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The Closure of the Playhouses in 1642

On 6th September 1642 the theatres were closed by Parliament as Civil War broke out. As this date marks the end of the period of Shakespearean London drama (as the Restoration stage from 1660 was a very different type of theatre) it would be worth the V&A pointing this out in any future exhibition of their early modern print collection. This can be linked to the titlepage below, a printed text that marked the execution of Charles I, an incident that ended the Civil War in Britain. Likewise, the V&A has a copy of the Beaumont and Fletcher folio of 1647, a printed collected works that tells us that the publication of plays continued throughout the war.

The following text might be used as supplementary material about both the period and the issues mentioned above:

Actors were by definition the household servants of aristocratic or royal patrons and that all bar one took their masters' side in the English Civil War. The exception was Eyllaerdt Swanston, who is first heard of as an actor in the office book of Henry Herbert, the Master of the Revels from 1623. In 1622 Herbert recorded Swanston as one of the "chiefe of them at the Phoenix" (the Drury Lane indoor theatre, also known as 'the Cockpit', built by Christopher Beeston), meaning the Lady Elizabeth's Men. According to the same record (now lost and preserved only in notes made by Edmond Malone), Swanston joined the troupe at the Blackfriars – that is, the King's Men – in 1624. On 20 December 1624, Swanston and other members of the company signed an apology to Herbert for performing a play called *The*

Spanish Viceroy without his approval as Master of the Revels. For King James's funeral of 7 May 1625, each of the King's Men, Swanston included, was given four yards of black cloth so that they could accompany the coffin as members of his household. With James's death their licence as his players expired, so on 24 June 1625 his successor Charles I issued a fresh licence, naming Swanston as well as John Heminges and Henry Condell (the two men who signed the preliminaries of the 1623 Folio of Shakespeare), John Lowen, Joseph Taylor, Richard Robinson, Robert Benfield, John Shank, William Rowley, John Rice, George Birch, Richard Sharpe and Thomas Pollard.

We have a partial record of the roles Swanston performed. In his dialogue *Historia Histrionica* (that is, History of Drama) of 1699, James Wright recorded that Swanston played Shakespeare's Othello, and an early annotation in a 1634 quarto of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* seems to show him taking its title role. In 1654, Edmund Gayton in his *Pleasant Notes Upon Don Quixote* pictured an amateur impersonation of an emperor and remarked that "[Joseph] Taylor acting Arbaces, or Swanston D'Amboys, were shadowes to him"; this presumably refers either to the eponymous hero of George Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* or his brother Clermont D'Ambois who (finally) avenges his death in the sequel *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*. Other role assignments are more speculative. Swanston was already a sharer in the Blackfriars playhouse when, in 1635, he and the actors Robert Benfield and Thomas Pollard took out a law suit against the actor John Shank and others arguing that they should be allowed to buy shares in the Blackfriars and Globe playhouses. After listing the services in the royal army done by the leading actors, Wright's character Truman says "I have not heard of one of these Players of any Note that sided with the other Party, but only Swanston, and he profest himself a Presbyterian, took up the Trade of a Jeweller, and liv'd in Aldermanbury, within the Territory of Father Calamy". The last named is Edmund Calamy

the Elder, the Presbyterian curate of St Mary Aldermanbury and a notable Puritan advocate of war against King Charles.

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

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

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

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

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

Shirley's address shows that he was alert to the considerable irony that the suppression of public performance led to a glut of plays appearing in the much more durable and distributable form of printed anthologies. These plays were delights that were "only

shewd our Fathers in a conjuring glasse, as suddenly removed as presented” and were now in printed form made permanent so that “the Presse thought too pregnant before shall be now look’d upon as greatest / Benefactor to Englishmen”. To see why the closing of the theatres caused a flood of printed plays one has only to consider the point of view of the owners of play manuscripts: what else could they do with them but sell them to publishers, since there were no theatres to perform them in? As W. W. Greg noticed long ago, the Stationers’ Register after 1642 contains “whole batches of plays, mostly old ones, evidently made with a view to extensive publishing ventures consequent upon the closing of the theatres during the Civil War and under the Commonwealth”.

The Closure and the V&A Collection

The image below (courtesy of the V&A Museum) shows the Beaumont and Fletcher folio of 1647 mentioned in the text above. The second image shows *Eikon Basilike* from 1649, a printed text that emerged just after the execution of Charles I (also in the V&A collection).

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