

AN EARLY STAGE AT QUEENS'

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The archives of the Old Library of Queens' College contain a curious and interesting document. It was misleadingly labelled 'Library Accounts' when re-bound in the early nineteenth century, and perhaps for that reason ('library accounts' do not promise to make very gripping reading) it escaped scholarly attention until comparatively recently. But alongside my predecessors' careful notes of how much they paid for theological commentaries and legal textbooks in the late seventeenth century are many other entries: details of Fellows' rooms allocations, with a sketch-plan of the College in the late 1620s attached; check-lists of the College plate; catalogues of furniture in the President's Lodge. The volume is in fact a register of inventories, and on its very last pages is to be found the most remarkable of these, labelled simply 'The Colledge stage. Feb: 18. 1639' (February 1640 according to our reckoning). It is a list of several hundred separate pieces of timber which could be fitted together to form a complete theatre (with a stage, multiple spectator galleries, and 'tyring-houses' or dressing-rooms) in the College's dining hall. In fact, it is more than a list: it is a detailed set of assembly-instructions, so devised that succeeding generations would be able to assemble the theatre from scratch, even if there was no one in the College who had seen it done before. What it describes is in effect a 'construction by numbers kit', with not only the identities of the different pieces, but also their precise interconnections carefully distinguished by special signs and colours. An extract from the

document's opening paragraphs will give a flavour of the thing:

The Scaffold at the upper end of the hall, about the stage markd all wth red paint.

Upright studs in the first face of the scaffold 4.

The first marked on the East side wth P the second A the third B the fourth + these three last being all markd on their South side.

Girts [beams] in those studs 3 first from P to goe into A at this ≈: the second from A to joyne wth B in this marke ⊖ the third fastend to B at this Mark ≡ is to goe into the East Wall.

Two Railes ouer these, first δ, second ∟o.

The Second face of the Scaffold.

5. Upright studs.

First h second A third h fourth B fifth h
2 2

And so on, with descriptions of how the 'Jeece' (an obsolete plural of 'joist') in the second gallery were marked with consecutive numbers 'in their extreme ends'; how a 'Raile' should be fitted right across the Hall, 'reaching from black B to white B'; how the West Tying house 'hath euery thing answerable to the East, & is marked wth a light Russett paint in euery parcell as the East is wth black'; and how 'onely Matted formes' were to be provided in the first gallery (as distinct, presumably, from more comfortable chairs in the Fellows' gallery).

What can we deduce about the actual dimensions and layout of this elaborate construction? And what might we learn from it about the early history of drama in the University – or, indeed, about the early history of the English stage in general? The Queens' manuscript does not give the physical dimensions of the components which it lists. There was no need to do so, since, as we have seen, each piece was sufficiently identified by special markings. But since it filled the Hall, and the Hall today is structurally almost unchanged since 1640 (except for the addition of a new gallery and screens in the 1730s), we can attempt a very detailed reconstruction with some confidence. The 'auditorium' consisted of four galleries: there were double galleries along the sides of the Hall; a gallery which may have been either single or double set against the screens at the lower end; and an impressive triple gallery, with raked seating, set up *behind* the stage, built above or replacing the High Table. (This last fact is particularly

noteworthy: it confirms what scholars have been arguing for some time, namely that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were writing for something closer to theatre 'in the round' than to anything whose perspectives resembled the modern proscenium arch stage, and that we must therefore imagine Hamlet (say) delivering his soliloquy, not across the footlights but to a *circle* of spectators). At some point in the theatre's working life two 'Additions' were constructed at this end of the auditorium – small galleries built between the back gallery and the two tiring houses, which stood at either end of the stage itself. These galleries and the back gallery were probably reserved for the Fellows and their guests.

The floor of Queens' Hall measures 44 feet by 27 feet. Professor Alan Nelson and I have calculated that the back gallery would have been about nine feet deep, the side galleries about six feet deep, and the screens gallery either three or six feet deep, depending on whether it was single or double. If we guess that the tiring houses were about eight feet long, and that there was a gap between them and the back gallery, and further assume that the stage itself ran the full available width of the Hall between the tiring houses, then we have a bare space in front of the stage (either for 'standing room only', or filled with benches left over from the normal dinner servings) measuring fifteen feet by eighteen, and a stage platform approximately fifteen feet wide by eleven deep. 'Slope-boards' were placed on each side of the stage, and we can assume that the players made entrances and exits on them. Vertical dimensions are harder to get a bearing on, but we calculate that the stage platform would have been between three and five feet above the ground.

Suppose then that we had entered the Hall of Queens' College through the doors in the southern screens just before the start of a performance. What would we have seen? A hall filled to overflowing with spectators, with galleries mounting perilously towards the roof on all sides. In front of us, a bare stage platform, except perhaps that 'houses' might have been erected on either side, or else represented by the curtained tiring-houses. If we had paid our visit in 1551, our eyes would have been drawn upwards to a mechanical contraption called a 'heavens' suspended from the roof timbers, for the College accounts of that year list the following items:

In primis Ioanni pople p[ro] opera tridui in fabrica[n]do
le frame p[ro] coelo ante ludos

Item famulo kyng p[ro] opera totidem dieru[m] in
eade[m] machina exedificanda

But at this point in my account the reader will pause. In 1551? Have I not been describing a theatre of 1640, nearly a century later? Here we come to the most interesting, teasing and potentially important aspect of the matter. One of the reasons why scholars have paid surprisingly little attention to the Queens' inventory is no doubt that it is very late, in terms of the history of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, being written only just before the Puritans closed the theatres for good, in 1642. But that fact alone should make us hesitate. Even the most stage-struck bursar was hardly likely to authorise major expenditure on a theatre in 1640. The academic drama was now in decline, perhaps partly as a result of increasing hostility from the Puritans (the Queens' plays which survive from this period contain vigorous rebuttals of Puritan criticisms)². By the 1630s, only Trinity and Queens' remained active, and even their performances were sporadic. Charles I had expressed disapproval of the anti-clerical comedy which Queens' had put on for him in 1632, and the row caused by the performance was so acrimonious that it seems to have contributed directly to the suicide of the Vice-Chancellor himself. There were no more plays in Queens' for six years and then, in 1638, the last known performance was staged. After that the curtain fell for over three hundred years, until one of the present Fellows refounded the College dramatic society during the Second World War.

I suggest that a Governing Body in this situation, perceiving that large-scale productions would now be infrequent, might well decide that it was time to put their theatre into semi-retirement. They therefore instruct the College staff that its components should be carefully numbered and coloured, and that a construction-manual should be drawn up, and then store it away in the 'Stage-house' which they had built for it in 1638³. (In the meantime, if the young men want to perform plays, they can do so on a more modest scale in the 'Acting-chamber' overlooking Small Bridges Street – now Silver Street – which had been set aside for that purpose in the mid-1620s). The entire Fellowship was expelled by the Earl of Manchester six years later, and I imagine the Parliamentary nominees who replaced them arranging a rather spectacular bonfire very shortly afterwards.

If this account is roughly correct, what we have here is therefore not an inventory of a theatre which had just been constructed, but of one which had been in existence for some time. Indeed, even if I am wide of the mark, the reader will recall that we know for certain that it was not brand-new in 1640, since the inventory itself describes

'additions'. Suppose that it had been in existence for many years – say, since the middle of the previous century, when College drama was in its heyday rather than in its final decline? Is there any evidence of stage performances in the Queens' Hall at that time?

There is indeed. In the middle of the sixteenth century, dramatic performances in Hall played such an important role in the College's life – both as entertainment and as a mode of instruction – that the Statutes of 1559 actually specify that the Professor of Greek should put on, between 20 December and Ash-Wednesday (for these were essentially winter activities, growing out of the old Christmas festivities), 'in Aula Collegii duas Comoedias sive Tragoedias' and be paid 6s.8d. for his trouble, while Scholars who refused to perform would be punished by the President⁴. And what we have here is only the formal recognition of – or perhaps the re-assertion of the dons' control over activities which are already long-established: as early as 1522, one Richard Robyns is paid 'pro labore suo qu[ando] agebat[u]r comedia plauti' (for his work when a comedy of the Roman dramatist Plautus was put on), and the entries make it clear that this is payment for the erection of some kind of *structure*, since 'teynter nayles' will be required. Nevertheless, the amounts spent are small, and what Robyns was building was probably something lightweight. In the 1540s, however, the bursar's clerk is kept busy recording a positive of wave of expenditure on staging. On 18 February 1541, John Dowse the carpenter and two of his workers are paid for five days' labour erecting the 'scene' (i.e. stage) for the comedies. Five years later, the same man and his son are paid for more extensive work – both 'p[ro] confectiōne le stage' and 'p[ro] demolitiōne le stage' – and others are paid for carrying boards from St John's and from Corpus, as if the Queens' stage is still being built 'from scratch' each year, and perhaps using borrowed materials. But in 1548 a much more ambitious and durable project seems to be under way. From 12 February, John Frost worked for four days on the 'scene' and the theatre, while Christopher Whyrte worked for one day 'ad theatrum'. On 17 February, the College paid out the sum of 15s.4d. for 'tricenta et d. assiu[m]' – 350 boards – 'ad le skrene [i.e. the Hall screens] et ad theatrum'. The College is now *purchasing* timber rather than borrowing it, and my guess is that something large-scale is beginning to take shape: on 19 February Dowse and son are back, and have put in eight days' work 'apud le skaene et theatrum'. On 10 March, John Frost and Thomas Barber are paid for six days' work 'circa theatru[m] in aula'. The bursar meanwhile

continues to expend fairly sizeable sums on timber, paying six shillings, for example, for the transport of three cartloads 'a bumstede p[ro] teatro' – from Bumstead for the theatre.

Queens' continued to be one of the most theatrically active Colleges (as it still is) throughout the remaining half of the sixteenth century. Sometimes, no doubt, (as it also still is) it was a little *too* active for the taste of the dons: in February 1595 the College had to find the very considerable sum of 45 shillings 'for repairing the hall windowes after the plaies' (whether because they had been broken when the buttresses for the theatre were nailed into them, or as a result of one of the frequent riots by undergraduates who had not been able to get in, we can only guess). But after 1548 there were no more large payments for theatre-construction, and it therefore seems a reasonable assumption that, from this date on, only fairly small expenditures on repairs, replacements and 'additions' were required. Unless some major new evidence should come to light, it does not seem likely that we shall ever be able to establish more than a *probability* that the construction described in the 1640 inventory was more or less continuous with the 'theatrum in aula' of 1548, but I suggest that the probability is high, especially when we also take into account the fact that the inventory describes exactly the kind of structure which one would expect to find in a mid-sixteenth century College making the transition from the medieval practice of presenting entertainments in front of the High Table to a custom-built auditorium. The Queens' stage was of a markedly old-fashioned kind by the standards of the mid-*seventeenth* century.

Here I come, finally, to the question of where this intriguing little jigsaw puzzle fits into the larger jigsaw of the early history of the English stage. Does this small College theatre, in so far as we can reconstruct it, have more than a local interest? It certainly does. For although T. S. Eliot was exaggerating just a little when he wrote that 'the play remains, but the Elizabethan theatre is gone for ever; we know as little about it as we do about stained glass work', and although a good deal of research has been done since, it remains the case that we really know very little indeed about how Elizabethan and Jacobean plays were actually staged. De Witt's quick sketch of the Swan Theatre, *circa* 1596; one or two brief comments by other contemporary eye-witnesses; the somewhat ambiguous evidence that is yielded by the surviving plays themselves: there is very little else. In this situation, every shred of evidence is important, and what we have in the case of the Queens' theatre is not a shred but a veritable

catalogue. If it does date, substantially, from the mid-sixteenth century, and if there is a significant degree of continuity between its structure and proportions and those of the professional theatres which were built in London from the mid-1570s, then it is a very important piece of the jigsaw indeed and could teach us a good deal about the actual physical conditions which Shakespeare and his contemporaries had in mind when they wrote their plays. It could, for example, deal a decisive blow to the theory that the new theatres were modelled on the structures of existing inn-yards or bear-baiting pits since it provides an immediately relevant model much closer to hand. Take the Queens' theatre, pull it out on all sides to cope with a large London audience, and fit it into a purpose-built permanent building, and you have something very like modern scholars' ideas of what the Globe was like, or De Witt's sketch of the Swan. It could similarly cast doubt on the rather fashionable alternative theory that admits the role of dining halls in the evolution of the Elizabethan theatre, but holds that the twin arches that are visible at the back of the stage in De Witt's sketch are developments of the twin arches characteristic of the screens at the lower ends of College halls. The Queens' evidence (and supporting evidence from Oxford has recently come to light) makes it clear beyond doubt that College plays were usually staged, as one would expect, at the *upper* end of the Hall, with the dons having a privileged private entrance from the Master's lodgings or the Senior Common Room, while the *hoi polloi* came in through the screens.

Why *should* there have been important continuity between the small, specialised academic stages and the London theatres? It seems to me that the most important aspect of the Queens' inventory and the associated bursarial accounts is that they lend strong support to the argument that the academic drama *did* play an important - perhaps even a crucial - role in determining the development of the mainstream of English drama, not just because the physical staging of the College plays evidently influenced later stages, but because the Queens' records show what a vital, vigorous and large-scale enterprise University drama must have been. We already know that its fame spread far beyond the College cloisters. Great noblemen and foreign dignitaries (the Earl of Essex and the French Ambassador, in the case of Queens') would be brought on special trips to the Colleges to see the plays. When a royal visit, or 'Progress', was made to either University a dramatic performance was one of the highlights: Elizabeth viewed plays at Cambridge in 1564 and Oxford in 1566,

with King's Chapel and the Hall of Christ Church being specially converted into theatres for the respective occasions. (It even seems possible that the Hall of Trinity College, Cambridge takes the form it does because it was specifically designed so that it could be converted into a theatre). Visitors often commented on the skill and sophistication of the College plays: one wrote in the 1560s that they were executed "with so much elegance, such graceful action, and such command of voice, countenance, and gesture, that if Plautus, Terence, or Seneca were to come to life again, they would be better pleased with them than when they were performed before the people of Rome; and Euripides, Sophocles, and Aristophanes would be disgusted at the performance of their own citizens."

What the Queens' records strikingly demonstrate is that these performances were not only skilled and sophisticated, but very expensive and elaborate, and that they constituted a major event of the College year even when distinguished visitors were not present. If Queens' College not only required its Fellows and Scholars by Statute to perform the plays; if it not only purchased a set of theatrical costumes so lavish and expensive that they were kept under lock and key in the strong-room in the gate-tower and signed in and out by Fellows as carefully and in the same ledger as the College plate⁵; if the College not only put up with near-riots in its front court and large numbers of broken windows; if it not only disrupted its dining arrangements and allowed the central part of the College (immediately adjacent to the President's private lodgings) to be taken over, first by carpenters and decorators and then by musicians and actors, for a fortnight or so, but also constructed an entire dismountable theatre so large and complex that it filled the Hall and later required a sizeable purpose-built outhouse to store it – if a College like Queens' was willing to do all this, then the academic drama must have been a very lively enterprise indeed, in the years just before and during the boom in the metropolitan theatre. What could be more plausible than the argument that, like the Footlights and the A.D.C. at a later date, the academic theatre was a main nursery for the West End (or South Bank) and that the 'University Wits' – Marlowe, Peele, Greene, Nashe and Lyly are the names that have survived – formed their fundamental ideas of stage space and actor/audience interaction in the College dining halls? It is pleasant to think of the young Christopher Marlowe walking the hundred yards between Corpus and Queens' in 1582 or 1583; fighting his way in through the ruck; settling down on one of the hard matted benches

and, with his translation of Ovid already half finished and the 'high astounding terms' of *Tamburlaine* beginning to echo in his head, making mental notes for a play on a classical theme, as he watched the Queens' dons and undergraduates making the rafters ring with their enthusiastic declamations of Seneca in their celebrated *theatrum in aula*.

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Notes

1. This article is based on research currently being undertaken by Professor Alan Nelson of the University of California and myself. Parts of the argument have already been rehearsed to a meeting of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society and in a paper by Professor Nelson on 'Hall Screens and Elizabethan Playhouses'.

2. See for example Robert Ward's *Fucus Histriomastix* of 1622–23 or William Johnson's *Valetudinarium* of 1637–38.

3. The only scholar who has recently investigated aspects of early Queens' staging assumes that this building (which was built opposite the main gate of the College, where the Master's Lodge of St Catharine's now stands) was actually a theatre, but this seems to Professor Nelson and myself evidently erroneous. Etymologically, the word 'stage-house' would surely mean a house (or store) for a stage. The College would have had no reason to build a special theatre at a time when it owned an elaborate dismountable one, and when academic drama was almost dead. In any case, the details of building materials used in its construction enable us to estimate that it would have been about 660 square feet in area – the dimensions of a large shed. This building survived the Interregnum but was derelict by the end of the century, and in 1696 two men were paid for 'pulling downe the Old House'. (See D. F. McKenzie, 'A Cambridge Playhouse of 1638', *Renaissance Drama* 3 (1970)).

4. The Queens' Statutes explicitly state that the performances had an educational purpose: they were to be staged 'Et ne iuventus nostra... pronunciando ac gestu rudis et inurbana maneat' (in order that our young men may not remain unpractised and unpolished in pronunciation and deportment). This is in line with humanist doctrine, which often stressed the educational value of performing plays in the classical languages. If we are looking for an explanation of why Queens' was one of the most theatrically active colleges in this period, we should remember that its early sixteenth century *alumni* included not only Erasmus himself, but the great humanist scholar John Fisher (who is known to have been a playwright) and Sir Thomas Smith. I have a hunch that Smith (whose memory is still annually toasted by the Fellows of Queens' at their Smith Feast) may have played a crucial role in the story which I have been attempting to reconstruct. Can it be mere coincidence that, in the same decade in which the Queens' Statutes required students to improve their pronunciation of the classical languages by performing plays, Sir Thomas was fighting a controversial campaign in the University to reform the pronunciation of Greek? He was a Fellow

from 1530 until 1547, and was Vice-president at the time when the project for the new theatre was conceived.

Compare the Queens' Statute with Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* of 1612:

In the time of my residence in *Cambridge*, I haue seene Tragedyes, Comedyes, Historyes, Pastorals and Shewes, publickly acted, in which the Graduates of good place and reputation haue bene specially parted: this is held necessary for the emboldening of their *Junior* schollers, to arme them with audacity, against they come to bee employed in any publicke exercise, as in the reading of the *Dialecticke*, *Rhetoricke*, *Ethicke*, *Mathematick*, the *Physicke*, or *Metaphysicke* Lectures. It teacheth audacity to the bashfull Grammarian, beeing newly admitted into the priuate Colledge, and after matriculated and entred as a member of the Vniuersity, and makes him a bold Sophister.

5. In 1546, for instance, among the 'Players garme[n]tes brought vp [to the] tower, postridie purificat', were 'A yelow coten cote my[n]gled wt paynted lynyn garded wt fushan of Nap.', 'A little bukram boyes cote red & grene', and 'devils cote deathes cote blak slops deathes face devils face'. Ten years later the bursar, John May, who brought out a tragedy in 1554, wrote:

Md that I Iohn mey haue borroed out of the tower these pa[r]cels of playi[n]ge gere folowyng -

Apollos coote, wt the hooode & the cappe -

Thrasos coote. The prologes goune -

ij cassokes of white satten - ...

Itm a white fether

Itm one mace

I a angels coote wt wynges to the same. A here for a women of yelow sylcke [.] phanum veneris [a Temple of Venus].

Such entries provide the main clues as to what kinds plays were put on. Thraso, for example, is a character in Terence's *Eunuchus*. The bursar of 1548 records the borrowing of 'hanno penus payntyd cote' (Hanno Poenus is a character in Plautus's *Poenulus*), while the 1546 entry has a special list of 'New made Garmentes at the Comodia of Laelia Modenas'.