old historical narrative was that humanism set drama free from the religious ideology of the Catholic miracle cycles, but McMillin and MacLean argued that Protestant religious ideology replaced Catholic religious ideology in the drama. The old idea that drama blossomed when it became secularized is, they showed, much too simplistic.

² Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 18–36.

³ *Ibid.* p. 9.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 31.

The following year, David Scott Kastan chipped away at the other end of the old story, by showing that it really is too simplistic to say that the Puritans closed the theatres in 1642.⁵ Kastan built upon Margot Heinemann's ground-breaking book *Puritanism and Theatre*, which pointed out that although the categories of 'Puritan' and 'antitheatricalist' overlapped somewhat there were plenty of Puritans who liked theatre and non-Puritans who hated it.⁶ As Kastan observed, the third Earl of Pembroke, Sir William Herbert, was known as a senior Puritan yet he patronized Ben Jonson and was a dedicatee of the 1623 Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays, while the fifth Earl of Huntingdon, Henry Hastings, was likewise radically Puritan yet he patronized Shakespeare's successor as house dramatist to the King's Men, John Fletcher.⁷ We can also add that the Puritan poet John Milton certainly liked drama: he contributed a commendatory poem to the Shakespeare Second Folio of 1632,⁸ his father having been a trustee of the King's Men's Blackfriars playhouse from 1620.⁹ Heinemann argued that Middleton himself was a Puritan, although as N. W. Bawcutt points out it is hard to reconcile this claim with the satires on Puritanism throughout his plays.¹⁰

To understand why the theatres closed we have to understand the Civil War, but unfortunately there is no clear consensus amongst historians on just what caused this upheaval or even just what the participants thought they were fighting for. Marxists pay attention to large epochal changes happening over many decades and centuries that generate stresses within social structures in ways analogous to how pressure builds up in the tectonic plates of the Earth's crust as they slowly shift. In politics, as in geology, such pressure may suddenly be relieved by a vast upheaval, and Marxists are not so much interested in the local event that triggers the upheaval as in the long-term shifts that created the pressure in the first place. For Marxists the key change is always economic — the dominant mode of production alters — and in the case of the Civil War they see a new and rising bourgeois class, practising capitalist wealth creation, wanting to thrust aside the old aristocratic class that arose from the previous mode of production, feudalism. Other historians, however, stress the particular arrangements of the English political system in which parliament was officially

⁵ David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 201–20.

⁶ Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts*, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁷ Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory*, p. 203.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. Published According to the True Originall Copies. The Second Impression*, STC 22274 (F2) (London: Thomas Cotes for Robert Allot, 1632), "A5^f."

⁹ Herbert Berry, 'The Miltons and the Blackfriars Playhouse', *Modern Philology*, 89 (1992), 510–14.

¹⁰ N. W. Bawcutt, 'Was Thomas Middleton a Puritan Dramatist?', *Modern Language Review*, 94 (1999), 925–39.

only an advisory board to the monarch but had sole power to raise taxes to pay for state spending. Throughout his reign, Charles I could prorogue parliament to avoid dealing with its objections to his policies — in particular those regarding intervention in Europe's Thirty Years' War — but only by foregoing the tax revenues that paid for his policies. After an eleven-year period without parliaments, Charles I finally convened what came to be known as the Long Parliament, on 3 November 1641. However, it declared itself immune to dissolution by the monarch and debated at length its members' grievances against the king, which were largely concerned with domestic religious policies.

So, was the Civil War primarily about class or religion? Even to this simple question there is no agreed answer. We can say, though, that Puritans were on the parliamentary side and that, so far as we can tell, all of the well-known actors except one were on Charles's side. This is not surprising since for nearly a century all actors had been, virtually by definition, on the side of aristocracy, as they were technically the household servants of senior aristocrats or members of the royal family. This had been the case since Elizabeth I's proclamation of 16 May 1559 requiring actors to have an aristocratic patron, which act forced the semi-professional acting troupes of the mid-century to either formalize their existence (and acquire capital) or disband.¹¹ So, despite the necessary historical qualification about anti-theatricalism and Puritanism not necessarily going together, we can at least locate almost the entire acting profession on one side of the great divide of 1642. But just why were the theatres closed at the start of the Civil War? As Kastan pointed out, it is not only not the case that Puritan anti-theatricalism finally triumphed but it is not even the case that anti-theatricalism was on the rise in the years before the Civil War. The hey-day of anti-theatrical publication and preaching had been in the last decades of the sixteenth century and it sounded distinctly old-fashioned in the 1630s.¹² William Prynne's famously ill-judged anti-theatrical polemic *Histriomastix* of 1633 was markedly uncharacteristic of prevailing views.¹³ Everyone knew that the actors were necessarily on the side of the monarchy so perhaps we could say that once a violent confrontation between parliament and king began to appear inevitable in the early 1640s the act of closing the theatres was a logical, albeit indirect, means of commencing the hostilities.

To take a view on just why the theatres were closed in 1642 requires taking a view on just what social function they had served in the preceding decades. In

¹¹ William Ingram, 'The "Evolution" of the Elizabethan Playing Company', in *The Development of Shakespeare's Theater*, ed. by John H. Astington, AMS Studies in the Renaissance, 24 (New York: AMS, 1992), pp. 13–28.

¹² Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory*, p. 203.

¹³ William Prynne, *Histriomastix: The Players' Scourge*, STC 20464 (London: E[dward] A[l]lde, Augustine Mathewes, Thomas Cotes] and W[illiam] J[ones] for Michael Sparke, 1633).

essence, was theatre a progressive or conservative social institution? Yet again, there is no clear answer. As McMillin and MacLean showed, the Queen's Men were formed in 1583 by Privy Councillors seeking to promote social cohesion by touring plays that promulgated moderately Protestant, English nationalist propaganda. The history play genre that they invented was not so straightforwardly conservative when taken over by its supreme proponent, William Shakespeare, in the 1590s. But nonetheless a prominent twentieth-century reading of his two tetralogies was that they unproblematically articulated a providentialist interpretation of English history. That is to say, England fell into collective sin with the murder of Richard II in 1400, suffered nine decades of internecine strife as a consequence of God's displeasure, and was restored to grace again with the accession of Henry VII in 1485.¹⁴ Later, however, the very same plays were re-interpreted as illustrations of exactly the opposite model of English history. Instead of showing the hand of providence, Graham Holderness influentially argued that the history plays depict a Machiavellian world of ruthless personal ambition and frenzied bloodlust with no redeeming human or divine aspects.¹⁵

J. P. Brockbank thought that in fact both the providential and Machiavellian models are present in the plays, and also in the prose chronicles of English history by Raphael Holinshed and Edward Hall from which they draw their historical events. Shakespeare, Brockbank pointed out, has different characters interpreting the events that are happening around them according to either the providential or Machiavellian model, as it suits them.¹⁶ Such critical disagreements over how we should read the Shakespearian history plays can be paralleled for virtually all the drama of the period 1576–1642. For any given play, there is no interpretative consensus on whether it is progressive or conservative in its depiction of governance and power, or the relations between the sexes, or religious orthodoxy, or sexual behaviour, or any socio-political topic of intense interest then and now. Heinemann saw in the drama of the two decades before the Civil War a strong strand of oppositional thinking that was critical of how state power was being exercised. Whereas earlier satires had been essentially trivial in their criticism of particular abuses that flourished at court, the plays of 1619–40 were, according to Heinemann, 'much more dangerous' because they 'made a number of attempts

¹⁴ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944).

¹⁵ Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare's History* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985); Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992); Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

¹⁶ J. P. Brockbank, 'The Frame of Disorder: *Henry VI*', in *Early Shakespeare*, ed. by John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, Stratford-on-Avon Studies, 3 (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), pp. 73–99.

to handle central issues of policy and outlook in dispute between Crown and Parliament'.¹⁷ It is one thing to suggest that a particular monarch is not doing his best or is unsuited to the role, but quite another to suggest that the country might be better off without having a monarch at all.

Heinemann's claim that plays with oppositional (or, 'dissentient') content dominated the period before the Civil War was influentially repeated and reinforced by Martin Butler.¹⁸ But what if the danger posed by drama was not simply determined by its subject matter? What if drama was inherently dangerous no matter what the dramatists wrote? There is clear evidence that some observers thought that no matter how it was done, the mere fact of representing the aristocracy and monarchy on the stage was apt to demean their role in society. When the Globe theatre burnt down in 1613 during a performance of Shakespeare's *All is True* (later renamed *Henry VIII*), the diplomat Sir Henry Wotton described to a friend how the play was staged, and how the court was 'set forth with many extraordinary circumstances of Pomp and Majesty, even to the matting of the stage; the Knights of the Order, with their Georges and garters, the Guards with their embroidered coats, and the like: sufficient in truth within a while to make greatness very familiar, if not ridiculous'.¹⁹ As Gordon McMullan noted, Wotton implies that the 'hubris of the dramatic representation' was the company's collective moral failing for which the fire was just punishment.²⁰ If Wotton's view were common, if the mere representation of monarchy was widely understood as an attack on the institution, then fine distinctions between pro- and anti-monarchical ideology in the drama evaporate and it is all essentially republican in effect, no matter what the characters actually say.

On the other hand, according to Leonard Tennenhouse, we are asking the wrong question in seeking to probe the relationship between early modern theatre and early modern politics, because the distinction between those two domains of action simply did not exist at the time. Under the influence of the French theorist Michel Foucault, Tennenhouse found that in comedies as much as in histories and tragedies the drama displayed just how power works in society. This is a concern not so much with how power is gained and lost as with how it saturates all social relations and how it mediates our interactions. In this kind of thinking about power, the word 'display' carries a substantial interpretative burden because there is no such thing as a neutral act of showing: ostension is always selective, partial, motivated. 'Renaissance drama', wrote Tennenhouse,

¹⁷ Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre*, p. 200.

¹⁸ Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis, 1632–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁹ William Shakespeare, *King Henry the Eighth*, ed. by Gordon McMullan, *The Arden Shakespeare* (London: Thomson Learning, 2000), p. 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

‘displayed its politics in its manner of idealizing or demystifying specific forms of power’ and it was in its performing of this display that the drama became ‘aesthetically successful’ because in his period ‘political imperatives were also aesthetic imperatives’.²¹

To give a concrete example, we might think that in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the Athenian law that gives Egeus absolute power over his daughter is merely archaic and that in finally deciding to overrule it Theseus exercises the monarchical right to interpret this statute in the best interests of his people. But Tennenhouse pointed out that at the moment of crisis, when Theseus and Egeus discover the runaways Hermia and Lysander asleep together outside the city, the duke chooses to impute their behaviour to an artistic and submissive impulse rather than a seditious and disobedient one. ‘No doubt’, he decides, ‘they rose up early to observe | The rite of May, and, hearing our intent, | Came here in grace of our solemnity’ (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, IV. 1. 131–33). ‘By identifying the lovers as revelers’, Tennenhouse pointed out, ‘Theseus does more than decriminalize their transgression of the law; he identifies their state of disarray with the order of art. [...] What had been a violation of the father’s law now becomes a scene of harmony’.²² We should note that this interpretative escape route by which transgression may be authorized and so brought within the operations of hierarchical power would become unavailable if one decides, as extreme Puritans did, that even observing the ‘rites of May’ —dancing around maypoles and other rural carnival activities —is sinful disobedience of God. Thus when we think about the events leading to 1642, power has two distinct and oppositional faces.

A key problem that everyone agrees led to the Civil War was that of deciding just what kind of authority the king could rightly wield. Could he exercise absolute power on his own or did that power exist only when the king acted in consort with his parliament? In Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, Northumberland insists that it is not enough for Richard to give up his throne in private: he must also announce to parliament the reasons for doing so. If the king refuses to make this public acknowledgement of his wrongdoing, Northumberland claims, ‘The Commons will not then be satisfied’ (IV. 1. 262). It is often supposed that the so-called ‘deposition scene’ in which this exchange occurs is absent from the first three editions of the play (published in 1597, 1598, and 1598) because it was considered dangerous to depict the deposing of a king. On the contrary, argued Cyndia Susan Clegg, the really dangerous matter here is not the deposing of a king — lots of plays showed that — but the depiction of a parliament whose

²¹ Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare’s Genres* (New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 6.

²² Tennenhouse, *Power on Display*, p. 74.

members believe that the monarch must answer to them.²³ If this is true, then the drama could be dangerous not so much in its overt depictions of particular events (whether historical or fictional) but in the covert, undiscussed assumptions that underpin those events and that to a modern ear scarcely even register as inherently political.

According to Tennenhouse, the emergence of the new sub-genre of ‘disguised ruler’ plays that followed the accession of James I in 1603 was the dramatists’ response to his taking personal charge of the theatre industry, making himself the patron of the leading company (Shakespeare’s Chamberlain’s Men, becoming the King’s Men) and their main rivals (the Admiral’s Men, becoming Prince Henry’s Men). The plays in question are Thomas Middleton’s *The Phoenix*, John Marston’s *The Malcontent* and *The Parasitaster, or Fawn*, John Day’s *Law Tricks*, Thomas Dekker and John Webster’s *Westward Ho!*, Dekker and Middleton’s *The Honest Whore, part two*, the anonymous *London Prodigal*, Edward Sharpham’s *The Fleeer* and Shakespeare and Middleton’s *Measure for Measure*, all first performed in the first few years of the new reign. In their dramas, the companies newly drawn to the Jacobean royal bosom speculated in their ‘disguised ruler’ plays just what would happen if the ruler absented himself and left lesser deputies in charge. Uniformly, the results are disastrous: the genre’s ‘whole purpose is to demonstrate what happens with the loss of the monarch’s presence’.²⁴ However, Kevin A. Quarmby has recently argued that the ‘disguised ruler’ genre had rather deeper historical roots than Tennenhouse’s topical explanation would allow, and Quarmby traced the genre’s elements continuing well into Caroline drama. Indeed, in the anonymous play *The Wasp, or Subject’s Precedent* (first performed around 1636–40) the disguised ruler is a baron forced into this device by the loss of his lands to the king’s favourite. Quarmby thought this late Caroline play might ‘offer veiled criticism of Charles I’s court favourite, George Villiers’ or else ‘it might represent criticism of King Charles himself, who, following the dismissal of his third Parliament in 1629, embarked with his Privy Council on over a decade of unchecked and isolated “Personal Rule”’.²⁵

The problem of determining whether the ‘disguised ruler’ genre might offend or flatter the monarchy is just one instance of the wider problem that we cannot easily tell what role drama played in Caroline public life prior to the Civil War. From studying the plays’ contents, we can construct arguments for their being subversive, their being conservative, or even — via the paradoxical logic of the New Historicism best sampled in Stephen Greenblatt’s essay ‘Invisible Bullets’

²³ Cyndia Susan Clegg, “‘By the Choise and Inuitation of Al the Realme’: *Richard II* and Elizabethan Press Censorship”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 48 (1997), 432–48 (pp. 443–45).

²⁴ Tennenhouse, *Power on Display*, p. 156.

²⁵ Kevin A. Quarmby, *The Disguised Ruler in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 221.

— conservative because subversive.²⁶ The paradox arises from Greenblatt's version of the subversion–containment dialectic in which rulers may tolerate or even personally indulge in subversion precisely so that they may better deal with it before it explodes into outright revolt. The paradox gets redoubled by Greenblatt's conclusion that once literary criticism has figured out that a play is being conservative — in its depiction of subversion only in order finally to validate the containment of that subversion — the play becomes subversive again by virtue of its unmasking this particular trick by which rulers stay in power.

With so many layers of subjectivity and repeated negation in the interpretation of drama, it starts to look as if indeterminacy is one of the defining conditions of the artform and that even under close scrutiny a play may have the quality that Feste says a sentence has, being 'but a cheverel glove to a good wit, how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward' (*Twelfth Night*, III. 1. 12–13). Certainly close official scrutiny was no guarantee of the detection of dissent. Albert H. Tricomi pointed out that in the 1630s Charles I himself took to perusing play scripts and would correct his censor, the Master of the Revels, in his judgements. Yet when the lawyers of the Inns of Court were invited to present a court masque in 1634, they came up with James Shirley and Inigo Jones's *The Triumph of Peace* which Tricomi characterized as distinctly qualified in its celebration of monarchical power's primacy. '*The world shall giue prerogative to neyther | We cannot flourish but together*' sing Irene (= Peace) and Eunomia (= Law) in unison,²⁷ and Tricomi read this as calling for 'a balance between the crown's rule and that of the law'.²⁸ Like Heinemann and Butler, Tricomi went on to find 'dissentient' voices across the drama right up to the closure of 1642.²⁹

If we think that drama was critical of the monarchy in the period up to 1642, we can hardly maintain that a Puritan parliament put a stop to drama for simple political purposes. Indeed, we cannot convincingly explain the closing of the theatres in terms of the radical nature of the drama they were presenting, because (*pace* Heinemann, Butler and Tricomi) there is no general agreement that the drama was radical. Kastan argued persuasively that even though the drama could not be pinned down as taking one side or other in the disputes about the nature of monarchical power, theatre was 'itself always a contested arena of power and desire, never inherently *either* an agent of subversion or an apparatus of royal

²⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, 'Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*', in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 18–47.

²⁷ James Shirley, *The Triumph of Peace*, STC 22458.5 BEPD 488a,b(*) (London: John Norton for William Cooke, 1633), C3^v.

²⁸ Albert H. Tricomi, *Anticourt Drama in England, 1603–1642* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), p. 171.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 171–89.

authority [...] it belonged neither to the King nor to his critics [...] [and] was claimed by both, for it was a significant site of voluble articulation, a locus of the production of meanings and images that could neither be stabilized nor controlled'.³⁰ According to Kastan, both sides wanted the theatres closed simply because they generated too many socially circulated meanings in the form of 'unauthorized representations that are then available for contest and appropriation'.³¹

The most recent commentator on the politics of the 1642 closure, Martin Wiggins, saw no reason to believe that the drama of the period could be thought especially dangerous by anyone at the time:

The single most striking feature of the surviving plays from the years leading up to the English Civil War is the dramatists' almost obsessive recourse to the plot device of the baby-swap, which was influentially used by Beaumont and Fletcher to disentangle potential tragedy in *A King and No King* (1611), but whose roots go back even further to a passing remark in Shakespeare [that Hotspur and Prince Hal might have been swapped at birth, 1 *Henry IV*, I. 1. 85–88]. [...] Insofar as there is a political application of this kind of fantasy, it recommends quietism: if you have a bad king, all you can do about it is hope for the emergence of some new evidence casting doubt on his birthright, or perhaps the return of an elder brother from the grave. [...] There is something of the same supine quality to the more overtly royalist drama of the pre-war years.³²

In Wiggins's narrative, the trigger for parliament's voting to close the theatres was the Master of the Revels, Henry Herbert, making military preparations for the royalist side on 5 August 1642. Forced to exclude him from the House of Commons (in which he sat as Member of Parliament for Bewdley in the West Midlands), parliament thereby 'lost control of the theatre' and realized that 'insofar as the current repertory was harmless, it was Herbert who had kept it so'.³³ This event pulled the trigger, but the weapon was loaded, according to Wiggins, by Protestant piety stoked up from attendance at anti-theatrical sermons.³⁴ Most importantly, the parliament's intention in 1642 was not a permanent closure of the theatres but just a temporary break during the present crisis.³⁵

Historians frequently find that an event such as a war or a change in a system of government is too large and complex to be given a single explanation or even a collection of simple ones. In such situations one may find that a case can be

³⁰ Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory*, pp. 209–10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

³² Martin Wiggins, *Drama and the Transfer of Power in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 104–05.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 112–13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

made for each of several quite different and mutually incompatible explanations, as with the Civil War and the lack of agreement amongst historians on whether religious or economic forces were the more important. One respectable response to such an impasse is to turn our attention to the individuals who took part in the event and to see how they experienced it. We will therefore now consider how various particular members of the theatrical profession experienced the closure of 1642, the Civil War, the Interregnum, and the renewal of theatre in the 1660 Restoration.

We mentioned that all actors were by definition the household servants of aristocratic or royal patrons and that all bar one took their masters' side in the Civil War. The exception was Eyllaerdt Swanston, who is first heard of as an actor in the office book of Henry Herbert, the Master of the Revels from 1623. In 1622 Herbert recorded Swanston as one of the 'chiefe of them at the Phoenix' (the Drury Lane indoor theatre, also known as 'the Cockpit', built by Christopher Beeston), meaning the Lady Elizabeth's Men.³⁶ According to the same record (now lost and preserved only in notes made by Edmond Malone), Swanston joined the troupe at the Blackfriars — that is, the King's Men — in 1624. On 20 December 1624, Swanston and other members of the company signed an apology to Herbert for performing a play called *The Spanish Viceroy* without his approval as Master of the Revels.³⁷ For King James's funeral of 7 May 1625, each of the King's Men, Swanston included, was given four yards of black cloth so that they could accompany the coffin as members of his household.³⁸ With James's death their licence as his players expired, so on 24 June 1625 his successor Charles I issued a fresh licence, naming Swanston as well as John Heminges and Henry Condell (the two men who signed the preliminaries of the 1623 Folio of Shakespeare), John Lowen, Joseph Taylor, Richard Robinson, Robert Benfield, John Shank, William Rowley, John Rice, George Birch, Richard Sharpe and Thomas Pollard.³⁹

We have a partial record of the roles Swanston performed. In his dialogue *Historia Histrionica* (that is, *History of Drama*) of 1699, James Wright recorded that Swanston played Shakespeare's Othello, and an early annotation in a 1634 quarto of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* seems to show him taking its title

³⁶ *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama: The Records of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels, 1623–73*, ed. by N. W. Bawcutt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 136.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³⁸ E. K. Chambers, Allardyce Nicoll and Eleanore Boswell, 'Dramatic Records: The Lord Chamberlain's Office', in *Malone Society Collections 2*, ed. by W. W. Greg (London: Malone Society, 1931), pp. 321–416 (pp. 325–26).

³⁹ E. K. Chambers and W. W. Greg, 'Dramatic Records from the Patent Rolls: Company Licenses', in *Malone Society Collections 1.3*, ed. by Chambers and Greg (London: Malone Society, 1910 (for 1909)), pp. 260–83 (pp. 282–83).

role.⁴⁰ In 1654, Edmund Gayton in his *Pleasant Notes Upon Don Quixote* pictured an amateur impersonation of an emperor and remarked that ‘[Joseph] Taylor acting *Arbaces*, or *Swanston D’Amboys*, were shadowes to him’; this presumably refers either to the eponymous hero of George Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois* or his brother Clermont D’Ambois who (finally) avenges his death in the sequel *The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois*.⁴¹ Other role assignments are more speculative.⁴² Swanston was already a sharer in the Blackfriars playhouse when, in 1635, he and the actors Robert Benfield and Thomas Pollard took out a lawsuit against the actor John Shank and others arguing that they should be allowed to buy shares in the Blackfriars and Globe playhouses.⁴³ After listing the services in the royal army done by the leading actors, Wright’s character Truman says: ‘I have not heard of one of these Players of any Note that sided with the other Party, but only *Swanston*, and he profest himself a Presbyterian, took up the Trade of a Jeweller, and liv’d in *Aldermanbury*, within the Territory of Father *Calamy*’.⁴⁴ The last named is Edmund Calamy the Elder, the Presbyterian curate of St Mary Aldermanbury and a notable Puritan advocate of war against King Charles.

In an anonymous royalist pamphlet of 1648 it was asked sarcastically of Swanston’s Puritan associates:

[...] have not they reason to suppress all Holly-dayes instituted formerly by the Church for the service of God, and for some refreshment to young people? What need is there of any Playes? will not these serve well enough, especially when they have got *Hillyar Swansted* the Player to be one?⁴⁵

Clearly, it was plausible at the time to blame Puritanism for the suppression of holidays and drama:

[...] we need not any more *Stage-playes*; we thanke them for surpressing them, they save us money; for Ile undertake we can laugh as heartily at [Thomas] *Foxley*, [Hugh] *Peters*, and others of their godly Ministers, as ever we did at [Andrew] *Cane* at the *Red Bull*, *Tom: Pollard* in the humorous Lieutenant, [William] *Robins* the Changeling, or any humorist of them all.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ James Wright, *Historia Histrionica: An Historical Account of the English Stage*, Wing W3695 (London: G. Croom for William Haws, 1699), B2^r. David George, ‘Early Cast Lists for Two Beaumont and Fletcher Plays’, *Theatre Notebook*, 38 (1974), 9–11.

⁴¹ Edmund Gayton, *Pleasant Notes Upon Don Quixot*, Wing G415 (London: William Hunt, 1654), E1^r.

⁴² Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941), II: *Dramatic Companies and Players*, pp. 584–88.

⁴³ *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660*, ed. by Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry and William Ingram, *Theatre in Europe: A Documentary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 221–28.

⁴⁴ Wright, *Historia Histrionica*, B4^v.

⁴⁵ Anonymous, *A Key to the Cabinet of the Parliament, By Their Remembrancer*, Wing K387 ([London]: n. pub., 1648), A3^r.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, *A Key to the Cabinet of the Parliament, By Their Remembrancer*, B1^v.

There is some evidence of the royalists continuing to enjoy drama even during the Civil War. Abraham Cowley's *The Guardian* was written for private performance before Prince Charles at Cambridge University but was so under-rehearsed that it became a staged reading, after which Cowley revised it to reflect what he wished had been performed;⁴⁷ Cowley claimed to have lost this revised version.⁴⁸ He later rewrote the play entirely under the new title *The Cutter of Coleman Street*, and mentioned that as *The Guardian* it was performed 'privately during the troubles', meaning the Civil War.⁴⁹ Leslie Hotson found further examples of actors entertaining the royalist troops.⁵⁰ It is easy to see, then, the explicatory attraction of a simple dichotomy between drama-loving Cavaliers and drama-hating Puritans, even as we dismiss it as reductive.

Our last sight of Swanston before his death in 1651 is in the 1647 folio of plays attributed to Beaumont and Fletcher. Along with Thomas Pollard and others, Swanston signed the epistle dedicating the collection to the parliamentarian Philip Herbert, fourth Earl of Pembroke (1584–1650), who until 1641 had been Lord Chamberlain and hence in charge of the state censor, the Master of the Revels.⁵¹ The Beaumont and Fletcher folio of 1647 was overtly in imitation of the 1623 Shakespeare Folio, its dedication to Herbert referring directly to his being one of the dedicatees of that earlier volume. In his address 'To the reader', dramatist James Shirley made the same point about contemporary reality outdoing drama that we saw in the anonymous royalist pamphlet quoted above: '*And now Reader in this Tragical Age where the Theater hath been so much out-acted, congratulate thy owne happiness, that in this silence of the Stage, thou hast a liberty to reade these inimitable Playes [...]*'.⁵²

Shirley's address shows that he was alert to the considerable irony that the suppression of public performance led to a glut of plays appearing in the much more durable and distributable form of printed anthologies. These plays were delights that were 'only shewd our Fathers in a conjuring glasse, as suddenly removed as presented' and were now in printed form made permanent so that 'the Presse thought too pregnant before shall be now look'd upon as greatest | Benefactor to Englishmen'.⁵³ To see why the closing of the theatres caused a flood

⁴⁷ Abraham Cowley, *The Guardian*, Wing C6673 BEPD 693a (London: [Thomas Newcombe] for John Holden, 1650).

⁴⁸ Abraham Cowley, *Poems*, Wing C6683 (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1656), [a]1^v.

⁴⁹ Abraham Coleman, *Cutter of Coleman Street*, Wing C6669 (London: [William Wilson] for Henry Herringman, 1663), A2^r.

⁵⁰ Leslie Hotson, *The Commonwealth and Restoration Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), pp. 8–9.

⁵¹ John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont, *Comedies and Tragedies*, Wing B1581 (London: For Humphrey Robinson, and Humphrey Moseley, 1647), A2^r.

⁵² *Ibid.*, A3^r.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, A3^r–A3^v.

of printed plays one has only to consider the point of view of the owners of play manuscripts: what else could they do with them but sell them to publishers, since there were no theatres to perform them in? As W. W. Greg noticed long ago, the Stationers' Register after 1642 contains 'whole batches of plays, mostly old ones, evidently made with a view to extensive publishing ventures consequent upon the closing of the theatres during the Civil War and under the Commonwealth'.⁵⁴

Hitherto, of all the manuscripts that might exist for a play, by far the most valuable would be the one containing the Master of the Revels's licence, since this proved that the script had been approved for performance. In the Interregnum, one such licence ended up in a printed book — although the manuscript itself is lost — because the printer, setting type directly from the licensed manuscript, included it after the play's 'FINIS' and epilogue. The play is by Thomas Jordan and the licence reads 'This Comedy, called, *The Walks of Islington and Hogsdon, With the Humours of Woodstreet-Compter*, may be Acted: This 2, August, 1641. Henry Herbert'.⁵⁵ In general a manuscript could not be expected to survive the process of being used to set type in the printshop, and ordinarily the players would never risk sending the licensed playbook itself to the printers; a scribal copy would instead be sent. By 1657, however, playing had been suppressed for fifteen years and presumably whoever gave this manuscript to the publisher Thomas Wilson saw little chance of a resumption of playing and hence saw little value in preserving the performance licence.

Henry Herbert himself naturally lost his position as Master of the Revels during the Commonwealth, recording in his day-book: 'Here ended my allowance of plaies, for the war began in Aug. 1642'.⁵⁶ Obviously a royalist, Herbert did not personally fight in the Civil War, but 'lived quietly in London and on his estates'.⁵⁷ With the Restoration, Herbert resumed his role as Master of the Revels on 20 June 1660, but just exactly what happened then is uncertain; we rely here on Bawcutt's interpretation of the incomplete and partly contradictory records.⁵⁸ Three surviving theatres restarted in the Restoration: Michael Mohun led a company of old actors at the Red Bull, at the Phoenix Drury Lane John Rhodes formed a young company (including Thomas Betterton), and at the Salisbury Court William Beeston established a company of unknown membership. These companies were forced out by the royal approval given to

⁵⁴ W. W. Greg, 'The Bakings of Betsy', *The Library*, 2 (1911), 225–59 (p. 236).

⁵⁵ Thomas Jordan, *The Walks of Islington and Hogsdon*, Wing J1071 BEPD 773a (London: Thomas Wilson, 1657), H4^r.

⁵⁶ *Control and Censorship*, ed. by Bawcutt, p. 211.

⁵⁷ Richard Dutton, 'Sir Henry Herbert (Baptised 1594, Died 1673)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew, Brian Harrison and Lawrence Goldman, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/13029 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵⁸ *Control and Censorship*, ed. by Bawcutt, pp. 88–101.

William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew, which approval allowed them to evade the Master of the Revels's authority.

First Davenant and Killigrew worked together to defeat Herbert's power and to subjugate the independent acting companies, then they set up their two companies. Killigrew took over Mohun's company and called it the King's Men (performing first at Gibbons's Tennis Court on Vere St), and Davenant took over Rhodes's company to form the Duke of York's Men (installed in the new Lincoln's Inn Field theatre). In 1662–63 Killigrew and Davenant were granted their performance monopolies from the king, and Herbert's authority over them was effectively ended. Herbert tried but failed to muscle in on the licensing of plays for publication, and all he had left was the licensing of travelling shows and entertainments. It is true that Herbert was allowed some censoring role by Killigrew and Davenant, but they were under no obligation to accept his authority; perhaps, suggested Bawcutt, he seemed to them a useful scapegoat if a play he approved caused offence. There are in all just three Restoration manuscripts and two printed plays with Herbert's performance licences in them, three of them showing signs of his censorship.

For one person at least, 1660 was very much a continuation of what he had begun before the Civil War. The dramatic career of William Davenant (1606–1668) began in the late 1620s with his revenge tragedy *The Cruel Brother* for the King's Men. That Davenant rapidly became close to the royal family is evidenced by the censorship of his play *The Wits* in 1633, when Herbert's disapproval of the words 'faith, death, [and] slight' was personally overruled by Charles I.⁵⁹ According to Herbert, the performer Endymion Porter had tried to give this playbook directly to the King, who insisted, reported Herbert with palpable satisfaction, that it first had to go through the hands of the Master of the Revels. Although the King insisted on the official protocol, that he then read the script for himself and corrected his corrector cannot have pleased Herbert, who recorded that he thought Charles I mistaken on the nature of the words in question. Davenant's court masques designed in collaboration with Inigo Jones in the late 1630s featured extravagant spectacle, extensive music, and a complete disregard for the realities of the contemporary political situation. In form they anticipate Davenant's greatest contribution to the history of performance in Britain, which we may call either the musical or the opera.

During the years of the Civil War dramatic performances in London did not entirely cease, and indeed the repetition in 1647 and 1648 of the prohibition against public performance makes it clear that performances were still happening: rulers repeat themselves only when they are being disobeyed.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Control and Censorship*, ed. by Bawcutt, p. 186.

⁶⁰ *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660*, ed. by Wickham, Berry & Ingram, pp. 132–35.

Hotson usefully summarized the ‘Surreptitious Drama, 1642–1655’.⁶¹ The eleven years after the execution of Charles I in 1649 were quite different from what went before, since — notwithstanding some remaining battles that finally sealed the military defeat of his son Charles II in 1651 — the triumph over monarchy was now complete and Puritanism was in the ascendancy. Those playhouses that had not been destroyed could operate only clandestinely. Immediately after Charles I’s execution, Davenant was appointed, in short succession, to several posts in the Royalist American colonies but he was captured by parliamentarians in the English Channel on his way there and after two years in the Tower of London was released in 1652.⁶² A ballad whose title puns upon Davenant’s name, ‘How Daphne Pays His Debts’, was entered in the Stationers’ Register in 1656 and it indicates that he was already active in trying to re-establish drama in London and that he sought Herbert’s old job as Master of the Revels.⁶³ This last point is corroborated by Herbert’s post-Restoration remark, in the midst of a dispute with him, that Davenant ‘exercised the Office of Master of the Reuells to Oliuer the Tyrant’.⁶⁴ Strictly speaking, the office of the Master of the Revels did not exist in the 1650s. Herbert went on to complain that Davenant cozied up to Cromwell’s regime and the insinuation seems to be that during the later part of the Commonwealth Davenant hoped to position himself for Herbert’s old job if he could get the theatres formally reopened.

The details of the performances alluded to in ‘How Daphne Pays His Debts’ are lost to us, but we know that from 1656 Davenant put on quasi-performances — “declamations”, interspersed with instrumental music and songs’ — first at hired venues across London and then at Rutland House in Aldersgate Street, his own home.⁶⁵ Finding that these performances were not suppressed, Davenant went on to develop the first part of *The Siege of Rhodes*, designed by Inigo Jones’s protégé John Webb and using ‘the Art of Prospective in Scenes’ with ‘the Story sung in *Recitative Musick*’, printed in an edition dated 17 August 1656 and presumably performed shortly before that.⁶⁶ There is considerable irony in the prohibition of drama, which this piece was clearly designed to evade, acting as a stimulus to the development of what was to become the new British dramatic tradition of opera. The irony is all the sharper when we note that in *The Siege of Rhodes* the part of Ianthe was ‘played’ (if that is the right term) by ‘Mrs. Coleman,

⁶¹ Hotson, *The Commonwealth and Restoration Stage*, pp. 3–59.

⁶² Mary Edmond, *Rare Sir William Davenant*, The Revels Plays Companion Library (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 103–04, 119.

⁶³ Hotson, *The Commonwealth and Restoration Stage*, pp. 141–49.

⁶⁴ *Control and Censorship*, ed. by Bawcutt, p. 264.

⁶⁵ Edmond, *Rare Sir William Davenant*, p. 122.

⁶⁶ William Davenant, 1 *The Siege of Rhodes*, Wing D339 BEPD 763a(i) (London: J[ohn] M[acock] for Henry Herringman, 1656), A1^r.

wife to Mr. *Edward Coleman*,⁶⁷ who is thus, as Davenant's biographer put it, 'the first identified woman [...] to act upon the English public stage'.⁶⁸

Taken any further, our story would enter upon the well-documented innovations of the Restoration theatre, including the normalization of women acting, the widespread use of perspective scenery, and the triumph of the indoor hall playhouses over the open-air amphitheatres with which they had co-existed before the Commonwealth. As we have seen, the seeds of these developments grew in the oppressive atmosphere of the Interregnum prohibition of drama, so we cannot see them as simply the expressed negation of Puritan supremacy. We quite naturally conceive of history as a series of narratives punctuated by calamitous events, among which the Civil War and the Interregnum are of prime importance for understanding the history of drama. The various agents in these events, however, led lives that in some cases sprawled across our punctuation marks and in considering how they experienced the events we find a counterpoint to the larger narratives. To attend to these experiences is not to reject grand historical narratives altogether but to try to see more clearly the materials from which they are made. This approach has come to be associated with the literary historian Raymond Williams, the title of whose classic *Culture and Society* could scarcely wield more abstract and generalized terms and yet whose text is forever concerned with 'the lived quality', the 'lived reality' of the events and persons with which it is concerned.⁶⁹ His remains an approach of special utility for theatre historians.

⁶⁷ Davenant, 1 *The Siege of Rhodes*, F4X1^r.

⁶⁸ Edmond, *Rare Sir William Davenant*, p. 128. Although there was no formal prohibition on women acting on the pre-Commonwealth stage, the absence of a professional or educational route into the commercial theatre reinforced the prevailing view that it was unseemly. Occasionally, singular women pushed against the norms of gender as they applied to theatre, most famously the cross-dressing Mary Frith (a.k.a. Moll Cutpurse) who at the Fortune theatre in 1611 sat 'vppon the stage in the publique view of all the people there presente in mans apparrell & playd vppon her lute & sange a songe' (Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, ed. by Paul A. Mulholland, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 262). The appearance of this record of her behaviour within the *Consistory of London Correction Book* does not indicate that Frith's performance was a crime, but shows that it was consistent with her other confessed misdemeanours including blasphemy and public disorder; Frith's denial of the more serious charges of prostitution and procuring prostitutes was on this occasion accepted (*Ibid.*, p. 263).

⁶⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), pp. 28, 52.