The Playwright’s Mirror:
Reflexivity on the Stages and Streets of Early Modern London

By

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Abstract

The culture of playgoing in early modern London has frustrated scholars due to a paucity of evidence. In order to understand the historical matrix of the theatre’s achievements, a consideration of the broader acquisitive energy of English society should be considered. This study examines both archival and literary sources to understand social behavior in early modern London via the court records of Bridewell Hospital and the drama of William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. It seeks to understand how the theatre interacted with the major social, political, and economic forces of its age, arguing that drama was a dialectical exchange between the stage and the street, producing effects that were felt and practiced beyond the playhouse walls. Language prescribed by authoritative bodies attempted to control social behavior, representing commercialized theatre and commercialized sex as uncivilized, dangerous, and criminal. Yet dramatists offer a more accurate portrayal of life on the ground, and similar to the archival record, they depict the London experience as multi-layered and complex. The plays also evince the ineffectualness of local power structures, for while playing and prostitution were constantly harassed by the state, they persisted, even prospered. Plays were social commentaries, but they were also social actions that provided definitions, practices, and possibilities that effected change beyond the world of the stage, and helped citizens conceptualize the rapidly changing and expanding urban milieu.
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And my late sister Katharine, who shared with me a love of both Shakespeare and the theatre from a young age, it is your memory to which I dedicate this project.
Dramatis Personae

THE STAGE

Practitioners


English Authorities

HM Elizabeth I, queen of England from 1558-1603 and great enthusiast of the theatre. Privy Council, Elizabeth’s administration. The Right Honorable the Lord Mayor of London, officer who governed City of London, only. Court of Aldermen, elected officials who represented the City of London, presided over by the Lord Mayor. HM James I, king of England from 1603-1625 and great enthusiast of the theatre.

THE STREET

Practitioners


English Authorities

Bridewell Court of Governors, elected officials who governed Bethlem Hospital and Bridewell Prison. Thomas Winch, Bridewell Treasurer.
In and around the city of London, England, during the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries.
Chronology of Events

1546 – Henry VIII authorizes the closure of all brothels in London.

1553 – Bridewell Palace becomes a hospital and correctional facility for wayward women. A few years later it is London’s most notorious prison.

1558 – Elizabeth I ascends the throne of England.

1572 – An Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds, a poor law targeting playing, is passed.

1574 – the first license granted to a company to perform is granted by Elizabeth I.

1576 – the Theatre, the first public playhouse in England, is built.

1576 – the first of several cases, which comprise a concentrated effort against commercial sex, is heard by the Bridewell Court of Governors.

1587 – the Rose, another playhouse, is built.


1604 – William Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure is first performed.

1610 – Ben Jonson’s The Alchemist is first performed.
“I believe in art’s social presence – as a breaker of official silences, as voice for those whose voices are disregarded, and as a human birthright.”

Adrienne Rich

“The theatre serves to orient us. And this is why, once one has understood how to use it, one can no longer do without this compass.”

Alain Badiou
Act I

In a letter dated July 28, 1597 to the Privy Council, the elite executive board of the Tudor political system, London’s exasperated Lord Mayor and his Court of Aldermen – having “signified to your H.H. [Honourables] many tymes heartofore” – addressed “the great inconvenience which wee fynd to grow by the Common exercise of Stage Playes.” Recycling language from another letter dated nearly two years prior, their narrative largely focused on corruption and disorder. According to these municipal authorities, plays were a miasma containing “nothinge but prophane fables, lascivious matters…& scurrilous behaviors” which vitiated audiences to “move wholie to imitation.” The letter continues with a laundry list of inconveniences, including the opportunity for “euill disposed & vngodly people…to assemble themselves & to make their matches for all their lewd & vngodly practices.” They cite confessions from apprentices who “have confessed vnto vs that the said Staige playes were the very places of theire Randevous appointed by them to meete with such othere as wear to ioigne [join] with them in theire designes & mutinus attemptes.”¹ The City of London’s antipathy toward the theatre was justified by the need to maintain the well being of the metropolis of which it served.

Although actions to stymie playing began much earlier, between 1592 and Elizabeth I’s death in March of 1603, there were several letters from the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen addressing the “suppressing of…Stage Plaies.”² Even given this concern, reaction by the Privy Council was curiously ambivalent. In the early part of the decade, the council appeared to concur with their municipal counterparts on the grounds

² The Lord Mayor and Aldermen to the Privy Council, September 13, 1595, in Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage, 4:318.
of attenuating disease, the result of a rather nasty outbreak of bubonic plague in the summer of 1592. The council first authorized playing “in any county, cittie, towne or corporation not being within vijen [ten] miles of London, where the infection is not,” but later barred performances “by any Companie whatsoever within the compas of five miles distance from London.” Over the next few years, there were several more instances in the Privy Council Register ordering the suppression of plays, yet there was an almost equal amount of support. A Privy Council minute from August 1597 cites the grounds of insurrection, reporting on a “lewd plaie that was plaied in one of the plaiehowses on the Bancke Side, contanynge very seditious and slanderous matter,” to which the Council “caused some of the players to be apprehended and comytted to pryson.” Another from March 1600 required the Middlesex Justices of the Peace to “take order that no soche theatre or plaie-howse be built” in that county, for it would “greatly displease her Majestie.” Yet, two years earlier, a letter informed the Middlesex Justices that a “licence hath been graunted unto two companies of stage players…to use and practice stage plays.” Their justification for this order was staging plays at public playhouses was a dress rehearsal, “whereby they might be the better enhabled and prepared to shew shuch plaies” for the queen. Another example of support, this time in May 1600, the Privy Council allowed Peter Bromvill, a French acrobat “recommende unto her Majestie from her good brother the French Kinge” to perform at the Swan Theatre, located in the borough of Southwark.

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These records reflect the local authorities’ united effort to extirpate playing yet also illustrates the internecine within Elizabeth’s administration. Some members of the council were the patrons of playing companies, such as Henry Carey, Elizabeth’s cousin, and Robert Dudley, Elizabeth’s favorite. Elizabeth’s indispensable chief advisor William Cecil, on the other hand, was determined to maintain social order and usurped the City’s jurisdiction over the theatres by reforming the governance of the office charged with regulating theatrical activity. The Privy Council reviewed a variety of petitions regarding playing, from those authored by the playing companies themselves defending their cause; from citizens of the neighborhood of Blackfriars hoping to prevent the actor Richard Burbage from building a playhouse; and from the Watermen of the Bankside advocating for the reopening of the Rose theatre after the plague outbreak of 1592. Several documents reveal a fight for power over theatrical activity between the City and the court. This circuitous interplay between Londoners, local authorities, and the royal court evinces the complexity to which the theatre was embroiled in the politics of the local and national governments.

Despite the influx of orders to restrain the excessive number of “howses erected & employed in and aboute the Cittie of London for common Stage Plaies,” the struggle for control between the City and the royal court seemed to ameliorate the position of theatre practitioners, allowing the theatre to evolve into a thriving industry. By the late sixteenth century, it had established itself as a social institution that attracted citizens by the multitudes, a development which prompted the materialization of playhouses around the city and a repertory of plays in the hundreds, several of which are now considered superlative in form and craft. Much to the consternation of the Lord Mayor and his

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Aldermen, their tireless efforts did not seem to impinge on theatrical activity. For instance, there was a plea by the Lord Mayor that all playhouses should be “plucked downe” in 1597. Yet, in 1599, the year the Globe theatre was constructed, there were nearly a dozen playhouses in London. Theatre was a function of metropolitan society as much as it was a cultural event that reflected the major social, political, and economic forces of its age.

Drama was a participatory art form that occurred within a public space. English society itself was performative, for as Jessica Browner observes, “not watchful silence but rather active and vocal participation was the usual audience reaction to a play that caught their interest.” The nation’s performative inheritance derived from the witnessing of medieval pageant plays, royal processions through the streets, public executions, spectacles at carnivals and fairs, and performances at guild feasts. By the late sixteenth century, plays were reflecting societal tensions regarding hierarchy, xenophobia, and spiritual repression, and dramatists encouraged audiences to make new meanings of these tensions in conjunction with their own experience, beyond the playhouse walls. Plays were unique texts that not only documented the social configurations that shaped society, they also contributed to social processes themselves, processes that informed identity and the socio-historical context in which that identity was designed. Those texts were then performed at the playhouse, a negotiation that facilitated collective participation within a public space. As Stephen Greenblatt observes,

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10 Privy Council Minute, July 28, 1597, in Chambers, Elizabethan Stage, 4:322.
“the Shakespearean theatre depend[ed] upon a felt community,” and that community was authentically represented at the theatre. Plays acquired meaning from the society in which it was created, and they, in turn, encouraged participants to construct new social ideologies. London theatre of the late sixteenth century supported and reinforced the cultural dialectics between representation and popular action by its accurate portrayal of the civil sphere. Moreover, it offered new alternatives to the prescribed social codes that governed behavior. This study aims to extrapolate the theatre as a dialectical exchange in which audience response was felt and practiced outside the playhouse. The trajectory of drama in the late sixteenth century is one of rapid and unprecedented evolution, from pageantry into commercial enterprise. With intrepid facility, the theatre managed to prosper, despite interdiction and near dissolution due to political, religious, and environmental pressures. Regarding the theatre as a social force, what type of effect did it have on its participants? How precisely did the theatre inform the life of the common Londoner?

Given the paucity of evidence, these questions may seem nearly impossible to answer, but not if investigated from an alternative perspective. Existing scholarship uncovers the interlocking ways in which the playing companies, the public playhouses, patronage, and the Revels Office buttress the business of playing into a flourishing industry, despite the vituperative political and social climate. Similarly, the records from London’s Bridewell Hospital reveal prostitution was as much a function of metropolitan life as the theatre appears to have been. By regulating sexual activity in the capital city,

13 Plague outbreaks occurred in the city of London in the years 1575, 1592, and 1603 and the theatres were closed as a result.
the Bridewell Hospital Court of Governors attempted to neutralize sex workers; yet, like the professional theatre, it was unencumbered by the machinations of Puritan extremists. Plays served as a blueprint for navigating the aggregate complexities of a society that was rigidly organized. More specifically, testimonies from the Bridewell Court Books complement ideas explored by dramatists William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, making the theatre a meditation that spoke to the larger implications of the shifting, expanding world occurring outside the playhouse.

Theatrical representation and sexual activity were perceived as a threat to public order because of their subversive potential. Plays, in particular those composed by Shakespeare and Jonson, were social commentaries implicit of the disruption of a rigidly organized system that was eroding in its nascent stages. Unlike pamphlets or executive orders, the theatre facilitated its message through linguistic poetry and a set of plot equivalences to common culture. William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* illustrates the ineffectualness of local authorities in the side plot of Pompey and Mistress Overdone. A pimp and madam whose business continues to prosper even after the closure of their brothel, the bawdy duo’s transgressive behavior also reveal the inadequacies of the Viennese legal system. Jonson’s *The Alchemist* portrays the city of London as a place to seize opportunity and find reward in a socially fluid society. *Measure for Measure* and *The Alchemist* thus articulate, through a critique of power structures, a more accurate portrayal of life on the ground.

The courtrooms of Bridewell Hospital were themselves theatrical spaces; prostitutes frequently used aliases to avoid penalty; and, more importantly, their very practice encouraged them to perform. An encounter between a prostitute and her john
was a performance in which she would disassociate her body in order to provide a service. She would dissemble to her customer that she enjoyed her work. By 1602, female prostitutes incarcerated at Bridewell – “being of lighte and lewde behavior” – used theatrical tactics to guide their behavior within the prison walls. Wearing “gorgeous apparel to entereteyne” the men of their “Aquayntance” the prison itself became a brothel, where prostitutes “liberallie to walk and talk in the fairest Roomes in the house and sometimes to shut their feloes upp together privately in chambers.”

Geographically, the public playhouses were located beyond spaces of authority: on the outskirts of the City and on the south bank of the river Thames. While brothels were concentrated on the north of Thames, they were scattered throughout the city, including the neighborhood of Southwark, where Shakespeare’s company the Lord Chamberlain’s Men built the Globe Theatre. Scholars have reported prostitutes stationing themselves outside the theatres touting for custom, and court records confirm they accompanied their clients to the playhouse. Moreover, as Duncan Salkeld has suggested, Shakespeare must have known and interacted with sex workers.

The Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque can be applied to both drama and commercial sex. The cultural elite attempted to reject and eliminate marginal populations only to discover their dependence on them – a psychological dependence upon precisely

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15 While it is true that theatres and brothels were located in districts designated for their use, playhouses and brothels were peppered all over the city of London. See Ian Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 211-213.


17 Duncan Salkeld gives other evidence of the overlap between the theatre and prostitution: the pimp Gilbert East worked for impresario Philip Henslowe, and several theatre practitioners lived in the red light district of Clerkenwell. See *Shakespeare among the Courtesans: Prostitution, Literature, and Drama, 1500-1650*, Anglo-Italian Renaissance Studies (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011).
that which was being opposed and excluded.\(^\text{18}\) Local authorities were systematically trying to eliminate these industries, to which the players, sharers, entrepreneurs, and sex workers deployed a keen resourcefulness. The language in the Bridewell Court Books and the plays by Shakespeare and Jonson suggest elite groups were informed by, and desired, what they considered to be uncivilized. The plays acknowledge that theoretical attempts at control differed from what happened in practice. This subversive power was recognized by the authorities, and fed their fatalistic view toward stagecraft and the sex trade. Moreover, this fatalism demonstrated how permanent and structural these industries were to London life.

There was an inability to control these industries, as Shakespeare and Jonson boldly point out in *Measure for Measure* and *The Alchemist*. Theatre was a mechanism for foregrounding socially subversive motives and the plays presuppose the authorities’ attempts at control were at odds with their practice. The plays demonstrate this ineffectualness vividly, and they were a powerful tool because they were presented in an enclosed space, to diverse communities, and most importantly, encouraged a response that was immediate, participatory, and collective. Drama represented social formations such as class hierarchy, political manipulation, and sexual repression, and, at the same time, reflected the transgressions of the period. The theatre, as a social space, was an intersection of culture in which a series of spatial relationships unfolded. Early modern dramatists used linguistic dexterity and multi-layered narratives to explode the branded notions of gender, class, and alterity.

Drama’s participatory response, bolstering a culture that was already highly performative, thus had the ability to inform behavior in other public, non-theatrical spaces. The audience was situated below the actors, but it was not passive admiration, it was active participation, which translated behavior outside the playhouse, for as Anne Jennalie Cook observes, “the theater offered socially transgressive possibilities to its spectators not solely in the content of the plays, nor even in the mingling of diverse social groups, but also in the opportunity to display a power denied elsewhere.”

The theatre and sex industries were linked by location, the dangers they posed, and their stigmatization. Critics grouped playing and prostitution under one umbrella of disruption to the public order, an affront to civility and decorum. The language of the Bridewell Hospital Court of Governors’ Minute Books, as well as Measure for Measure and The Alchemist, explain how these communities informed one another, underpinning a larger theory that drama facilitated behavior in other public, non-theatrical milieu, such as the market, the church, and the home. The literary and archival record recognize that what was occurring on stage was in direct correlation to what was happening on the street, as opposed to what the authorities decreed, the preachers pontificated, or the pamphleteers composed.

As Jean Howard argues, “the power of stories to confirm or expand social subjects’ imaginative parameters and their modes of rendering experience intelligible” made the theatre an effective mouthpiece for the dramatist’s skeptical attitudes toward moral absolutes: the actions unfolding on the high, fictional platform on the stage

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reflected the concerns and the complexity of the lives of the groundlings, that section of the playhouse population who paid the modern equivalent of a penny to watch a play. Performance was a process that suggested individuals could break free of conservative social roles vis-a-vis their interpretation of the action performed at the theatre, and this is further supported in the testimonies of the Bridewell Court Books.

There exists a wide breadth of scholarship pertaining to early modern theatre. Historiography was not particularly contentious, yet scholars were not fully engaged in dialogue with one another. There have been shifts in the theoretical approach to parsing primary texts. While scholars in the early twentieth century have been increasingly thought of as outdated in their analysis, they established a solid foundation for modern criticism, which places more importance on the imbricating historical factors involved in the production of plays, rather than the plays and playwrights themselves. Contemporary scholars recognize the intricacies of which the theatre, as an industry, was absorbed in the political, social, and economic dynamics of the nation.

The genesis of our understanding of the material conditions of English drama in the early modern period lay with E.K. Chambers’ seminal study The Elizabethan Stage, published in 1923.21 A comprehensive reference work accompanied by copious primary sources reproduced in appendices, it contains information on the public theatres, production values, and activities of the staging companies, including their contentious relationship with the City of London and the royal court. Chambers used what he called the “historic method” to redefine the context of early modern drama.

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The narrative established by Chambers reflected a cultural bias against a post-Victorian British government, the stage of the title is largely an adversarial depiction of art versus state. Chambers focused on the curmudgeonly attitude of the City of London towards dramatic entertainment.22 His title described a historical marker of time that has since been reformed, in part due to recent debates regarding the royal influence on theatrical activity (not to mention the fact that the commercialized theatre spanned two regimes).23 Chambers and his contemporaries acknowledged drama’s progression from church to street to banqueting hall to playhouse, yet they also marked the year 1576 with a melodramatic symbolism that ignored the outward facing parameters of the theatre’s evolution. The Theatre, arguably England’s first purpose-built playhouse, was built in 1576, and so it was deemed “a year that…and achieved inevitability in the annals of theater history and become its own symbol.”24

Another major text on the subject was Glynne Wickham’s Early English Stages, which posed the argument, similar to Chambers, that “Reformation and Renaissance concepts of government” interested in order and welfare “enmeshed the English theatre like some bird in a net.”25 Yet Early English Stages took a more contextual view of the period, and examined early English theatre vis-a-vis its “pageant theatres of the streets.” This point, for Wickham, incubated commercialized theatre – a shift from medieval

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22 I concur with Richard Dutton’s assessment of the historiography of early modern English drama. In his introduction to Mastering the Revels, he cites Chambers, along with scholars G.E. Bentley and Virgina Gildersleeve, whose historical analyses paint a courageous portrait of the stage fighting against the “despotism” of the Tudor and Stuart governments. See Richard Dutton, Mastering the Revels: The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 3.
religious experiment to social recreation. Wickham believed the religious element slowly dissolved due to a growing alarm towards drama, which later became manifest in censorship. Wickham also recognized the infusion of the player in the established performative culture of the nation, an attraction of the court; the marketplace; the church and the public festival.²⁶

Wickham concurred with Chambers’ assessment that City authorities, “the mayors, aldermen, magistrates and judges,”²⁷ viewed drama as a constant nuisance. There were battles over regulations in this era²⁸ between the reformers and the moderates, “Elizabeth, James I, and Charles I gave their patronage to the theatre’s apologists, while opponents of the stage found their champions in the representatives of extreme reformist and democratic opinion in Church and Parliament.”²⁹ In the second volume of Early English Stages Wickham explored the consequences of this clash on the actors, playwrights, managers, and theatre architecture,³⁰ translating this conflict in financial terms:

“the professional actor was forever exercised by three questions of paramount importance to his livelihood: the frequency of performances, the availability and security of the place of performance, and the size and regularity of attendances at those performances. Central to all these disputes was the theatre’s increasing reliance upon capital investment. The money needed by a company of professional players in Tudor times to finance the production of their plays grew in volume in proportion both to the number of actors employed and to the number of plays commissioned: and costs on both counts were subject to any fluctuation in the number of performances given.”³¹

²⁶ Wickham, Early English Stages, 2:106.
²⁷ Wickham, Early English Stages, 2:115.
²⁸ I shall facetiously note here that Wickham divides Early English Stages, 1300-1660 into three volumes, the second of which begins, conveniently, in 1576. Yet, Wickham points out in his preface that the drama of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Dekker was a slow progression, extending beyond the “1576 tradition.” See Early English Stages, 2:xi.
²⁹ Wickham, Early English Stages, 2:114.
³⁰ Wickham, Early English Stages, 2:98-99.
³¹ Wickham, Early English Stages, 2:115.
The actor’s vocation, Wickham concluded, was reliant on patronage, support that was more robust than a direct payment.


Though his work is somewhat hypothetical due to an absence of archival evidence, Andrew Gurr’s The Shakespearean Stage and Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London are authoritative and generally well-regarded surveys of English Theatre. Though Gurr’s scholarship may be seen as an update to Chambers, his revised editions of these works, published as late as 2009, offer vivid descriptions of the playhouses, performance techniques, and audiences, and serves as a more useful introduction of conditions of the
period than Chambers. The more recent revisionist histories of early modern drama, published in the wake of Gurr and the Records of Early English Drama project, cogently demonstrate a reliance on empirical research of documentary evidence to construct the complicated story of early modern theatre. Contemporary scholars, in the words of theatre historian Richard Dutton, “see the theatres reflecting both a variety of factional interests co-existing within the government structure of the day and the tastes of a range of social groupings.”

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, two schools of thought within cultural studies and literary criticism, impacted theatre history, especially Shakespeare studies. New Historicism examines literary sources via their historical context, placing equal value on literary and non-literary texts, and positions drama as not merely reflecting society, but shaping it. This development coincided with an archival turn in historiography that emerged in the later half of the twentieth century. A major research initiative undertaken at the University of Toronto, The Records of Early English Drama (REED), was established in 1976 (and still ongoing) to locate, transcribe, edit, and publish all surviving documentary evidence of minstrelsy, pageantry, public ceremony, and drama in the various cities and counties of Great Britain from the beginnings of dramatic performance through 1642, when the theatres were ordered closed by Parliament after the monarchy fell. The REED project negated earlier assumptions that early modern theatre “arose and flourished entirely in London” and gathers documentary evidence, by county, to prove that “English towns and cities were busy with drama and other kinds of showmanship throughout the sixteenth century.”

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33 Dutton, Mastering the Revels, 8.
34 McMillin and MacLean, Queens Men, xiv.
The unearthing of new data compounded this direction in theatre dialectics, one which gravitated toward the material and cultural concerns surrounding the texts, as opposed to a formal analysis of the text itself, taking into account the physical space and location of the playhouse, as well as the social space that effected dramatic composition and performance. Moreover, historians looked to the texts as blueprints, “taking place only and always in context and action” and with the importance of the story tied to the recovery and analysis of historical sources. 35

For contemporary scholars, the playwright and his composition are part of an imbrication of circumstances, events, and other agents that form the overall narrative: “if texts and commentary on texts are the soul of drama...they are not a substitute for performance or for the negotiated collaboration (of which the authors or authors are only a part) that makes performance possible.” 36 As John Cox and David Katsan explain in the introduction to a compendium of essays provocatively titled A New History of Early English Drama, the aforementioned shift in scholarship shuns reliance on the scripts themselves: “theory has now brought us to the place where we must respond to its challenges by producing not more theory but more facts, however value-laden they may be, that will illuminate the historical conditions in which early drama was written, performed, read, published, and interpreted.” In the close reading of documentary evidence, even in such far-fetched places as sewer records and the London livery company rosters, reports on theatrical activity are extant, suggesting that drama was connected with several strands of society and culture in the early modern period. 37

35 Cox and Kastan, A New History, 2.
36 Cox and Kastan, A New History, 4-5.
Dutton, who investigated court and civic records, found a more complex story than Chambers’ and Wickham’s observations on the Revels Office. His study on the Revels Office recognized that the efforts of City authorities to suppress drama were, in fact, undermined by the flippancy of Elizabeth’s Privy Council. *Mastering the Revels* chronicles the functions of the office that was responsible for the regulation and censorship of drama by way of the “institutional interference of the government in the drama of the period.” As he states in his introduction, *Mastering the Revels* was the product of the question, “how was it that [Ben] Jonson, of all English Renaissance dramatists the one who most often fell foul of the authorities, came within a heart-beat of becoming Master of the Revels, a post that would have required him to regulate and censor the works of his fellow dramatists?” Censorship was the uncomfortable intersection of drama and government “where literature and politics indisputably confronted one another.” While the subversive potential of dramatic texts and performances signified that the authorities perceived drama as a threat, Dutton proves, via a thorough analysis of court records, that the Revels office was not interested in eradicating drama or governing the playwrights outright. When considering the power of patronage and the Tudor system of government, the Master of the Revels was rather concerned with protecting, not oppressing, theater artists. Dutton deconstructs this system of government in terms of England’s interlocking patterns of patronage, client relationships and networks that bound Privy Councilor to Queen, local government to central. Dutton concludes that the Master of the Revels was an integral cog in the machinery of state and in the machinery of theater. Playing politics and earning his

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living, the Master of the Revels deftly courted the needs of the monarch and Privy Council, massaged the patrons who protected the playing companies, and valiantly tried to be fair to the artists themselves. Dutton’s examination of the influence of noble patrons as courtiers and councilors demonstrate the complexity of power, authority, and art. *Mastering the Revels* shows that the patronage system as a fundamental force in the political and artistic structure of early modern England.

William Ingram’s *The Business of Playing* is an economic study of stagecraft in early modern London. Ingram is primarily concerned with how the economic circumstances that preceded the commercialization of drama affected dramatists and practitioners.\(^\text{41}\) As drama evolved, it was disruptive to the established economic systems of the city, as seen by the consternation of “costume purveyors” in the city, who complained about players renting clothes from the Revels Office.\(^\text{42}\) Even before the public playhouses were built, drama was an element of the commercial sphere.

Ingram contends the construction of the playhouses beyond the immediate reach of City authorities was a tactic by theatre managers to avoid a series of stringent regulations and monetary obligations by the authorities. Moreover, as demonstrated by the actors James Burbage, Edward Alleyn, and, most famously, William Shakespeare, in order to supplement financial stability in the city, actors did not look to playing as their sole source of income. Ingram reports that players found an increasingly important role as entrepreneurs and suggests that performing at taverns and in guildhalls enabled these entrepreneurs to learn that they needed to erect a space exclusively devoted to drama. For


\(^{42}\) Ingram, *The Business of Playing*, 70-72.
actors, looking beyond playing was a maneuver against inflation and this led to their increased presence in other aspects of social life in the city.

Despite interdiction from the pulpits and the Lord Mayor, “the City of London was full of stage players…making their presence felt, finding a ready audience, making some kind of money for themselves and presumably making money for their landlords as well, the owners of taverns or inns, or for private individuals such as the goldsmith Robert Fryer, who made a space available for playing.”\textsuperscript{43} If the aim of the government was to portray playgoing as hazardous in as many ways as possible, and the suppression of playing was a recurring enterprise, the professionalism of playing was at its core a fortification to the economic and social oppressions of the authorities.\textsuperscript{44} More specifically, the multiple regulations by City authorities only induced players to find new ways to tend to their affairs.

Playing was tolerated because it bolstered the economy. Even regulation by the state seems not to have had any adverse effect on the commercial theatre’s growth as an institution. A component of Ingram’s argument concerns regulation, how it reinforced, not repressed the players: “the licensing regulations and the increased governmental assertion of control impelled the players in turn to consider their own self-interest and to device new ways of managing their affairs.” Regulations only made practitioners more adroit and more inventive.\textsuperscript{45}

Following in Dutton’s and Ingram’s footsteps, Janette Dillon’s \textit{Theatre, Court and City} examines the interdependent relationship between the city and the court and

\textsuperscript{43} Ingram, \textit{Business of Playing}, 75.

\textsuperscript{44} For example, in the 1550s groups of players were so prevalent that the Court of Aldermen decreed that they could not perform within London without a license.

\textsuperscript{45} Ingram, \textit{Business of Playing}, 90.
looks at the effects on drama in the period Shakespeare is composing his most famous works. As previously discussed, playhouses were built outside the borders of the City, yet players often performed inside city limits. After a statute established in 1572, it became mandatory for players to be attached to a noble patron, adding a geopolitical layer of insurance for drama. Dillon contends that theatre was appeasing both the city of London and the royal court simultaneously, a tactic that ensured its survival. She deconstructs the “double orientation” of allegiance by theatre practitioners, while also elucidating the actor/audience relationship, “physical environments as ‘produced’ by those who occupy them, and the subjectivities of those occupants as in turn ‘produced’ by the spaces they inhabit.” The public playhouses constructed in the 1560s and 1570s were amphitheaters, public spaces that could accommodate several thousand people, and it has been well documented by Andrew Gurr that several social classes were in attendance. In this regard, Dillon seeks to understand “the concept of theatre as a place to play,” a site of architecture in which performance and audience are separate, yet also a site of fantasy, “which offer an audience vicarious experiences.” Theatres created a new social experience that, in turn, informed the social spaces that surrounded them.

The playhouse as both a physical location as well as a social space is explored by Marvin Carlson in *Places of Performance*. Carlson unpacks the two-pronged relationship between performance within the playhouse walls and the playhouse within the larger environment of the city. *Places of Performance* explores the “physical surroundings of performance, by way of demonstrating not only how such surroundings reflect social and

46 Dillon, *Theatre, Court and City*, 1.
47 Dillon, *Theatre, Court and City*, 4.
49 See Gurr, *Playgoing*.
50 Dillon, *Theatre, Court and City*, 7.
cultural concerns and suppositions of their creators and their audiences, but even more important, how they may serve to stimulate or to reinforce within audiences certain ideas of what theatre represents within their society and how the performances are to be interpreted and integrated into the rest of their social and cultural life.”

His “semiotic approach to theatre architecture” studies the physical components of the playhouse – on both a micro and macro level – and how they inform systems of social values. Theatres, like other social spaces, were embedded with unique codes, signs that reflected the political, social, and economic forces of an era and its society. The location of the playhouse, according to Carlson, “say[s] a great deal” about the architect’s perceptions – “how it will be regarded by the public,” and how those users relate to society.

Dutton and Dillon posit that the theatre operated within the larger political system in the capital, while Ingram views drama through an economic lens. Carlson’s study, while not exactly theatre history, understands drama in terms of architectural space, and how that space underpinned a larger social context. These studies illustrate the infusion of drama as a major force in political, social, and economic dealings of the period.

Audiences, especially in the late-sixteenth century, were highly sophisticated, the natural result of a culture that was accustomed to performance. Anne Lancashire’s *London Civic Theatre* is an examination of theatrical activity sponsored by the London civic establishment, “a study of London’s theatrical culture as developed by the city itself.” She echoes Wickham’s assessment that London theatre in the years leading up the construction of the public playhouses was, “to an important extent, a pageant theatre

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of the streets.”

Lancashire, one of the general editors of volumes published in the REED series, notes such pageantry as royal entries into the city, the Midsummer Watch, and the inauguration procession of the city’s mayor to Westminster should not only be considered as “London’s recorded theatrical activity” but also a contribution to the dramatic artistry inherited by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Lancashire suggests that anti-theatrical complaints by prelates and civic leaders should not be read as an outright public rejection of drama, but rather an indication of widespread theatrical activity and growth in the region.

Civic theatrical activity is parsed into two categories: first, plays and mummings (British folk plays that incorporated music, dance, and sword fighting into a prescribed narrative about death and resurrection) performed by London guilds for feasts and other celebrations, and second, the pageantry associated with the civic processions of the Royal Entry, the Midsummer Watch, and Lord Mayor’s Show. As Lancashire points out in her introduction, “London’s theatrical significance” in medieval and early-Tudor eras was defined by court performance such as royal procession, but theatre “originating in the city itself, that the citizens of London experienced and participated in” should not be overlooked. Performances staged in the London district of Clerkenwell, for example, were linked to plays performed for the London livery companies. After the demise of the multi-day biblical play in Clerkenwell, records began to appear of the London livery companies and guilds paying players to perform at annual company feasts. Naturally, these plays were performed in livery halls, with the aristocracy, even royalty, in attendance. By the mid-fifteenth century, payments to players were allocated in livery

57 Ibid.
company budgets, clerks often served as actors and guilds took the entertainment seriously. It was from these traditions that the playing companies of the late sixteenth century emerged.

Sally-Beth MacLean, another general editor of the REED project, surveyed records pertaining to the playing companies as a lens to understanding early modern theatre history. Her monographs on two playing companies, the Queen’s Men and Lord Strange’s Men, (written with Scott McMillin and Lawrence Manley, respectively), in addition to her REED work chronicles the companies’ activities in the late sixteenth century. While playing companies were extant long before the public playhouses were built, touring the country and performing at court, MacLean discusses the purposes and effects of these particular companies at a time when theatrical activity was at its most volatile. Both the Queen’s Men and Lord Strange’s Men were active in London, but as the REED evidence indicates, they were primarily touring companies. The Queen’s Men were founded by Elizabeth’s Principal Secretary Francis Walsingham, in consultation with Edmund Tilney, Master of the Revels. MacLean refers to the political agenda associated with this move, “a shift in the politics of court theatre.” MacLean argues that the creation of the Queen’s Men allowed for more civil control of playhouses as well as the actors themselves, presupposing the national government’s motive for establishing a playing company in the queen’s name was not necessarily to protect but to gain control. She confirms that “between 1583 and 1591 the Queen’s Men dominated the court

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58 Lancashire, London Civic Theatre, 71.
59 MacLean directed the development of The REED Patrons and Performances website (http://link.library.utoronto.ca/reed/) and The Early Modern London Theatres website (http://emlot.cch.kcl.ac.uk/).
60 McMillin and MacLean, Queen’s Men, 2.
61 Ibid.
calendar,” but also points out that while the company was something of a monopoly among actors, it is a “well-documented example of a successful company practices in the 1580s.” 62

Lord Strange’s Men, who are regarded by scholars as the company for which Shakespeare wrote many of his plays, had a style more literary than earlier iterations. The Stanley family’s Catholic alliances, at odds with Elizabethan’s regime, lead MacLean and Manley to conclude that the plays performed by Lord Strange’s Men reflected the “religious and political developments of the later Elizabethan age.” 63 MacLean and Manley connect the company’s “daring and innovative repertory” to the political agendas of their patron. Records indicate Ferdinando Stanley’s support of actors while pursuing his own agenda of promoting his family’s history. 64 As MacLean has accounted for in her numerous books and articles on the subject, the playing companies were a crucial element to the evolution of theatre during this period, promoting political interests, but also, reflecting on their own industry, such as competition between touring companies and those that played for the public theatres in London, which engendered a collaborative and competitive approach to writing and performance. 65 By the 1590s, plays were published, antiquating the dramaturgy of companies like the Queen’s Men, who were “better suited to theatres than to publication.” 66

After the public playhouses were built, the playing companies were at work, and the careers of dramatists such as Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Ben

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63 Manley and MacLean, Lord Strange’s Men, 6.
64 Manley and MacLean, Lord Strange’s Men, 4.
65 McMillan and MacLean, Queen’s Men, 155-169.
66 McMillan and MacLean, Queen’s Men, 169.
Jonson, and Thomas Dekker were established and ensured a legacy with printed folios, drama was fully integrated into social and communal life. An emergence of stage comedies featured prostitutes at their narrative’s center, something feminist literary critic Jean Howard believed was governed by “the place of women in the changing landscape of the expanding, commercializing, and multinational city that London was becoming.”

She asserts that while plays acknowledged prostitution as a social problem, the “high-spirited” portrayals of sex workers put pressure on the widespread conservative idea that sexual status should determine a woman’s worth, suggesting “the London stage offered powerful and socially significant alternatives to normative prescriptions not only about prostitutes, but also about women more generally.” Moreover, the theatre responded to London’s expanding market economy, by portraying women’s social status as both evolving and complicated. As such, city comedies, particularly ones that depict habitual practices in the capital city (as opposed to foreign cities and fictional lands) responded to this watershed moment by making whorehouses and prostitutes their central focus, “celebrating women’s financial acumen or cultural sophistication over her chastity.”

Theatre historians have examined government records, diaries, and the Records of Early English Drama and conclude that while documents may express an official position, they do not necessarily reflect the complicated realities of the age.

London was, from its beginning, a “major performance center,” with a rich theatrical inheritance; theatrical activity was indeed closely related to the court, but as

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67 Howard, Theatre of a City, 114.
68 Howard, Theatre of a City, 114-115.
69 Howard, Theatre of a City, 120.
70 Lancashire, London Civic Theatre, 12.
will be discussed in the chapters that follow, within the canon of Shakespeare and Jonson, the theatre was, more significantly, in active dialogue with popular imagination.
Act II

Theatre and prostitution were essential to the occupational structure of late sixteenth-century London. Neither officious efforts by local authorities nor the baleful ink of religious discourse could control these industries because they served the interests of a metropolis that was expanding at an exponential rate. After Henry VIII’s order to close all brothels in 1546, prostitutes scattered about the city, making surveillance and supervision more difficult. Commercialized sex became a problem that was both “pervasive and ineradicable,”¹ by operating mainly in the suburbs. Prostitutes solicited customers near the theatres, along main routes linking the north and south of the country, and at annual fairs, and the industry was able to prosper without governmental interference. Similarly, political and theological discourse relegated playing as a danger, but the administrative record reveals the commercialized theatre as an increasingly dominant force in early modern England. The authorities were desperate to marginalize the theatre, but could not compete with its popularity, it was attractive to several classes of metropolitan society: nobles, small businessmen, artisans, laborers, and apprentices alike.²

Before the theatre became commercialized,³ theatrical activity was represented in three forms:⁴ medieval pageant plays; royal processions through the streets;⁵ and

² Gurr, Playgoing, 50.
³ Scholars are conflicted as to when exactly this happened. Wickham and Ingram conclude that the theatre’s evolution was a slow progression. As explained in the chapter 1, many mark the year 1576, the year the Theatre was built in London, as the inauguration of professionalized theatrical activity. Some believe 1583, the year the first play featuring the linguistic mode that would dominate this era in playwriting, blank verse, as another marker. Others still do not discount the building of the Red Lion playhouse in 1567 as a watershed moment. See McMillian and MacLean, Queens Men, 1 and Gurr, Playgoing, 11.
ambulant companies that toured the country performing scripted plays.\textsuperscript{6} These scenarios attracted voluminous crowds, a constant source of frustration for the administrators of such municipalities, and the London metropolis was especially sensitive to this burden. Public events that drew large crowds in close proximity to each other were a dangerous problem from the point of view of London authorities. Sixteenth century London was a time of rapid, often tumultuous change, fraught by several outbreaks of the plague. The topographic and demographic changes that resulted in overcrowded streets, an increase in poverty, and threats of disorder contributed to the burgeoning anxieties of local government.

The year 1575 was the first of several occurrences of plague outbreak, and arguing for health concerns, the authorities were able to successfully close the playhouses. Disease was an efficient method to contain playing, but whether players were touring the country or performing inside London taverns, authorities constantly harassed them. Local authorities stigmatized players as the lowest class of citizen in the early modern period, and classified them as vagabonds, vagrants, or masterless men; they had no stake in the economic order and were pushed to the periphery. Regulations were fortified by a religious discourse that sought to extirpate playing.

Pamphlet writers denounced the theatre with rancorous vigor. Theological ideology designated theatres as a “generall market of bawdrie.”\textsuperscript{7} The theatre was a

\textsuperscript{4} This list is not exhaustive. These three were the most popular modes of theatre during the medieval period, but certainly household dramas, spectacles at fairs, and printed plays (none of which have survived) were elements of theatrical culture.
\textsuperscript{5} Lancashire, \textit{London Civic Theatre}, 1-2.
“chappel of Satan,” where people risk “suspition of honesty.” A place that incited “whoredom,” whence “gestures, bawdie speeches, such glauncing of wanton eyes and the like is used,” the theatre was “a market of wantonesse.” Stagecraft and lewd behavior – a common idiom for prostitution – were interchangeable to such critics as Stephen Gosson and Philip Stubbes, who conflated their activities as irreligious. They assumed the activity of playgoing as a legitimate threat; compounding their arguments with the dangers it posed to vulnerable populations, namely women and youth. Another such critic, Anthony Munday, recorded supposed first-hand accounts of women whom “even on their death beds with teares confessed that they haue received at these spectacles such filthie infections.” To the pamphleteers, theatres were the antithesis of civility and decorum, a place which turns “chastitie upside downe & corrupt[s] the good disposition & manners of youth.”

Bitter invective was the weapon of choice for papal extremists throughout the 1580s. The Anatomie of Abuses calls for a theocratic London that installs harsh punishment on bawdry, Philip Stubbes even goes as far as suggesting the death penalty against prostitution, adultery, incest, and fornication. Included in this diatribe against immorality were, of course, plays. Another vociferous critic of the theatre, Stephen Gosson, a self-proclaimed reformed playwright, believed theatres were “snares unto faire

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10 Philip Stubbes, Anatomie of Abuses (1583), in Chambers, Elizabethan Stage, 4:222.
13 Munday, Second and Third Blast, in Cook, “Bargaines,” 274.
women." In his tract *The Schoole for Abuse*, Gosson claimed that prostitutes solicited at playhouses, and explained their methods in great detail. William Prynne’s *Histrio-Mastrix*, published in the early seventeenth century, asserted that the only people who attended plays were “adulterers, Whore-masters, Whores, &c…

...Applauders, frequenters, upholders of these lascivious Stage-plaes; ... since such creatures ... spread their nets, where they are always sure for to catch their prey, which they seldom misse at Stage-plays ... the common rode from the Play-house, being either with an adulteresse to a Tavern; or with a Whore to a bawdy-house.”

Augmented by the polemic voices of preachers, the City embarked on an aggressive campaign to regulate playing, beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, on the grounds that theatrical activity was immoral, politically subversive, and conducive to public disorder. The government of the City of London was small and oligarchic, consisting of the Lord Mayor and the Court of Aldermen. The aldermen were responsible for city administration, and according to Ian Archer,

“the aldermen disposed of considerable judicial authority, managing the estates of minors in their capacity as the City’s court of orphans, presiding over the mayor’s court, the court of hustings, the sheriffs’ court, and, in conjunction with representatives of the common council, over the court of conscience with jurisdiction over petty debts. The senior aldermen, those who had passed the chair, together with the recorder, constituted the commission of peace in the City, and sat on gaol deliveries and at City sessions.”

Moreover, the aldermendictated who joined their ranks, and kept the administration within the elite, and “the high cost of office-holding, which resulted from the aldermen’s duty of subsidizing the round of civic feasting, meant that it was the preserve of the wealthy.” Any community that did not have a stake in the economic order was underrepresented in, and by, the city government.

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Records indicate that as early as 1549, the aldermen were monitoring both plays and players, requiring the players to obtain certification to perform. In 1550, the Court of Aldermen issued a decree binding certain “common” players of interludes not to play in the City of London without a license. In 1565, the Court of Aldermen prohibited playing in any “taverns Innes victualinge houses or in enny othr place or places…for the heringe or seinge of enny such playe or enterlud,” though this order attenuated in the next few years. The year 1572 marked an important victory for the Aldermen in the issuing of “An Acte for the punishement of Vacabondes,” on June 29th. Unlike earlier poor laws, this iteration targeted players and playing outright. “Comon Players in Enterludes…not belonging to any…honorable Personage of greater Degree” without license was considered to be a vagrant and immediately sent to prison. If convicted, they were to be whipped and burned “through the gristle of the right Eare with a hot Yron.”

An Act of the Court of Common Council, issued on December 6, 1574, focused on the social consequences of playing, not necessarily the players, and construed it as hazardous: “greate disorders and inconveniences have bynne found to ensue to this Cittie by the inordinate haunting of greate multitudes of people specially youthe, to Plays, enterludes, and shewes.”

One encouraging outcome of these orders was the first license granted to a company to perform throughout the kingdom “for the recreation of oure loving suiectes [subjects] as for oure solace and pleasure when we shall thincke good to see them.”

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issued by Elizabeth to Leicester’s Men (the playing company sponsored by the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley) in 1574. Another occurred in 1581 – two years into his appointment as Elizabeth’s Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney was commissioned to license all plays and playhouses. As Dutton points out, this has been interpreted as a lateral move, as this Special Commission gave him “powers to punish anyone who resisted his authority,” but in retrospect, his influence over what could and could not be staged at court would, in time, be carried over to the commercial theatre.  

Over the long term, the Vagabond Act and the Act of Court of Common Council of the early 1570s did not have as negative an effect on the playing companies and how they operated as may be assumed. The Vagabond Act engendered the practice of patronage as a protective measure “for performers who wanted to stay on the right side of the authorities,”26 while the 1574 Act of Court of Common Council, was, according to Ingram, a stroke of conciliation by the City to the court, one that did not contain, but facilitated playing.27 The 1574 order may have been the working solution to a municipal funding problem.28 With each regulation that passed, theatre practitioners found ways to use it to their advantage and strengthen their position in the economic hierarchy. Patronage, for example, became the conduit to which the theatre companies linked themselves to the royal court.

The creation of new playhouses represents another example of initiatives that were taken during the times of attempts at control. With the earlier regulations, the City government promoted an agenda of “sedition and unchastity” as a way to review scripts

26 MacLean, “Adult Playing Companies,” 49.  
and dispense licenses, something which Ingram suggests “opened the door both to the collection of fees for licensing and to the limitless possibilities of harassment”\(^{29}\) for those offering players a space to perform. Standard custom prevailed players performing at taverns, and the corollary to the City’s restrictive regulations was the construction of outdoor theatres in neighborhoods beyond the City’s jurisdiction. The general consensus among scholars attributes the construction of the first public playhouses in the liberties of the city as resourcefulness on the part of the players who wanted to escape fines and harassment, just as patronage would offer them protection.

The construction of playhouses, the licensing of companies, the emergence of theatrical shareholders; by the 1590s the theatre was constituted as a civic institution in London, a commercial enterprise that was a vital piece of the metropolitan machine. This development can be attributed three-fold: to the ways in which the theatre interlocked itself into the social and political milieu of the city; to the sanctioning of the theatre by the state; and to its enormous popularity.

Actors, managers, and sharers were well known and respected members of their communities. Some were members of guilds. Theatre impresarios Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn, in addition to building theatres, acting in plays, and owning brothels, were on the highly select vestry of St. Saviour’s in Southwark, “the linchpin of local government in the borough and dominated by the parish elite.”\(^{30}\) While playwrights were writing subversive texts, they were also serving royal interests. Theatre was sanctioned by the state because it was something that could be manipulated; as David Scott Katsan suggests, Elizabeth “understood that a license was necessary, that is, that actors’

\(^{29}\) Ingram, *Business of Playing*, 131.
representations must be subject to statutory control no less than artists’.\(^{31}\) Yet, dramatists such as Shakespeare, Jonson, and Christopher Marlowe, while certainly commenting on the political commonplaces of their time, codified their texts with symbolic staging, utilizing the architecture of the playhouses to impel their audiences to “work at visualizing the spectacle the words described,”\(^{32}\) because they, too, understood the power of representation and used it as a tool to dispatch their own social concerns. Even if patronage was used to further individual political agendas, it nevertheless offered protection. In June of 1584, when troubles were brewing in Shoreditch, James Burbage, who built the Theatre, utilized the recourse of his patron Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon.

Regulations imposed by the City did not have an adverse effect on playing; with support from the Privy Council, London officials’ attempts to curtail theatrical activity were unsuccessful. No evidence exists that the aforementioned Act of Common Council of 1574, or even the 1559 act requiring adjudication before performance were ever executed. Ian Archer assumes campaigns against the theatres faltered due “lack of political will [and] administrative failings.”\(^{33}\) Roslyn Knutson supports this view; she asserts there is little evidence to support the idea that government wanted to restrict the “burgeoning theatrical industry.”\(^{34}\) If the court and City were not united in their efforts, it is not so hard to imagine that the City may not have been entirely monolithic in its position on the theatre, and that, perhaps, certain mayors had a more hard-lined agenda against playing than others. The location of the theatres determined much of this course. The Theatre and the Rose were built in the suburbs of greater London, and while it was a

\(^{31}\) David Scott Kastan, “Proud Majesty Made a Subject,” 463.
\(^{34}\) Knutson, “Playing Companies, 1593-1603,” in Oxford Handbook, 60.
clever tactic on the part of builders James Burbage, John Brayne, and Philip Henslowe to avoid fees, penalties, and harassment, it also positioned the theatres under Privy Council regulation. This bypass of City authority determined the subsequent development of the theatres, which was now “determined more by the dynamics of the interaction of court interests with each other and with commercial forces than by the city’s own priorities.”

Elizabethans were not a prissy bunch, as the plethora of erotic puns and rude wordplay in the playtexts make clear. Indeed, Alfred Harbage and Ann Jennalie Cook agree that audiences were sexually sophisticated. Harbage argues that London spectators would have been either unconscious or accustomed to solicitation occurring in the playhouse, and Cook concurs that they were able to handle the erotic elements of plays, and were not prudish. Most of the playhouses were destroyed by accidental fire, not governmental edict. Many of the complaints voiced on the pulps and in civil administration meetings were misrepresentative. While criminals certainly attended plays, they were in small proportion to the masses merely hoping to spend an afternoon being entertained. Despite the propaganda of the authorities, affrays were scarce.

More tellingly, theatre was popular. Andrew Gurr insists that up to fifteen thousand spectators attended the theatre each year throughout the decade (roughly fifteen to twenty percent of the Shoreditch and Southwark districts). When the Rose Theatre reopened in 1594, it had to be reconstructed by Henslowe to fit 3,000 spectators at a time, and Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre held the same amount. Henslowe’s Diary also confirms that the repertory of plays in his playhouse were close to thirty per season, Shakespeare

37 Gurr, Playgoing, 56.
38 Gurr, Shakespearean Stage, 213.
himself sent scripts to his company to be performed every day of the week.\textsuperscript{39} The theatre attracted an audience that was not mutually exclusive; the amphitheatres were open to all. A law student in the 1590s commented on diversity of playhouse – attendees, servants, artisans, and prostitutes and gentlemen occupied the same space.\textsuperscript{40} The development of the industry contributed to its longevity: the playhouses and the repertory style of producing plays made spectacle quotidian. “Through the spectacularization of space and the habituation of playgoing,” Londoners morphed into “an everyday audience.”\textsuperscript{41} The playhouse became a permanent venue with a recognized form of entertainment that made attending the theatre a habitual indulgence.

While official documentation merely accounts for decisions made, and not for potential opposition to those decisions,\textsuperscript{42} oppressive action against the theatre was inconsistent, if at all carried out. The theatre was a daily event as much as it was a novelty, it was popular and it was profitable. Dramatists exploited the division of precept and practice in their stories of men and women, patrician and plebian, corrupt and redeemed. Moreover, they gave their audiences the opportunity to process their world beyond the political and religious cache of discourse.

Literary sources foreground the complex set of negotiations inherent in urban experience and those ideas were recycled back into the culture, making authorship and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{39} There are several inconsistencies in Henslowe’s diary. R.A. Foakes assumes “if some such explanation of the daily entries is possible, it may be that their day-to-day accuracy is not significant, and that Henslowe entered plays against dates that do not always indicate the day of actual performance. To correct the dates on the assumption that they should provide an accurate record from day to day may be an action based on correct presuppositions about both the character of the entries and the character of Henslowe himself.” See Philip Henslowe, \textit{Henslowe’s Diary}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., ed. R.A. Foakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
  \item \textsuperscript{40} See Gurr, “Social Composition” in \textit{Playgoing}, 58-85.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Archer, “City of London and Theatre,” in \textit{Oxford Handbook}, 397.
\end{itemize}
oral narratives themselves acts of transgression. Governmental efforts against stagecraft and the sex trade reflect Shakespeare’s explorations of corruption and clemency in *Measure for Measure* – the plot is largely concerned with the administration of justice.\(^{43}\) Men are fallible, laws are open to interpretation, and with an extraordinary elegance of prose and sincerity of spirit, Shakespeare highlights the contentious relationship between ideology, power, and crime. *Measure for Measure* depicts a city run amok, but its genius lies in the recognition that moral absolutism does not, in practice, serve the people it is supposed to protect. My reading of *Measure for Measure* has an eye toward the role of both stagecraft and the sexual commerce in the popular imagination of the time, and associates it with the government’s efforts to contain playing.

In acknowledging and criticizing the hypocrisy of power structures, the theatre becomes the place where citizens can count on the truth. Plays bring to life an alternative world that illuminated the early modern Londoner’s historical situation. The Viennese government of *Measure for Measure* emulates the Bridewell Governors during their moral campaign on illicit sexual activity of the 1570s, examining the impact of corruption within a legal system. Equally central to the play is sex – it is often linked to decay and death and deemed a social problem. Shakespeare questions whether the government should be involved in regulating sexual misconduct, recognizing the foolishness of trying to contain behavior that was essential to life in London.

*Measure for Measure* is more disturbing than the festive comedies that precede it; Shakespeare’s psychological investigations weigh in on the possibility of judgment by humans whom are ruled by emotion and whim. The plot is assembled by contrasts

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“juxtaposed and resolved...incorporated in dramatic form.” If other dramatists such as Thomas Dekker who, “concerned with conventional theories of gender and morality, relate prostitution to cuckoldry,” Shakespeare shows a more complicated vision of sex workers. Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure may be read as a reaction to the attempts to socially marginalize particular groups of people, and can be understood as a call for tolerance and mercy.

Measure for Measure would have striking topical relevance to Bridewell Hospital’s aggressive campaign to curtail prostitution in the later 1570s. Measure for Measure’s source material, The Right Excellent and Famous Historye of Promos and Cassandra: Divided into Commercial Discourses, written in 1578 by George Whetstone, directly refers to a scandal in the Bridewell crackdown in which several pimps and the eldest son of Lord Hunsdon accused court treasurer Robert Winch of accepting bribes – apparently, taking action against the wealthy proved highly embarrassing for the City. The early modern ideal of reform became interchangeable with punishment, and Bridewell had a terrible reputation for cruelty and malpractice. The general consensus among London denizens was that the institution that was supposed to purge immorality assumed it corporeally, elucidated in Thomas Dekker’s Your Five Gallants: “And as for Bridewell, that will but make him worse; ‘a will learn more knavery there in one week than will furnish him and his heirs for a hundred year...there’s none goes in there a quean, but she comes out an arrant whore” (3.5.139-144) It was well known as a harsh

46 Archer, Pursuit of Stability, 232.
institution that dispensed severe punishment, with deplorable prison conditions. There were accusations of corruption within its governorship, people cursed Bridewell in the streets, prostitutes even plotted mass suicides in a foolhardy attempt to destroy the institution.\textsuperscript{48} It naturally provided plenty of dramatic fodder for playwrights of the time.

*Measure for Measure*, first performed in 1604,\textsuperscript{49} challenged systems of authority by shedding light on its duplicitousness. The architecture of the plot ballasts itself on motifs of deception, identity masking, and manipulation. Moral discrepancies in character, as well as the many pardons of corrupt acts in the play’s final scene encouraged tolerance when dispensing justice. As such, the play contends that sex cannot and should not be regulated, and the play promotes tolerance over retributive justice.

Alarmed by the crime rate, the Duke of Vienna pretends to go off on a diplomatic mission, disguising himself as an ecclesiast so that he may observe the true state of affairs in his city. The “strict statutes and most biting laws, the needful bits and curbs to headstrong jades” he says, have for “fourteen years…let slip; even like an o’er-grown lion in a cave that goes not out to prey.”\textsuperscript{50} He consigns leadership to one of his best, and most strict interpreters of the law, Angelo. “If any in Vienna be of worth to undergo such ample grace and honour, it is Lord Angelo,”\textsuperscript{51} who is well known for his unwavering decision making, of not making “a scarecrow of the law.”\textsuperscript{52} Angelo takes the opportunity to rid the city of all unlawful sexual activity. He arrests Claudio, a gentlemen who has impregnated his fiancé. Then (in language that could have been composed by a City

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\textsuperscript{48} See Griffiths, “Contesting London Bridewell.”

\textsuperscript{49} “In the Revels Accounts a play called ‘Mesur for Mesur’ by ‘Shaxberd’ was listed as having been acted in the banqueting hall of Whitehall on St. Stephen’s Night (26 December) 1604,” see Lever, *Measure for Measure*, xxxi.

\textsuperscript{50} *Measure for Measure* (Lever), 1.3.19-23. References are to act, scene, and line.

\textsuperscript{51} *Measure for Measure* (Lever), 2.1.22-24.

\textsuperscript{52} *Measure for Measure* (Lever), 2.1.1.
official) Pompey Bum, a notorious pimp, informs Mistress Overdone, a brothel keeper, “all houses in the suburbs of Vienna must be plucked down” on Angelo’s orders.

Shakespeare explores themes of excess and restraint, posing alternative interpretations of the law – is it “just but severe” as Isabella laments when hearing her brother’s punishment, or is there room for clemency? Act Two’s second scene is a brilliant example of this debate. Angelo, on one side, repeatedly tells Isabella that is “the law” not he, who condemn her brother’s action. Claudio must be punished, under the law Angelo’s hands are tied (“what I will not, that I cannot do.”). Angelo uses the objectivity of the written law to argue his case:

“Condemn the fault and not the actor of it? Why, every fault's condemn'd ere it be done: Mine were the very cipher of a function, To fine the faults whose fine stands in record, And let go by the actor.”

Isabella counters by questioning judgment. Though initially reticent in her meeting with Angelo, after being taunted “you are too cold,” she launches into an impassioned plea for her brother’s life, appropriating the Old Testament logic of “judge not that ye not be judged”:

“Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once And he that might the vantage best have took Found out the remedy. How would you be If He, which is the top of judgement, should But judge you as you are? O, think on that, And mercy then will breathe within your lips Like man new made.”

Under the autocracy of Vienna, “liberty” is equated with lechery, “like rats that ravin down their proper bane, / A thirsty evil; and when we drink, we die.” Liberty

53 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.2.89.  
54 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.2.43.  
55 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.2.57.  
56 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.2.42-46.  
57 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.2.45.  
58 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.2.73-78.
encourages excess, which thus incurs restraint; in Claudio’s case, the restraint of prison. Equating liberty with lechery is not only punitive, but also labels the two as a base action of rodent-like proportions. This is illustrated by the constable Elbow’s report to Angelo about Pompey, describing him as “a tapster; a parcel bawd; one that serves a bad woman.” The bad woman is Mistress Overdone, “whose house was, as they say, plucked down in the suburbs; and now she professes a hot-house; which I think is a very ill house too,” associating negative language with the sex trade, and conflating Overdone’s character with her profession. Elbow pounces on Pompey every opportunity he is granted, first calling him “a precise villain,” lacking what “good Christians ought to have” and then, a few scenes later, criticizing his “abominable and beastly touches.”

Elbow’s descriptions of Overdone and her gang follow literary motifs of the time, “a preoccupation with the conventional pattern of authority and social relations.” These attitudes informed a rhetoric that placed sexual misconduct as diametrically opposed to Christian behavior. Pompey views sexual desire as natural, and a law that seeks to regulate it is a law against nature. Shakespeare is aware of the dichotomy: prostitution is represented as inhuman but the act of sex is a natural function of humanity. Even the Provost – another official in Vincentio’s (the Duke) administration – believes Angelo’s punishment of Claudio to be too harsh, commenting on the ubiquity of fornication: “all sects, all ages smack of this vice; and he to die for’t!” Shakespeare’s point here is that it is impossible – and, perhaps, morally suspect – to legislate such rampant behavior.

59 Measure for Measure (Lever), 1.2.121-122.
60 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.1.62-65.
61 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.1.54-56.
62 Measure for Measure (Lever), 3.2.23.
64 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.2.7-8.
The Vienna of *Measure for Measure* is a transparent symbol of London, and Shakespeare is indulgent with double entendre throughout the play. Mistress Overdone’s complaint “What with the war, what with the sweat, what with the gallows, and what with poverty, I am custom shrunk,”⁶⁵ boldly represented “a number of factors operative in the winter of 1603-4: the continuance of the war with Spain; the plague in London; the treason trials and executions at Winchester in connection with the plots of Raleigh and others; the slackness of trade in the deserted capital.”⁶⁶ The prison to which Pompey is sent is thinly veiled image of Bridewell, and there are illusions to Bridewell latent in the text. Pompey is sent to prison to find “correction and instruction,”⁶⁷ Bridewell’s primary mission. Pompey observes this prison is much like “our house of profession,”⁶⁸ where “all great doers in our trade”⁶⁹ reside. Shakespeare may have transplanted the action to Europe to circumvent the problem of censorship, but the references to London made the play instantly accessible to audiences.

Shakespeare funnels his views through the complicated personalities of his three protagonists: Vincentio the Duke, Angelo, and Isabella. Angelo is unequivocal in his views, but it is a disservice not only to his city, but himself. Even as Angelo tells his second in command “’tis one thing to be tempted, another thing to fall,”⁷⁰ he falls in lust with Isabella, Claudio’s sister who has come to plead for his life. He propositions her, saying her brother will only be freed if she agrees to share his bed, a promise he has no intention of keeping. Yet, *Measure for Measure* “is concerned with error, not evil; with

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⁶⁵ *Measure for Measure* (Lever), 1.2.75-77.
⁶⁷ *Measure for Measure* (Lever), 3.2.33.
⁶⁸ *Measure for Measure* (Lever), 4.3.1.
⁶⁹ *Measure for Measure* (Lever), 4.3.18.
⁷⁰ *Measure for Measure* (Lever), 2.1.17-18.
correction, not retribution.”

Angelo represents the corrupt magistrate, a common early modern literary convention, who abuses his authority, but he is neither good nor bad. Angelo is deeply conflicted by his feelings for Isabella, “When I would pray and think, I think and pray / To several subjects: Heaven hath my empty words / Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue, / Anchors on Isabel” and his moral faulting is indulging those feelings.

What makes his proposition of Isabel intriguing is his soliloquy after his first meeting with her. The audience witnesses his grappling with what it means to be tempted by something he believes is perilous:

“Most dangerous
Is that temptation that doth goad us on
To sin in loving virtue.
Never could the strumpet
With all her double vigour, art and nature,
Once stir my temper: but this virtuous maid
Subdues me quite. Ever till now
When men were fond, I smil’d, and wonder’d how.”

Moreover, Angelo demarcates the strumpet, with her “double vigour, art and nature” denoting “the artifice of the courtesan combined with the natural appeal of sex” and the maid who is “virtuous.” While others see procreation as an element of the natural world, “as blossoming time / That from the seedness the bare fallow brings / To teeming foison” that will produce a plentiful harvest of humanity (and therefore cannot be easily exterminated), Angelo’s philosophy is quite the opposite. For him, sexual behavior is synonymous with murder, which is why he is so perplexed by his feelings for Isabella. If, in the past he would smirk at others infatuation, he has now succumbed to their conduct.

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71 See Lever, Measure for Measure, lxxxi.
72 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.4.1-3.
73 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.2.181-187.
74 See Lever, Measure for Measure, 51.
75 Measure for Measure (Lever), 1.4.41-43.
Claudio represents liberty, Isabella represents restraint, and Angelo oscillates between the two. From the outskirts of the action, Pompey is like a Greek chorus, making wise observations that, because of his professional status, are disregarded by the other characters. The polarity between creation and death is explored throughout the play. Angelo’s lust contains “the strong and swelling evil of his conception,”76 the Provost informs Claudio “’Tis now dead midnight, and by eight tomorrow / Though must be made immortal.”77 Angelo is fleshier than the one-dimensional corrupt magistrate. His actions are questionable, but are dealt with less harshly than the severe law he siphons off on Claudio.

This makes Measure for Measure, unlike the bard’s other comedies, more disconcerting on a spiritual level. The harsh reality of the play lies in Shakespeare’s recognition of, in the words of Elizabeth Marie Pope, “the personal flaw described in the measure-for-measure passage: the bitter and uncharitable narrowness in judging others that springs from a refusal to recognize or deal with one’s own faults.”78 A striking element is the lack of a happy ending. Shakespearean comedy usually ended in marriage, signifying man’s primary function in the early modern world.79 Yet, the otherwise impetuous Isabella, told by the Duke to “give me your hand say you will be mine,”80 offers no verbal reply. These predicaments reflect the fluidity of the early modern experience, predicaments that often eschewed prescribed social roles. Moreover, the open ending also gave the audience the opportunity to interpret the action on their own terms, even offering an alternative. It challenged the Renaissance Christian doctrine of

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76 Measure for Measure (Lever), 2.4.6-7.
77 Measure for Measure (Lever), 4.2.62-63.
78 Pope, “Renaissance Background,” 76.
79 See Lever, Measure for Measure, xci.
80 Measure for Measure (Lever), 5.1.490.
clemency, seen in the play’s conclusion with the Duke’s absolusions, yielding penalties disproportionate to what punishment meant by Renaissance standards. Measure for Measure encouraged its audience to grapple, like Angelo and Isabella, with the concepts of tolerance, mercy, judgment, and forgiveness, not only in terms of their religious ideologies, but also in negotiating with civic life.

The lack of marriage compounds Measure for Measure’s unsettling ending. Shakespeare was clearly skeptical of moral absolutes. He presented a man, Angelo, who was a strict interpreter of the law and encounters a moral dilemma in his lust for Isabella. The final scene was one of multiple pardons, perhaps a subtle encouragement to London lawmakers to understand the impossibility of gaining control over industries that pervaded the streets of London. Themes about sex and the Dispensation of Justice would have been on the minds of Londoners. Measure for Measure was first performed a year into King James I’s reign. After forty-five years under Elizabeth, Londoners now had to adjust to a new ruler and his unique brand of justice.

Measure for Measure’s unsettling ending did not clearly state Shakespeare’s position on mercy and clemency. He intentionally withheld an answer to the dilemma; he merely posed the question. This is typical of the Bard’s plays – they explored the great political, social, historical, human issues of the day, but they did not provide a solution, he had faith in his audience. Every time a character was justified, the audience was presented with a point of view that kept the debate open, ensuring that when they left the theatre, they would question, debate, and discuss those questions. It induced a hunger to go back and see the play from a fresh perspective.

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81 Pope, “Renaissance Background,” 79.
Measure for Measure was a parable for the administration of justice in early modern England and the testimonies in the BCB in the closing decades of the sixteenth century reflected these contradictions. The records themselves were complicated in the way they presented sex workers. Like Isabella, sex workers used their voice and commonly deployed popular agency. If literature provided the rhetoric that prostitutes were “a shame to their sex and to virginity…unfit to make a wife and unworthy to be call’d a woman,”82 or that, if reformed, they led quiet lives of “serene peace of religious comfort,”83 Measure for Measure and the BCB portrayed sex workers as financially dependent, mobile, adroit, and garrulous. Further supporting this idea are Isabella’s impassioned soliloquies. In her debates with Angelo in Act Two, Isabella, a woman entering a nunnery, a community known for their silence and obedience, had a voice. Her arguments were lucid and intense; it is what stirs Angelo’s longings in the first place.

The Bridewell testimonies were vehicles of cultural resistance; without literacy or the written word on their side, oral narratives became their power play. Language and the power of the argument were important for depositions; it informed legal and religious life and the mentalities of those who participated in those practices. Shakespeare’s message criticized official reaction to prostitution. Sexual behavior could not be controlled, in part because of ineffective measures or compromised authority, and a similar conclusion can be deduced from an investigation of the court records of Bridewell Hospital.


Act III

Elizabethan court records provide ample information about the London sex worker. It is one of the few sources of which we can recover the thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes of the socially stigmatized, expressed in their own voice. Though these voices could have been misrepresented, “in most instances magistrates acted as administrators passively organizing existing evidence.” Historians have culled court records with a skeptical eye because testimony is often tendentious, but these records should not be generalized as fiction. For early modern Londoners, these testimonies were a type of emancipation, an opportunity to form and shape their own narratives. Starting in the winter of 1576, the governors “embarked on a determined crack-down on commercial sex in the capital.”

Like players, sex workers “disturbed the social hierarchy and the ideology from which it derived legitimacy,” an order that was rooted in the family. The industry was thus perceived as threatening because sexual activity disrupted the infallibility of the household sphere. Just as players were targets of the Lord Mayor and City of Aldermen, bawds and pimps were the main target of the Bridewell Governors. Both industries comprised an underworld that was diametrically opposed to the modest and upstanding commonwealth. In both political and religious discourse, theatre and prostitution were commonly associated with filth and disease. In practice, and far more dangerous, these

3 Archer, Pursuit of Stability, 211.
industries aided the erosion of social relations that were auxiliary to early modern urban existence. The testimonies may have stigmatized sex workers, alienating them from civilized society, but they also reveal an industry that permeated all domains of human activity.

Paul Griffiths has shown how the governors of Bridewell labeled plaintiffs with language so often used in the defamation cases, such as “rouge,” “vagrant,” and “whore.” He argues that language on the street was absorbed into legal vocabularies, to which Bernard Capp concurs that these words were, in turn, re-absorbed back into street speech in more covert ways to mitigate legal risk.\(^5\) The Bridewell records repeatedly used the word lewd to describe sexual behavior. In Old English, the word was defined as belonging to the laity, or laymen; in Middle English, it meant belonging to the common people, or vulgar. The term distinctively demarcates two social groups. Sexual morality was a central precept for a patriarchal society in which a woman had no control over her body and her value was placed upon her ability to produce offspring. Naturally, sexual behavior outside procreation was associated with vulgarity. The use of these idioms was a trope to describe sexual behavior as repulsive. Legally, lewdness is defined as “behavior that is deemed morally impure or unacceptable in a sexual sense; open and public indecency tending to corrupt the morals of the community; gross or wanton indecency in sexual relations.”\(^6\) The ubiquity of the term in political discourse was then funneled into the oral culture, exacerbating the cultural divide. The poor were the most identified as


practicing illicit sex. The word lewd linked the grotesque with common folk and kept it within that group, distancing these types of behaviors from the refined elite.

Whore was a ubiquitous idiom for unchaste women, whether (or not) she exchanged money for sex, was unfaithful to her husband, or “flaunt[ed] [herself] in a public way offensive to [her] neighbors.” Terms like “bawd” and “harlot” bled into cultural vernacular and became a label tattooed on those who encouraged or participated in illegal sexual activity. Yet, the categories of maid, wife, widow, and whore were fluid, as Howard observes, “prescriptive in junctions that did not necessarily fully describe women’s social experience, perhaps especially in urban London.”7 Laura Gowing’s lucid examination of the language of sexual insult intimates the rigid organization of gender relations in the early modern period, what she describes as “a moral framework…in which ‘whore’ is a word of vague yet telling power against women, with no equivalent against men; and where marriage is perceived as a continuous economic and sexual exchange of goods which women’s unchastity disrupts.” Calling a woman a whore damaged her reputation with a force that charging a male with promiscuity did not. “Whatever made a good reputation,” Gowing notes, “sexual discredit could threaten it.”8

Another common word early modern women and men used for sex was “occupying,” an image that implied “that only one man can occupy, and possess, a woman at once”9 – a brothel in Islington was named “the well occupied house.”10 In the Old Testament, carnal knowledge was original sin, and “knowledge of the bodie,” which

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7 Howard, Theatre of a City, 135.
9 Gowing, Domestic Dangers, 271.
10 Salkeld, Shakespeare Among the Courtesans, 2.
is often repeated in the BCB, was associated with shame. A woman was defined by her virtue and honor, and this language kept the patriarch firmly at the top of the hierarchy.

Both the interrogators and the plaintiffs used these words to describe their activities, and such brash talk about sex gave its speakers a subversive power. Social distinction in early modern England was grounded in feudal tradition, but urban existence was malleable, especially in a metropolis that was cosmopolitan, mercantile, and the seat of royal power. Testimonies in the BCB, particularly when examining their language, show this potential for transgression in such an unpredictable environment. They reflected the limitations of containment that Shakespeare highlighted in Measure for Measure. These terms circumscribed women to a social order that may have seemed binary – grounded in moral practice, dependent on marriage, and operating as an economic exchange. As the evidence shows, however, the words used by and about early modern women draw a distinct line between precept and practice. The early modern woman’s experience was at odds with the record-keeping institutions of her society. Female testimony was full of agency; women who were once victims became instigators under interrogation of the governors, raconteurs who blamed others to save their own skin. Moreover, the fact that they were using their own words in their own voices was an act of transgression. The crackdown on sex workers in the mid-1570s by the Bridewell Court of Governors reveal the difficulty in enforcing control over an industry that was deeply embedded in the daily life of the city.¹¹

¹¹ Preliminary investigations into Elizabethan prostitution via the historical record were taken on by Ian Archer and Paul Griffiths, who examine both archival and literary sources to discern patterns. They recognize the challenge in this pursuit, due to inconsistent and poor documentation. See Archer, Pursuit of Stability, 211-215 and Griffiths, “The Structure of Prostitution,” 39-63.
Bridewell Palace was consigned to the City of London by King Edward VI to be used as an orphanage and a correctional facility for wayward women in 1553, though power within the institution was often contested.\textsuperscript{12} A charter stated the Court of Governors of Bridewell Prison were “a body corporate with a common seal and power of making rules,” yet it was never made entirely clear if their discretionary powers were legal, nor their precise jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{13} Apprehension was inconsistent, “the bench either issued warrants or constables, deputies, and other officers acted upon their own initiative.”\textsuperscript{14} By 1556 it became London’s most notorious prison, the principal institution in controlling a rise in crime. Bridewell was a site of reformation, reflecting the aggressive ideology of Henry VIII’s break with the Catholic Church. Moreover, post-Reformation England, in contrast to Catholic Europe, never reinforced canon law.\textsuperscript{15} Under post-Reformation values, then, Bridewell would cleanse the streets of idle men, beggars, and thieves, and reform the “idle youth and unthrifty poor.”\textsuperscript{16} Bridewell became cultural “shorthand for the ways in which Tudor-Stuart society dealt with the poor.”\textsuperscript{17}

The prison also had a courtroom and appointed governors to hear cases, giving them authority – granted by the monarch – to ““searche, enquire, and seke owt’ in London and its sprawling northern suburbs ‘all ydell ruffians and tavern haunters, vagabonds, beggars, and all persons of yll name and fame.”\textsuperscript{18} The Governors were

\begin{footnotes}
\item Griffiths, “Structure of Prostitution,” 42.
\item Charity commissioners (1582), reprinted in Griffiths, “Structure of Prostitution,” 42.
\item Griffiths, “Structure of Prostitution,” 43.
\item Laura Gowing notes, “the reformed code drawn up under Edward VI…never got through Elizabeth’s parliaments, and instead only piecemeal alterations were introduced.” See Gowing, Domestic Dangers, 10.
\item The supplication by assent of Governors of Poor to King’s Majesty for obtaininge Bridewell (1552), reprinted in Griffiths, “Structure of Prostitution,” 42.
\item Paul Griffiths, “Contesting London Bridewell, 1576-1580,” Journal of British Studies 42 (July 2003), 286.
\end{footnotes}
assisted by the Lord Mayor and the Court of Aldermen to “issue warrants and apprehend offenders.”19 Women who were tried at Bridewell were always classified as lewd women, whether or not they were prostitutes.20 Transcriptions were recorded by the Bridewell Court of Governors, a socially prestigious appointment that served ecclesiastic interests.21 Testimony, therefore, was refracted through an elite, male, and homogeneous scribal hand. Yet Gowing notes these narratives “were shaped not just by clerks and proctors but by their narrator’s own strategic and unconscious reshapings.”22 Female testimony was far more loquacious than the idealized position of the quiet, obedient woman. Kathryn Jones accused prostitute Jane Fuller of inticing her “about a yeare and a half past to this lewd lyfe that she now useth,” and ends her statement by calling Fuller “an Arrant bawde,” with an ability to corrupt other young women: “she is hable to spoyle a greate number.”23

The London underworld was an organized system, and the BCB cites evidence for at least a hundred brothels in operation throughout the city.24 The BCB gives the impression that sexual commerce was a network of “familiarity and sociability” among prostitutes, pimps, and brothel keepers, in which pimps shuttled prostitutes between districts, prostitutes paid rent to brothel owners, pimps were employed by multiple brothels whom were also well aware of the places to find clients, including recruitment

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20 The Bridewell Court Books document London’s sex trade – identities, activities, and expenditures – in lengthy and detailed records. All citations from the Court of Governors’ minute books for London’s Bridewell and Bethlem Hospitals are courtesy of Bethlem Museum of the Mind, Beckenham, Kent.
21 Ian Archer confirms “of the ten governors attending over 30 percent of the meetings in the key year, 1576-7, six were puritans, and the lack of proof on another three may be explained in terms of the lack of surviving wills for them because wills provide one of a very few clues as to religious orientation.” See Archer, Pursuit of Stability, 253.
22 Gowing, Domestic Dangers, 54-55.
Testimonies reveal pimps visiting steel yards, ambassadors’ residences, and apprentice shops. Testimonies from January 1577 reveal a profit split between the brothels owned by Gilbert East and Black Luce, respectively. East and Luce shared prostitutes, and one woman of their joint employ, Mary Dornelly, often wore a silk gown for the company of “gentlemen and welthymen with velvet gaskens and rich apparel and not for the common sorte.”

A testimony from the summer of 1576 belongs to Thomasine Breame, a brothel madam who stood before the Bridewell Governors several times during her infamous career and readily revealed the network of pimps, escorts, and prostitutes that operated in London:

“Mrs. Breame saith that William Mekens in fetter lane is a bawde and his wiffee also And Dothe knowe the wemen that be lewde almost all And Dothe carry them to strangers And he is abell to tell of all sortes of men & wemen that be lewde And he is a whoremonger And kepeth Elizabeth Cowper and others and his wife knoweth it & also she plaith the harlot And he knoweth it.”

Words such as “bawd,” “lewd,” “harlot,” and “whoremonger” may have been prescribed to Breame and her employers by the Governors, and were likely pelted at her in the street by the citizenry. Breame had been branded “an infamous woman,” but she made the most of her vocation. The BCB reports that Breame was lodged in affluent districts owned by several prominent gentlemen, including the Treasurer of Bridewell Court, Robert Winch. In return for sexual favors, she acquired money, clothing, and trinkets. Breame was strategic on the stand. When Winch was alleged to have maintained a house

30 Griffiths, “Contesting London Bridewell,” 301.
for her near St. Paul’s cathedral in March of 1577, Breame vehemently denied it. She condemned the suggestion as “utterlye false and a horrible slander to Master Winche.”

Breame also prescribed language to her colleagues in order to reduce her sentence, naming “one megge Goldsmyth from Black Luces at Clerkenwell wher she laye and she saieth that the said Luce is an arrant whore and a bawde.”

The consistent use of these terms was not only a method to defame sex workers, but to keep them segregated from more socially acceptable groups. Prostitutes were frequently cited in court testimony as “lewde & naughtie wemen.” Bridewell was an equal opportunity litigator; both men and women were victim to slander. Though Breame was frequenter of the prison, she exerted her power within its walls, knowing she was under the protection of Winch, who “showed lewd women great favor in Bridewell.” Jane Robinson, another prostitute, reported that Breame could leave the prison “when she listed.” Certainly not true of all, but some sex workers were able to use their bodies to their advantage, applying agency and manipulating their situations to serve their own interests. The defamation tactic by Bridewell proctors was not entirely successful, for prostitution continued to prosper.

While brothels were concentrated to the suburbs of Shoreditch, Southwark, and Clerkenwell, commercialized sex could be found anywhere in the capital, including its more wealthy neighborhoods. A confession from a pimp named Henry Boyer in October of 1577 alleged that the wife of the parson of Islington “desired him to help her to ii or iii

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34 Griffiths, “Contesting London Bridewell,” 301.
wemen to her house to play the harlottes at her house with suche as came for she had ii or iii Justices of the countrye at her house to deall with them.” He acquired these women from a Mistress Neal, whom he claimed was “a comen bawde and she hath kept dyvers harlottes.” Testimonies confirm prostitutes entertained apprentices and merchants. In November 1576, Elizabeth Kelsey was denounced in court by pimp William Mekens as an “arrant whore” who “caryed the fashion with Dutche, Frenche, Spanishe, Italyans and all.” Women who were not prostitutes themselves made money by arranging sexual liaisons in their homes. In July of 1601, one Mistress Cowell was accused by her landlady Elizabeth Sherman for sending her to fetch Margaret Smith, another notorious prostitute, whenever young men arrived at the house “so that they might have thuse of her body.” Sherman was charged to find other women for the same purpose. One Master Newton frequented Cowell’s house on “diverse nights” and lay with her “all the night long when her husband was out of towne,” and also functioned as her broker.

Other than the many allegorical links between the plays and the Bridewell Court, stagecraft and commercialized sex stress the importance of performance to their success. The courts offered individuals the opportunity to tell their story in a public forum, men and women on the stand dictated a version of events, “for some witnesses, and particularly for women, it was a narrative that bore closely on the terms of their identity,

autonomy, and authority.”

Defendants and witnesses were raconteurs with an ability to dissemble and hyperbolize when it suited their needs.

Breame’s testimony is particularly interesting because a connection can be made to the theatre, in that she says William Mekens’ wife “played the harlot.” Gowing notes that the urban experience was a public forum, and that the civic world operated by popular participation. The courts were for the convicted “a formal arena in which to tell their story,” the courtrooms themselves theatrical spaces. Prostitutes, like players, relied on their performative skills for profit; their very practice encouraged them to perform, and they most likely utilized this practice in the courtroom. Prostitutes were exposed to several types of dialect, languages, and behaviors in encountering their diverse clientele.

Elizabeth Evans, from Shakespeare’s hometown Stratford-upon-Avon, moved to London in the mid-1590s and testified before the Bridewell governors in 1598 for having “bin about London for three or foure yeares…with th’use of…her bodye.” She had been known for adopting several aliases as well as for her elusiveness, itinerant among brothels in order to avoid arrest. She was not the only one, Anne Levens moved between a reported seventeen bawdy houses. The gaps in the court books make it difficult to determine the wider range of motives and circumstances in the world of prostitution; some may have fallen into sex work as entry into metropolitan life, others may have been coerced from abroad, others forced still by uncertain circumstances. The historical record shows some movement up the financial ladder, like the aforementioned

38 Gowing, Domestic Dangers, 266.
39 Gowing, Domestic Dangers, 263.
Levens who, establishing herself as one of London’s most successful prostitutes, offered her services to “cortyers,” and gentlemen who paid her twenty shillings.43

There are a few other allusions to the theatre in the Bridewell depositions, linking the theatre and prostitution. On June 12, 1579, the governors dealt with Jane Wolmer, who had attended a play at the Curtain theatre with not only a member of the prominent playing company Leicester’s Men, but also her landlord John Chambers and his wife. Under interrogation, it was revealed that Chambers and his wife were running a “bawdy-house,” and with “Chambers himself A resorter of playing houses,” this was one of many professional excursions for staff and clients. Prostitutes took advantage of “post-performance liaisons.”44

Despite the governor’s aggressive attempts to reform sex workers, Henry VIII’s Reformation motives did little to curtail the availability of commercial sex in London.45 Bawdy houses existed with a ubiquity that rivaled the playhouses – the sex industry, like the theatre industry, thrived, and as Griffiths notes, sex workers had significant social significance.46 This was compounded by bribery within the governorship and a rise in vagrancy, which took up much attention of the court during and after the campaign of 1576.47 Literary sources cast prostitutes in a downward spiral until they are alone and destitute.48 Their beastly activities made them unnatural to society, and economic necessity drove them into prostitution. Poverty, then, became the source of their sin.

Critics observe that prostitution was not always prosperous, and often dangerous. Women

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were victims of violence or exploitation. Displaced from their homes or abandoned by their families, women were in vulnerable positions and resorted to prostitution as a means of survival. Only a few women were able to make a successful career of prostitution, and sex work was often “hazardous.”

Readings of the BCB indicate disempowerment of the poor who were under testimony, and they demonstrate the ruling elite dictating verdicts, but they also speak to a populace who was able to exert agency, despite their disenfranchised position. Language was the way to shift blame – prostitutes emphasized that their employers were manipulators who “procured” them with false promises. Prostitutes deployed a popular agency by playing themselves as the victim, telling tales to satisfy a given inquiry.

Their talent for performance to achieve freedom was grounded in language and imposture, a central theme of Ben Jonson’s comedy *The Alchemist*. His portrayal of Dol Common, a prostitute and one of the protagonists of the play, evinces that Jonson, like Shakespeare, did not share the shortsightedness of his literary contemporaries, who often depicted prostitutes as lurid, their narratives as criterion for reform and atonement. Jonson linked criminality with economic opportunity, and accurately illustrated the ways it weaved itself into metropolitan society.

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49 Salkeld, “Case of Elizabeth Evans,” 61.
Act IV

The use of popular agency observed in the plaintiff testimonies of the BCB is crystalized in Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, not only in its plot but also in its language. Unlike Shakespeare, who coded his plays with foreign locales and poetry, Jonson’s dramatic aesthetic was grounded in city comedy, a burgeoning form of theatre at the turn of the seventeenth century. Jonson’s writing exemplifies Stallybrass and White’s deconstruction of social class according to Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival theory – professionalized drama was a product of early modern English culture, but defined by its alterity. Writing about London so specifically “could be as much an act of dissociation from, as a sign of engagement with” the city,¹ and Jonson used city comedy to analyze patrician, as well as his own, attitude toward the ideology of the civilized versus the grotesque. Jonson was a renegade – he was frequently in trouble with the law and jailed several times throughout his life. The product of working class stock, he, like Shakespeare, was not university educated, but by choosing to publish his plays in folio form (something that did not happen for Shakespeare until after his death), taking them beyond the stage and onto the bookshelves of elite libraries, Jonson founds the means to elevate his artistic status. He often complained about audiences, but there is certainly no shortage of plays he wrote for the popular theatre. By engaging with the practice of alchemy – the transformation of matter via a bottom-up approach, Jonson distilled the “various symbolic views and strategies”² that were latent in the understanding of and responses to social division in early modern culture.

¹ Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 61.
² Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 62.
Jonson’s playwriting was grounded in the classical tradition, but was more accessible to London audiences by three distinct characteristics. His dialogue was not written in verse, language that was usually attributed to royalty and the aristocracy in the plays, the elevated language of the great rhetorical speeches of Shakespeare. *The Alchemist* was written in the prose of the common man. His character’s names were a clear indication of their personality, Abel Drurger, for instance, is the name for the tobacconist of the story. His plays were almost exclusively set in London, for setting was an important factor of spectator interpretation:

“No country’s mirth is better than our own:
No clime breeds better matter for your whore,
Bawd, squire, imposter, many persons more,
Whose manners, now called humors, feed the stage”³

For Jonson, the only people who understood the early modern London experience were Londoners. Jonson anchored his play in a contemporary time in London and reflected the speech, behavior, and attitudes of its citizens. He ushered in a new style of drama, the comedy of manners, plays that implemented a realism that he believed to be missing from the romantic drama of his contemporaries, Shakespeare included.

The alchemy shop where the trio of con artists operates is emblematic of social mobility and moral corruption simultaneously. The protagonists Face, Subtle, and Dol have developed a scheme to get rich quick, but it involves conning their community. Jonson satirized greed and vice, yet recognized the attraction of wealth and power. In this sense, *The Alchemist* is a fast-paced, satirical depiction of human folly. The world of the play is a topsy-turvy tapestry of action: the servant usurps the master, alchemy replaces science, rhetoric undermines reason, and moral order is subverted as a result. While the

play criticizes conzening, pan handling, and swindling, we should not ignore the social liberation of the protagonists, even at the conclusion when order is restored: “he would have built / The city new; and made a ditch about it / Of silver”

Lovewit says about his servant, Jeremy – who had appropriated Lovewit’s house as an alchemy lab in his absence.

_The Alchemist_ reads like a transcript of daily life in the capital city. The play was so rooted in London custom it reinforced the dialectic between the stage and the street, Jonson presented socio-economic relations through his allegorical craftsmanship. They are made in his image; as an author, Jonson assumed that control. In the context of Jonson’s play _Bartholomew Fair_, Stallybrass and White maintain Jonson’s “master-poet” status “constituted his identity in opposition to theatre and the fair,” mapping out the divisions between the civilized and the grotesque. In _The Alchemist_, Jonson’s investigations of social mobility are satirical, yet demonstrate low culture as inventive, not necessarily evil. _The Alchemist_ may be considered a comment on the exclusion/containment model in social theory. While _Bartholomew Fair_ may have been received as low comedy, _The Alchemist_ has always been regarded as a perfect play. My reading of _The Alchemist_ reinforces the evidence in the BCB – London as a society that could not be contained.

The action of the play springs forth from the plague descending upon London and the noble classes scurrying off to protect themselves – Lovewit, an elite, decamps to the country, leaving his house in the stewardship of his butler, Jeremy, one of the servile

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4 *The Alchemist* (Harp), 5.5.77-79.
5 Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 77.
6 The English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, said _The Alchemist_ had one of the three perfect plots, the other two being _Oedipus Rex_ and _Tom Jones_.

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class. In this deserted city infected with disease, a new social model emerges and The Alchemist explores this power dynamic. The Alchemist is about the art of the con, but it also a play about transformation. Both sex workers and the cozening triumvirates of The Alchemist were essential forces within their social spheres.

Lovewit’s absence allows for moral inversions. Jeremy creates an alias, Captain Face, and recruits two members of the criminal underworld, who normally inhabit the districts outside the City’s jurisdiction. Face lures them inside the City to the affluent neighborhood of Blackfriars in order to hatch their scheme. At the turn of the seventeenth century, the commercialized theatre was experiencing a shift in location – from the outdoor amphitheatres in the liberties of Southwark and Shoreditch to indoor theatres in neighborhoods like Blackfriars. Low culture, usually divided from civilized culture, was encroaching new space, and The Alchemist cleverly depicts the poor invading privileged spaces, a transgression that could only occur with an event such as the plague.

Jonson associates Subtle with images of uncleanness, identifying him with dog’s vomit (“Out, you dog-leech! The vomit of all prisons—”) in the first scene, following cultural assumptions of rogue populations classified in excremental terms. Indeed, sex workers were also often associated with filth and disease. Taking this a step further, Cheryl Ross suggests Subtle epitomizes the plague itself, he is the “expression of the commonwealth’s sickness.” This association spoke to a deeper fear that rouges and the plague shared “the ability to cross boundaries in the landscape and in the social hierarchy.” Yet, as Shakespeare acknowledged in Measure for Measure, Jonson too

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7 James Burbage first tried to build an indoor theatre at Blackfriars monastery in 1599, but a petition by the neighborhood barred construction. A few years later his wish was granted. The Alchemist debuted at Blackfriars Theatre in 1610.

8 The Alchemist (Harp), 1.1.104.
realized that criminals, like the plague, were uncontainable, for even though those marginal elements of society both reinforced and threatened identity, both were necessary and necessarily excluded, simultaneously. The underworld gave “place to everything the civic body cannot contain and control.”

*The Alchemist* is a play about getting rich quick. With the departure of his master, Jeremy can embark on a profitmaking enterprise. He enlists the help of Subtle, a man he meets in the food market of Smithfield and Dol, a prostitute. Jeremy immediately assumes the identity of the respectable Captain Face, and advertises throughout the city that, Subtle, who has assumed the identity of an alchemist, is working to produce a potion that will turn base metals into gold. The three con artists continue to devise every scheme imaginable to keep the money flowing, each attempt growing more ridiculous than the last.

In the first scene the triumvirate Subtle, Face, and Dol fling insults at each other as if they were throwing confetti, calling one another rouge, slave, cheater, cutpurse, bawd, and witch, language familiar to London audiences. In this same moment, an allusion to Bridewell is made in the reference to “deaf John.” Before their scheme can succeed, however, metamorphosis must occur. Subtle reminds Face of his place and subsequent transformation in the first scene:

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“Thou vermin, have I ta’en thee out of dung,
So poor, so wretched, when no living
Would keep thee company, but a spider, or worse?
Raised thee from brooms, and dust, and watering-pots,
Sublimed thee, and exalted thee, and fixed thee
In the third region, called our state of grace?”
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11 *The Alchemist* (Harp), 1.1.64-69.
Only then can they succeed “in casting figures, telling fortunes, news, / selling of flies, flat bawdry.”\textsuperscript{12} Before assuming the identity of Captain Face, Jeremy engaged in a ritual of purification. Subtle has to literally lift Face up (“ta’en out of dung”) and “sublime” him, an alchemical term for converting a substance into vapor in order to remove impurities.\textsuperscript{13} Like Angelo, Subtle associates the poor with filth and disease and the privileged, that “third region,” that is pure, with grace. Here Jonson reinforces the cultural attitudes of early modern London, with transformation, a mobile state of being, their escape strategy.

Social mobility was achieved through financial acumen, and “the commercial implications, latent in the central situation of cheating and prostitution,” are dispatched throughout the play via Jonson’s fiscal language. Sutble, Dol, and Face “have gone into business, with a contract, shares, and an expanding practice.”\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, Dol personifies the breakdown of the division “between the whore and other categories of women or between the practices of the whore and those of other commercial entrepreneurs.”\textsuperscript{15} In his city comedies, Jonson infused his prose with common vernacular. Under the protective cover of allegory, Jonson is able to achieve a sense of realism.

The opening scene’s furious argument between Face and Subtle, in which Face equates Subtle with nasty smells, human waste, and unclean substances\textsuperscript{16} juxtaposed with elite language, Subtle and Face also refer to each other in aristocratic terms, Dol styles them as “Sovereign, General.”\textsuperscript{17} This duopoly of identity foreshadows the action to come.

\textsuperscript{12} The Alchemist (Harp), The Argument, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{13} Harp, Jonson’s Plays and Masques, 204.
\textsuperscript{14} Edward B. Partridge, “The Alchemist” in Jonson’s Plays and Masques, 448.
\textsuperscript{15} Howard, Theatre of a City, 237.
\textsuperscript{16} The Alchemist (Harp), 1.2.1-6.
\textsuperscript{17} The Alchemist (Harp), 1.1.5.
Bookended by the low epithets of the first and last scene, when we see the trio as their real selves – butler, conman, and prostitute; the dialogue in between – when they are “cozeners,”18 – is indulgent and extravagant. Their victims play into this dupe. Epicure Mammon, a noblemen who visits the alchemist’s shop in search for the philosopher’s stone, has fallen for Dol, and instructs himself to “Heighten thyself, talk to her all in gold; / Rain her as many showers as Jove did drops / Unto his Danae”19 – in Roman mythology, Jove wooed and won Danae in the form of a shower of gold.

With these language associations, Jonson is using the stage to evince the multiplicity of urban culture. The Alchemist depicts early modern London as socially mobile; characters in the play seize every opportunity to further their interests, much to Jonson’s ridicule and the audience’s delight. The imagery and allusions in The Alchemist are literal and abrasive, authenticated by underworld slang:

“\[I am sure it is a bawdy-house;  
I'll swear it, were the marshal here to thank me: 
The naming this commander doth confirm it. 
Don Face! why, he's the most authentic dealer 
In these commodities, the superintendent 
To all the quainter traffickers in town! 
He is the visitor, and does appoint, 
Who lies with whom, and at what hour; what price; 
Which gown, and in what smock; what fall; what tire. 
Him will I prove, by a third person, to find 
The subtleties of this dark labyrinth.\]”20

Each time the characters delineate themselves in lofty terms, we see in their actions how far they are from that description. The Alchemist dramatizes a succession of characters from different social backgrounds, but the one flaw that unites them – gullibility – make them all victims. At the play’s conclusion Dapper, the aspirant gambler, loses his stake; Sir Epicure Mammon loses his money and his dignity; Drugger,

18 The Alchemist (Harp), The Argument, 6.
19 The Alchemist (Harp), 4.1.24-27.
20 The Alchemist (Harp), 2.3.300-308.
the would-be businessman, parts with his cash, but ends up no nearer to the success he craves; the Puritan duo, Tribulation and Ananias, never realize their scheme to counterfeit Dutch money.

Clerks and noblemen alike visit Face’s laboratory/shop to procure wealth and vanity, quick fixes and miracle cures. In their attempts to dupe the locals as to their power and status, the cozeners fall victim to the whims of their own importance. Subtle and Face are commonly called “your worship,” when interacting with their customers, and to Subtle, Face becomes “so famous, the precious king / Of present wits.”

It is only after their scheme collapses that they are once again brought down, to earth and their lowly social positions. Lovewit returns to London and the play concludes with Jeremy reinstated to his servile position. The “venture tripartite” – Subtle, Face and Dol – are self-deluding small-timers, ultimately undone by the same human weaknesses they exploit in their victims.

Alchemy is the scheme for the cozening triumvirate to take advantage of the vulnerability of the locales in a time of panic. Ross suggests that Jonson’s intention of setting the play during a plague outbreak evokes “the play’s swindlers [as] the parasites who prey on [the city] in its weakened conditioned.” Yet, each customer that enters the shop is increasingly rapacious, and the degree of the con increases in kind. Things keep elevating until the laboratory explosion in Act Four, which mirrors the havoc that immediately follows – old customers return, who, through the con artist’s orchestrations, unknowingly cozen each other until no one can keep up and the scam disintegrates. The play’s conclusion sees a restoration of order, in which the master of the house returns,

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21 The Alchemist (Harp), 5.5.13-14.
22 The Alchemist (Harp), 1.1.135
and Jeremy apologizes directly to the audience, “I put myself on you, that are my country, and this pelf, which I have got, if you do quit me rests to feast you often, and invite new guests”\textsuperscript{24} giving them the opportunity to judge on the action that has just transpired.

\textit{The Alchemist} is a parable on moral disorder when the elite and responsible leave the city behind to criminals and fools. \textit{The Alchemist} represents the subtle breakdown of hierarchy, reflecting transgressive behavior that was occurring in the Bridewell courts. This erosion of power structures is analogous to activity in Bridewell Prison. Subtle, Face, and Dol never assume their schemes will fail because they understand how badly their customers need their product. They continue to plot because they are liberated by the knowledge of their uncontainability. As many literary critics have noted, \textit{The Alchemist} is concerned with the materiality of theatre, that alchemy is an analog to the actor’s skill. Transformation that occurred on the stage, in the courtroom, and on the street. This skill was subsumed by the audience; armed with a newfound inspiration and confidence, they transgressed their own, individual power structures, reclaiming their identity and living on their terms.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{The Alchemist} (Harp), 5.5.162-165.
Act V

The tempest assailing stagecraft and sexual commerce had yet to blow over London, but by the turn of the seventeenth century, these industries were auxiliary to the cultural infrastructure. A review of archival and literary sources paints a dynamic picture of the institution of theatre and its relations to the prescriptions of the early modern society. Just as “commercial sex provided a social and sexual option for some sections of the ‘integrated’ society”¹ the theatre offered new modes to correspond with a rigidly disciplined, yet slowly eroding, cultural system. Fatalistic attitudes toward stagecraft and sex work were attributed to the opportunities for autonomy and subversion within a society that determined movement and imposed control. These industries informed one another in the ways they subverted social control.

A case that started in Bridewell and extended to the Star Chamber (England’s highest court) infers the autonomy of plaintiffs, but also the slipperiness of testimonies. “Self preservation was frequently the name of the game” when it came to dealings of the court, and in this particular case, a goldsmith accused by the Governors of being a “whoremonger” corralled various prostitutes, pimps, and brothel keepers to testify in a defamation case. Some conceded Anthony Bate’s wishes, while others provided evidence against him.² The Bridewell Court Books reveal a multiplicity of perspectives from plaintiffs, they were accused, accusers, victims, and accomplices. This landscape would ultimately become too unwieldy to control. Moreover, given the popularity of bawdy activity, the emerging mindset toward the apprehension of sex workers became one of

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¹ Griffiths, “Structure of Prostitution,” 56.
insouciance. Bridewell was depleting resources from the city, especially in light of an ever-growing vagrancy problem. Chasing sex offenders was a nuisance for the city at large. By the seventeenth century, Bridewell would turn most of its attention to the pursuit of vagrants.3

Amidst this chaos, the theatre also prospered, and stood as the “immanent incarnation of transcendent ideas.”4 Pre-Reformation theatre “defined proper Christian behavior by denigrating and defeating its un-Christian opposite. Characters associated with vice in morality plays…were typically costumed and played in ways that aligned them with dirt, feces, and rampant sexuality.”5 Dramatists like Shakespeare and Jonson emancipated their audiences from this status quo. The archival records shows specific language was assigned to plaintiffs, women especially, but the plays show women as sophisticated, clever, and multi-dimensional. Drama inspired early modern Londoners and made available the possibilities to transcend the hierarchy of the socio-political system. The correlation between the plays and the Bridewell testimonies makes evident that the plays mirrored life as it was lived, not how it should be lived. The efficacy of this criterion lies in its message: the plays seem to express that the practices of playing and sex cannot be suppressed, even the most strident of voices cannot seem to contain them.

From these ideas, I suggest, then, that the theatre was a form of inculcating its audience with the philosophies of the popular experience. Theatre provided alternatives to quotidian life, it encouraged individuals to transgress their prescribed roles in a vertically ranked system. Stephen Greenblatt and other New Historicists propose the

theatre as a retrieval of self, a way to maintain identity in an age in which that power was exercised by the state, the church, and the family. Stagecraft and the sex work were intersections of urban society in which borders between individuals and classes were crossed and called into question.

The subversive power of drama functioned as a significant cultural intervention in a process of political reformation that would not only end the monarchy in the coming years, but also close the theatres themselves. As plays became more sophisticated and more powerful in calling out the shortcomings of power structures, representation itself became an act of subversion. The authorities attempted to sublimate these industries by censorship, closure, and arrest. Playwrights were also shareholders and actors, and like sex workers, deeply felt the armada of local government. They were renegade institutions that were also successful and pervasive. As hard as the authorities tried to exclude them, the playhouse and the bawdyhouse were sites of potential plebian resistance to those entrusted with the maintenance of social order. Both stagecraft and prostitution have been thought of as historical alterity, operating on the margins of the city and the society. Over time, however, they become assimilated into the culture, a hybridization that made them “enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone.”

The engagement with performance is a powerful transaction. Performing is not necessarily deceit or manipulation, it is a “movement toward perfection,” and plays themselves are processes “polished by their author and actors, and offer ‘wholesome

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6 See Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980) for his ideas regarding the shaping of self as a way to control identity in a rigidly disciplined society.
7 Oliver Cromwell and the civil war of the seventeenth century put a hold on all theatrical activity in the nation until Charles II reopened the theatres in 1660.
8 Kastan, “Proud Majesty Made a Subject,” 460-461.
9 Stallybrass and White, Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 197.
10 Stallybrass and White, Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 193.
remedies’…to the audience that have material effects in the world.”¹¹ For theatre practitioners and sex workers, performance was not only an act of transgression, it was an act of survival. Theatre was a marginal art, yet it utilized a visible means of expression, that of performance, to reinforce the opinions of its spectators – which then became the dominant cultural beliefs it reflected.

The tensions between dominant and marginal groups, demarcated by definitions of cleanliness and filth, are thoroughly explored in the archival and literary sources. Texts acquire meaning from, and are informed by, the society at large. This is cyclical process, for texts inform society in turn. Dramatists achieve this through the theatrical conventions of expository speeches, soliloquies, and asides, calling for active participation on behalf of their audiences. The power of theatre relies on its message and how that message is expressed. The act of performing encompassed several actions: pretending and showing, manipulation and transformation. In *The Alchemist*, Subtle, Face, and Dol have to perform in order to defraud their victims of money and goods. They are playing roles in order to carry out their plans. Throughout the play, the protagonists call attention to the procedures of performance: their entrances and exits, their many costume changes, the alterations of personality. Likewise, *Measure for Measure*’s entire plot rests on the mechanics of performance. The Duke cannot observe unless he dresses up in costume and pretends to be someone else.

The deeper meaning underpinning this examination contends marginalized populations are using the power of performance to transgress their situations – the subjective effects of the theatre are physically mobilized by the spectator to whom power had been transferred and who was thus, transformed. This power was wielded by

¹¹ Mary Thomas Crane, “What Was Performance?”, *Criticism* 43 no. 2 (Spring 2001), 183.
audiences who were not passive observers but active participants, who demonstrated their authority beyond the playhouse walls. The theatre, then, is an apparatus that is diametrically opposed to the state; it does not suppress, it emancipates; it does not impose, it instructs. Plays were social commentaries, but they were also social actions that provided definitions, practices, and possibilities that effected change beyond the world of the stage – “theatrical performances were ‘exercises’ which conveyed beneficial and material effects to both performers and audience.”

People in the same space understand and empathize with each other in a way that is not possible on the page. The theatre was both a public speaker and a gatherer of groups, an endeavor that required collective listening. At the theatre, language, possessing incredible power, empowered not only the speaker, but also the listener.

The archival record demonstrates that attempts to contain drama and sex work were unsuccessful. This idea was reflected in Measure for Measure – humans are unable to judge, and therefore cannot contain. We also see, in the historical record, that women had a voice and exerted agency, and this is reflected in The Alchemist through language and plot. Alchemy, after all, is the act of transformation to make something better, more perfect, reflecting social mobility in a vertical direction. Like theatre practitioners, sex workers had multiple allegiances, and their networks were complex. Both industries were attacked and defended by city officials and locales alike in the late sixteenth century, and ultimately proved triumphant over the authorities.

The multiplicity and elasticity of Shakespeare and Jonson’s body of work, speak to the complexities of the age. England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was shifting and expanding, it was a transitional period between new and old beliefs.

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12 Crane, “What Was Performance?”, 172.
Shakespeare is writing in a time when international trade ignited, and he explores usury and the world of credit in his play *The Merchant of Venice*. The gunpowder plot of 1605 instilled a sense of a national fear of a terrorist threat, a year later Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*. In an age of exploration, trade, and cross-cultural encounter, geography and race are topics explored in *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Venice, a city on water, was a place of trade and cultural exchange, and it was anti-papal; it bore a resemblance to London. Venice was also famous for its courtesans, and travellers often reported the difficulty in distinguishing elite women showing off their fashionable wares and the courtesans showing off theirs. Iago, the villain of the story, does not display the virtuous characteristics that Shakespeare’s audience might expect from a European Christian character. Moreover, Shakespeare presents Othello as he does Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, as a complex man, capable of stereotypical Moorish savagery and fury but striving to be virtuous.

Literary criticism seeks to analyze plays “in terms of the society in which they participate.” Theatre history analyzes the society and agents out of which the plays evolved. The New Historicist approach marginalizes audiences as vulnerable and passive, in which the theatre has a power to shape “not merely the audience’s interpretation but the audience itself.”13 This argument aligns with anti-theatrical fears, but performance theory suggests that actor and spectator are at one another’s whims. The audience is cognizant of the power of spectacle, but as many prologues and epilogues typify, audience response is what determined success. The theatre, through its very practice, exercised an ability to influence, perhaps even create audiences, but the relationship between the two was reciprocal. The connection between producer and consumer was

13 Low and Mayhill, *Imagining the Audience*, 3.
powerful and malleable, the playwright may have created the audience, but he was also at
their whims, communication started and ended with the audience. Given “the
fragmentary nature of external evidence and the impossibility of determining exactly how
to use internal evidence reliably,” there is the opportunity to have a multi-faceted
reading of the plays.

An interdisciplinary approach to theatre studies shows reflexivity between theatre
practitioners, their audiences, and the general society. Plays like Measure for Measure
and The Alchemist use foreign cities and madcap plots to conceptualize the circumstances
of the age in ways their audiences could readily identify. Indeed, the situations and
themes explored in the plays had resonance with Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s own world.
They blended fact and fiction, using the tools of the stage to interpret the activities of the
burgeoning metropolis. A new approach to examining sources, fusing theatre history,
social history, performance theory, literary analysis, perhaps even anthropology, to
presuppose ideas related to audience behavior will paint a dynamic picture of the theatre
and its relations to the prescriptions of early modern society. This present study begins
the construction of such a history; it provides evidence, via legal testimony and play
scripts, that evince the multiple and complex reflections between the stage and the street.

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15 Low and Mayhill, Imagining the Audience, 9.
16 Work on this has already begun. See Low and Mayhill, Imagining the Audience, for a collection of
esssays that attempts to “instantiate a marriage between historicist scholarship and theater history.
Examining the idea of audiences…affords a rich opportunity to observe the interaction of culture and
theater,” 10. Low and Mayhill make a clear distinction between the literary critic and the historian, and my
research follows their lead with an interdisciplinary approach: “the audience conceived by the literary and
cultural critic can be derived through the plays themselves as an aspect of the culture in which the drama
participates; the audience of the theater historian is a collection of individuals who paid admission and
attended plays (but seldom any particular play), whose existence can be determined from external
evidence,” 2.
From here, perhaps, the question can be posed: did theatre provoke social change and if so, how do literary and archival sources working together prove such a hypothesis?

If “control of the major sites of discourse is fundamental to political change,” the theatre, because it was participatory, served to orient and perhaps indoctrinate spectators in a complex and evolving civil sphere. My readings of these documents, both literary and archival, suggest that the theatre was more than a social comment on particular movements, moments, and events; it surpassed its primary function of entertaining the masses for an afternoon. Drama was, and is, a social action – a universal means of expression and an exchange of energy that is immediate and inclusive. The late sixteenth century was a time of significant change in England, and drama examined and responded to the many social tensions that resulted from those changes. In every aspect of life, the rules were being rewritten, and that is what the plays fundamentally express. 

Early modern theatre shunned complacency and influenced its audiences, for it was not merely engagement with an author, but with several voices that conditioned and informed their own discourse. Commercialized theatre empowered citizens to be more active agents, more participatory in municipal life. It offered the early modern Londoner a unique perspective on philosophies that transcended the playhouse, a visual vocabulary to engage their world that was more fulfilling and more complete.

17 Stallybrass and White, Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 202.
18 See Greenblatt, Shakespearean Negotiations, 20.
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