

# THE KING'S PLAYER AND HIS ROYAL PATRON



Hamlet and the Players.

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Mrs. D.P. Bowers as Lady Macbeth.

Come you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts,  
Unsex me here!  
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## What James I. Did to Encourage the Drama---Shakespeare His Chief Playwright

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JUST behind the heralds and the gentlemen of the chamber, in the coronation procession from the Tower to Whitehall after King James's accession to the English throne in 1603 walked William Shakespeare, chief among his Majesty's servants, the King's Company of Players, clad in a splendid red uniform provided for the occasion. By a shift of fortunes in no wise remarkable, his Royal Majesty must now be content to appear as a subordinate though not uninteresting figure in the train of his loyal subject.

To reconstruct the environment in which Shakespeare lived—his theatre, his audience, his personal life, and the London life of the time—is one of the ways by which we may pay tribute to the poet and at the same time come to a better appreciation of his work. Important elements in this environment, and elements that have perhaps received less attention than they deserve, are the Court before whom his plays were produced, and the monarch who was his royal patron. In days when Kings were hedged about by more divinity than now, the character and tastes of royalty, reflected by the nobility and Court society, had a good deal to do with changes in literary fashions and the general temper of the age. The drama in particular stood in the shadow of the Court. A large part of its revenue—in plague years its only revenue—was derived from Court performances; and it relied on royal protection in its frequent quarrels with municipal authority. Shakespeare wrote for his audience; and it is not too much to assume that the Court and the King had something to do with the character of his plays.

"The wisest fool in Christendom," that succinct and pungent epithet applied by Henry of France, has stuck in popular memory as an apt characterization of the sovereign who ruled over England during the last thirteen years of Shakespeare's life. So, too, the good Whig Macaulay's striking caricature of a slobbering, trembling, witch-baiting, cowardly pedant, has colored—or discolored—our modern conception of the first of the English Stuarts, in spite of the soberer and more kindly judgments of such historians as von Ranke, Gardiner, Spedding, and Andrew Lang. The truth is that Macaulay, and Scott, also, in his "Fortunes of Nigel," took their evidence unquestioningly from those "capewitted" writers, as a contemporary called them, who in the days of James and Charles fed the ears of credulous Puritans with the dregs of Court scandal.

It is hard to believe that a King so fond of reckless riding that on one occasion he was thrown head first from his horse through the ice of the frozen Thames, was altogether a coward, even though he objected to naked swords about his Court; or that the monarch who proposed the method and supervised the translation of our modern version of the Scriptures, and who was so ardent a devotee of poetry and patron of the drama, was altogether the dull pedant Macaulay would have us believe. Many of his own verses, intimately personal in character, have come to light only recently; and, whatever their intrinsic merit, they show his character in a more favorable aspect. The son of Mary Queen of Scots had indeed some of the intelligence and wit, if little of the dignity, of his royal line; and most of his faults may be traced to the love of pleasure and lack of self-control which were common Stuart failings.

It was at least with a well-justified hope of a more regard to the present condition of our writings in respect of our sovereign's happy inclination that way, that poets lifted up their voices in mingled grief and rejoicing at the change from Elizabeth to James. "Sorrow's Joys and Mournful Ditties to a Pleasant New Note" greeted the King on his leisurely progress

across the border. Fully to have gratified the hopes of these poets the royal revenues must needs have exceeded the bounds of their imaginations. But it seems clear that James, with his characteristic recklessness in money matters, and after the "patterns of virtuous Princes" he had studied in boyhood, seriously intended taking the arts and letters under his protection.

In this respect he could find no difficulty in surpassing the generosity of his predecessor. While Elizabeth's person and career stirred her subjects to high poetic enthusiasm, she gave literature little more substantial encouragement. The patronage which during her reign came chiefly from gentlemen scholars such as Sidney and Essex, or from noble ladies such as Sidney's sister, the Countess of Pembroke, was under James supplemented and in large measure supplanted by the direct support of the Crown. All the companies of players were attached to members of the royal family. Shakespeare's position as chief dramatist of the King's company of players, Bacon's political promotion, the poet John Donne's preferment in the Church by the King's influence, Ben Jonson's services as Poet Laureate and masque-maker, all illustrate the close relations between the Court and the chief literary figures of the time.

The effect of these relations forms an interesting subject for study. While the first ten years of James's reign, 1603-13, mark the culmination of the Elizabethan drama, the last twelve, 1613-25, saw the beginning of its decline. The cause of this decline—so far, indeed, as it is possible or necessary to explain why a great outburst of literary activity should not continue indefinitely—may be found in the clash between the drama and the growing reformatory spirit of the age, a clash in which the drama, as a matter of self-preservation, allied itself with the Court, or Anti-Puritan party.

In this struggle even Shakespeare, most discreet and nonpartisan of writers, leaves little doubt as to the direction of his sympathies. "Dost thou think," asks stout Sir Toby Belch of the Puritan Malvolio, "that because thou art virtuous we shall have no more cakes and ale?" The clown in "All's Well That Ends Well," written not long after 1603, levels his shafts at both "young Charbon the Puritan and old Poysam the Papist" in a manner that must have pleased a King who had learned by bitter experience that Presbyterian Kirk Assemblies could threaten his sovereignty quite as dangerously as Papal bulls and legates. The theme of "Measure for Measure," another play of the same period, is the downfall of a straitlaced and hypocritical censor of morals.

However justified this choice of sides, it is quite true that the Jacobean drama was weakened by its more complete subservience to the tastes of the Court. On the other hand, to assert that these tastes were conspicuously lower than in the days of "good Queen Bess," or that King James himself was, to quote Professor Courthope, "no genuine lover of the drama," is to indulge in unwarranted conjecture. The King was devoted to the drama long before his coming to England; and throughout his life his pleasure in theatrical entertainment seems to have been second only to his delight in hunting and dialectic.

Regarding the King's early fondness for one form of such entertainment, the Court masque, which reached its highest development in the course of his reign and to which, incidentally, may be attributed the increasing element of spectacle and fantasy in Shakespeare's later plays, the best of evidence is furnished by a curious entertainment which he himself composed in 1588 for the marriage of his ward, the daughter of the first Duke of Lennox, and the Earl of Huntly. The piece, first published in this century and only recently connected with the marriage it celebrates, is crude enough, and remarkable chiefly as the sole extant example of its type in Scottish literature; but it mingles disguise, dialogue, gorgeous "shows," comic by-play, and classical mythology quite after the fashion of French Hymeneé and English "maskings" at feasts and royal progresses. Though there is no indication of dancing or music, the component elements are otherwise much the same as those of the more elaborate shows of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones, at which one may easily conceive the King as an appreciative



Helena Modjeska as Isabella.

in Measure for Measure.  
When you have vowed,  
You must not  
speak with  
men.



Fanny Kemble

as Isabella.

To whom should I complain? Did I tell this,  
Who would believe me?  
Collection of William P. Harvey.

spectator, capable of enjoying not only the laborious erudition of their pieces but also their finer artistic and poetic qualities.

In this connection it is interesting to recall the theory that Shakespeare's "Tempest," where masque and drama are charmingly commingled, was also written for performance at a Court wedding, possibly that of the King's daughter Elizabeth and the Elector-Palatine of Heidelberg, the date of which was originally set for November, 1612, but postponed to the following February on account of the death of the heir apparent, Prince Henry. Whether so intended or not, the play contains many passages which may be plausibly taken as flattering allusions to King James. The King himself, at least, would have discovered a striking resemblance to his own character in that of the wise and peace-loving Prospero, without a parallel in the liberal arts, so rapt in studies that he grew a stranger to the State.

To return to the King's early experiments, he had a hand also in devising the games and shows at the baptism of his eldest child, Prince Henry, in August of 1594. Iris, Juno, and Ceres appeared here, as in "The Tempest"; but the chief feature was an allegorical representation of the favor shown by the gods during his voyage to Denmark to bring home his Queen and in the happy issue of their marriage. A movable ship appeared, eighteen feet long

and eight feet wide, with sails, ordnance, and rigging, and manned by Arion with his harp, Neptune, Thetis, and Triton, three sirens, six sailors, and fourteen musicians. The vessel approached the table, delivered the banquet, and departed to the singing of the 128th Psalm.

At a second banquet a chariot containing six allegorical ladies—Ceres, Fecundity, Faith, Concord, Liberty, and Perseverance—was to have been drawn in by a tame lion, but the experiment was given over, as the contemporary account tells us, "lest his presence might have brought some fear to the nearest." One is reminded of the lion whose roaring "might fright the Duchess and the ladies" in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the date of which falls in the same year.

Probably the King's first opportunity to see the regular drama, performed by professional actors, came during the preceding winter, (1592-93), when a company of English players visited Edinburgh and presented plays before the Court. Later visits, the records of payments for which are preserved in Edinburgh, occurred in 1594, 1599, and 1602. In each year the payments "to the Ingls comedians" indicate at least three or four Court performances. In 1598 an Englishman at St. Andrews "desyrt liberty to make an publick play"; and in 1601 the players went as far north as Aberdeen. In 1599 the

King got into a squabble with the Kirk Session of Edinburgh over an order they issued forbidding church members to attend the plays, in spite of the fact that the actors had already received the King's sanction and given warning by drums and trumpet of performances in "The Blackfriars Wynd." Ultimately the plays went forward. The incident is noteworthy chiefly as indicating the settled hostility of the Church, and, on the other hand, James's friendly attitude and eagerness to give the drama a foothold in his capital.

Lawrence Fletcher, who is mentioned as head of the company in Scotland, seems to have gained the King's special favor. In 1595 he heard that Fletcher had been hanged in England, and took the matter up with Roger Aston, the English envoy, saying "in merry words, not believing it, that if it were true he would hang him also." Fletcher was not at this time in Shakespeare's company of players, nor have we evidence that Shakespeare accompanied any of these troupes to Scotland. But when the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Company by royal patent of May 17, 1603, Fletcher's name appears first in the list of shareholders, followed by those of Shakespeare and Burbage. Either the King was responsible for this addition or the players themselves thought it expedient to join Fletcher to their fellow-ship.

Within a short time after the accession all the important London companies were taken, like the Lord Chamberlain's, under royal protection—the Lord Admiral's as the Prince's Players, the Earl of Worcester's as the Queen's, and the Children of the Chapel as the Queen's Children of the Revels. This not only established a royal monopoly of patronage but brought the drama more closely under the influence of the Court. Players became in a sense members of the respective royal households; if the King gave a play he would ordinarily call on his own company of actors.

Court performances were also more frequent than in the preceding reign. Without entering at all fully into this vexed question, made more difficult by the inaccuracies or forgeries of early investigators, one may gather from the accounts of the Master of the Revels and similar sources a good general idea of the extent and character of such performances. During ten years between 1603 and 1614 (there is a gap in the Revels accounts from 1614 to 1626), excluding the plague year 1609-10, the writer has figured that there were in all 227 Court performances, or an average of nearly twenty-three a year. Of these, 146 were given before the King and 149 by the King's Company. In 1605 there were twenty-two performances in all, eleven by the King's Company, and of these the following plays of Shakespeare: "Merchant of Venice" (twice), "Merry Wives of Windsor," "Measure for Measure," "Comedy of Errors," "Love's Labor's Lost," "Moor of Venice" ("Othello"), and "Henry V."

In 1612-13 we have from the Vertue MSS. a record of fourteen plays given before the Lady Elizabeth and the Prince Palatine, as follows: "Ptilaster, one other called

the Knot of Fooles, one much ado about nothing, The Maids Tragedy, The Merry Devil of Edminton, The Tempest, a King and no King, The Twins Tragedy, the Winters Tale, Sr John Falstaffe, the Moor of Venice, The Noblemen, Cassars Tragedy, and one other called Love lyses abeedings." "The Hot Spur" and "Benedicts and Beter's" were also given in this year. At least seven of these plays are Shakespeare's.

Court gaiety was at its height between Christmas and Twelfth Night. During this period, as the French Ambassador Boderie tells us, the Court gave itself over to "games, comedies, dancing, and good cheer." At the close the King left town for his "chase ordinaire."

As chief dramatist of the King's Company Shakespeare was thus undoubtedly brought often into personal intercourse with his sovereign. We have plenty of evidence of the King's friendly relations with Jonson, Donne, Bacon, Drummond, Sir William Alexander, and other contemporary poets. That we have so little in the case of Shakespeare is not surprising in view of the obscurity which hides so much of his personal life. It must be accounted for, perhaps, by assuming that the actor-dramatist was on a lower social plane.

We know, at least, that Shakespeare was too good a practical playwright to disregard his audience. His shifts from one type of play to another illustrate his skill in following changes of popular taste. Success at Court must have given plays something like the prestige of a Broadway run today. And we may be sure that if such success was of value Shakespeare was not the one to run willfully counter to royal taste.

In his later plays there are a number of passages, such as Macbeth's vision of Kings,

"That twofold balls and treble scepters carry," and the reference to "touching for the king's evil" in the same play, which must be taken as mildly flattering allusions to the King; and there are other characters and lines which reasonably offer a similar interpretation. Critics have found traces of an idealized James, not only in Prospero, already mentioned, but in the benignant Duke of "Measure for Measure," shunning the "foolish throng" but still maintaining a watchful eye over his city. So, too, the struggles of Coriolanus with the Roman Senate and Tribunes have been compared to the strife between James and his Parliament.

The settings of "Macbeth" and "Hamlet" must have been of especial interest to the Scottish King and the Danish Princess who shared his throne. In 1589 (the date, by the way, when we first hear of the old "Hamlet" play) James had crossed to Denmark to bring home his bride, and on account of the lateness of the season had spent the winter at Elsinore, "drinking and driving o'er" after the Danish custom of the time. The central situation of "Hamlet," also, bears a resemblance, which may have struck the author of the old "Hamlet," to the position in which James was placed by his mother's marriage with Bothwell, the suspected murderer of Darnley, though Shakespeare's Hamlet, scholar as he is, bears but a remote resemblance to the scholar King James. It has often been noted that Valdemar and Gertrude are good Danish names, and that two courtiers named Rosencrantz and Guildenstern actually accompanied Queen Anna to Scotland.

In "Macbeth" there is said to be little definiteness of local color. But the introduction of the Weird Sisters and other supernatural elements may have been suggested by the King's well-known interest in demonology. Though he had written a book on the subject, and put to death some 200 Scottish cronies for stirring up tempests to hinder his return from Denmark, he became skeptical as he grew older, and less inclined to encourage the Puritans in their favorite pursuit of witch-hunting.

In general there is found in Shakespeare's plays little or none of the abject flattery too often conspicuous in literature likely to reach royal ears. Such influence as may appear is of a more general character, arising from the dramatist's intimate relations with the Court, and his sympathy, based both on practical interest and natural tendency, with the opinions and policies of his royal patron. From a negative point of view, it may be said at least that one will search his plays in vain for lines that would have given offense to a monarch, even to one who, in his own age, was probably the most ardent expounder and exponent of the divine right of Kings.

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