

The Case for Placing Shakespeare in King's Lynn

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It has long been known that St George's Guildhall in King's Lynn was used as a performance space from as early as the fifteenth century. There are also well-established anecdotal associations within Lynn local history between the Guildhall – now part of the King's Lynn Arts Centre complex – and William Shakespeare. Rumours of the Bard's presence here lie behind the name attached to part of the Arts Centre site – the Shakespeare Barn – and to that of a former public house nearby (29 King St.), 'Shakespeare House'. A case can be made for placing Shakespeare in King's Lynn in the early 1590s that offers substantiation of these local claims. My case brings together different types of evidence.

Firstly, we know that Lynn was a regular stop on the circuits for early modern theatrical companies. Lynn's burgeoning economy and relative ease of access made it an attractive place in which travelling players could seek paying audiences during the periods that they would have spent on the road in the provinces, particularly the summer months. Archival evidence in the Chamberlains accounts and Hall Books compiled by the town council (or 'corporation') shows that Lynn was visited by the Queen's Men in 1586, 1587, 1588-89, June 1591, July 1595, 1596; by the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1586; by the Earl of Essex's Men in 1591; by the Earl of Pembroke's Men in 1592-93; by the Earl of Derby's Men in 1594; and by the Earl of Worcester's Men in 1598-9.¹ Documentation assembled from other provincial records office appears to suggest that Lynn was part of a well-defined East Anglian circuit for travelling players; other stops included Norwich, Ipswich, Aldeburgh and Dunwich. Companies would have headed out towards the provinces as part of a round trip that always led back to the centre of the early modern dramatic industry, if we can call it that: London. By the 1590s there were purpose-built playhouses to the north of the City and on the south bank of the Thames, at the site of the modern, reconstructed Globe Theatre. Obviously, companies liked to perform in London since it offered the greatest potential audiences and receipts, and they were especially keen to be in the capital towards the end of the year as it placed them in a favourable position to be chosen to perform at the royal court during the Christmastide revels held between 26 December and Twelfth Night.

The record of the Earl of Pembroke's men's visit to Lynn in 1592-3 is of particular interest to my argument. Henry Herbert, the second earl of Pembroke, had been supporting liveried players or entertainers of some form from as early as 1575-76, though there is only really any evidence of an active company functioning under his patronage for a relatively short period of time between 1591-1601.² Pembroke's Men appear to have included a number of players and 'sharers' that overlapped with personnel from other companies, principally the Earl of Derby's Men and Queen's Men. (Trying to reassemble the composition and itinerary of the early modern

¹ Wasson, pp. 64-68. Several smaller, lesser-known companies also performed here. With one rather obscure and non-Shakespearian exception, we do not have records of what plays were performed by any of the companies in their visits to Lynn.

² Gurr, pp. 266-67. The Earl's son, William Herbert, was later a dedicatee of Shakespeare's posthumous *First Folio* collection (1623).

companies is notoriously difficult and – as with other forms of corporate bodies – personnel would come and go, and the patron’s name would be used and re-used as a convenient banner under which different groups of players would perform and travel.) Several prominent names have been connected with Pembroke’s Men. Richard Burbage was the company’s principal actor and chief interpreter of Shakespeare’s greatest dramatic roles. Gabriel Spencer, an actor, is perhaps best-known as the victim of Ben Jonson’s murderous assault in September 1598. Jonson himself has also been associated with the company.³ The other name to be connected with Pembroke’s Men is, of course, that of Shakespeare.

When they came to be printed in 1593 and 1594 several of Shakespeare’s early plays state explicitly that they were performed by Pembroke’s Men: *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *3 Henry VI*. (To this list we can add *2 Henry VI*.)⁴ Early modern scholar Andrew Gurr has demonstrated that Shakespeare was with his plays in Pembroke’s Men in 1592 and 1593 by highlighting how textual details in the early printed editions of *2* and *3 Henry VI* strongly suggest that the author had to be present in and with the company when they performed the plays. Details of staging reflected in the stage directions found in the early quarto and octavo versions of *2* and *3 Henry VI* suggest the presence of the author when they were first staged. Replications of visual details evoked in these stage directions betrays the hand of a writer who was familiar with the descriptive minutiae of the plays’ key source, Holinshed’s *Chronicles*.⁵ We know that Shakespeare was performing with the company in 1592 from a rather critical dig at the playwright made in a text published that autumn by fellow writer and dramatist Robert Greene. Norwich-born Greene famously referred to Shakespeare as an ‘upstart crow’ in a jibe that closely evoked the language of *3 Henry VI*. This reference has long been known to Shakespeare scholars, and close scrutiny of its sense and context suggests Greene may have seen Shakespeare perform in this early history play in around mid-1592.⁶

We know also that Pembroke’s Men were forced to leave London in the summer of 1592 due to an especially virulent bout of that most unwelcome of seasonal visitations, and one of the greatest threats to the livelihoods of the early modern theatrical companies – the plague. Theatres would be closed on public health grounds when the number of plague deaths rose, and the summer months were always bad. Pembroke’s Men undertook a particularly long tour of the Midlands and East Anglia during 1592-3. Shakespeare was a company man, and as one of its principal playwrights would have travelled with his fellow actors when they made their journey into the provinces. One has to wonder why he would have wanted to have stayed put in London during the plague-stricken summer months, given the opportunity and, I would argue, the necessity of travelling with the company at this time. Both *Henry VI* plays have a large ensemble cast and need over twenty actors each to cover the many different parts, even when one employs careful doubling of roles.⁷ The plays required a large company of actors and for everyone to do their part.⁸ For practical and logistic reasons alone, Shakespeare simply could not have afforded to have stayed in London whilst the company – which was by no means *his* company – went on tour. The great

³ Donaldson, pp. 103-22, 132-5.

⁴ Gurr, p. 269. Pembroke’s Men also performed Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II*.

⁵ Gurr, p. 271.

⁶ Gurr, p. 271; Ackroyd, pp. 176-7.

⁷ Shakespeare, *2 Henry VI*, pp. 434-7; *3 Henry VI*, pp. 410-20.

⁸ Honan, p. 170.

size of the travelling company, coupled with the perennial pressure caused by the plague, led to their break-up during August 1593. Shakespeare's later history plays generally had rather less unwieldy numbers of parts and companies would learn the expedience of travelling light.

When we read the entry in the King's Lynn Hall book 6 (KL/C7/8, fol. 35v) 'Item bestowed vpon the erle of pembrookes players xx s [20 shillings]' for the year of office running 1592-93, we can therefore make a strong claim that Shakespeare was among their number. The exact timing of Shakespeare's visit is hard to pinpoint exactly. We can rule out the period around the turn of the year when the company performed at court. We might conjecture based on the Greene anecdote, the projected dates of the *Henry VI* plays, and the known dates of the company's appearances in other parts of the country that Shakespeare and Pembroke's Men were here in the summer or autumn of 1592.

We know from a reference dating from September 1594 that plays were performed in both Trinity and St George's Guildhalls. The connection to St George's Guildhall – and thus the modern Arts Centre – can be made on the basis of the hall's long-standing and consistently, if patchily documented, history as a performance space. Given that Trinity was regularly used as the centre of Lynn's local government, St George's would seem to offer a better (bigger?) regular performance space once the town corporation took over the building in 1545. It could also be argued that the St George's Guild (and its hall) already had more established traditions of civic entertainments and performance, judging from the records in local accounts (from 1513-20) to payments for collars with dragon's heads, which suggest that some form of St George play/ pageant would have been performed annually – as it was in Norwich.

When assembling both the bigger picture or local details of Shakespeare's biography one does so always using the language of 'maybes' and 'possibly's'. For example, we do not know for certain that Shakespeare was born on 23 April. His baptism record is dated 26 April and it was usual for newborn infants to be christened within 2-3 days of their birth; hence the 23rd. Fitting the nation's most famous playwright to the day of the nation's patron saint and, with ironic symmetry, to the known date of his death, is an historical contrivance that combines archival data with informed, though interpretative, supposition. With a similar methodology in mind, using a triangulation of different types of known sources, we can make the case for placing the playwright from Stratford, who *may* have been born on St George's day, at the site of St George's Guildhall – now King's Lynn Arts Centre – in, as I have proposed, the summer or autumn of 1592.

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