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The Playhouse at St. Paul's

So far the ShaLT Collection Enhancement Reports have used the printed collections at the National Art Library (particularly the unique Dyce Collection) to highlight printed texts in terms of issues such as authorship and genre. However, bearing in mind that the key outreach goal of the AHRC funding for the project was to further public awareness about the actual theatre sites (The Theatre, Blackfriars, and so on) it seems highly appropriate for a series of reports to focus on the actual theatre spaces. Thus, this report highlights the playhouse for child actors at St. Paul's. Indeed, it is envisaged that the T&P Department at the V&A might be able to host a small exhibition of Dyce material in terms of the actual Shakespearean London Playhouses. With this in mind, this report and others that follow will each pick-out printed works at the V&A that link to certain theatre sites (usually because the early modern title pages often name the place of performance at the beginning). This topic should prove interesting to visitors to a potential exhibition because often the title page is the only evidence we have for the performance of a play at a certain location (for instance, nothing at all exists in print on a title page linking a play with the Newington Butts theatre south of the river).

The Playhouses for Child Actors at St Paul's (and the Blackfriars)

St Paul's was one of the two main sites for the boy-players in the 1570s and 1580s and again in the 1590s and 1600s. The location of the playhouse was the cathedral precinct, abutting the old church. There were two separate periods in which the boy choristers were performing plays publically in the upper storey almonry. Firstly, from 1575 to 1590 the boy actors performed plays under their master for elite audiences, frequently by their resident playwright John Lyly, and in competition with the nearby boys company at the nearby Blackfriars

theatre. From 1599 a second boy company was performing here, and again they were in direct competition with the Blackfriars boy company.

From the mid-1570s there were 'boy companies' performing plays, without any involvement of adult actors. These groups performed in the first indoor hall playhouse spaces, not in amphitheatres like the Theatre or Curtain. Boy company plays were performed from 1575 to 1590 at St Paul's, the playhouse occupying the Almoner's hall of the old cathedral, whilst the nearby Blackfriars indoor theatre staged plays from 1576 to 1584. The boy actors had to perform before Queen Elizabeth and her court, and so used public performance to effectively practise and hone their skills, which included both singing and acting (Paul's boys were primarily choristers).

Although the boy actors at St Paul's and Blackfriars were socially positioned very differently from the professional male acting companies, it is fair to assume that when Sebastian Westcott started the Paul's company in the 1570s, theatre was most certainly catching on in London. The boy actors were therefore able to participate in this activity for a number of years to paying audiences. Indeed, in 1582 Stephen Gosson felt able to remark in his *Playes Confuted in five Actions* that 'Cupid and Psyche [were] played at Paul's and a great many comedies more at the Blackfriars and in every playhouse in London.'

Professionally speaking, the boy actors of St Paul's and the Blackfriars may be compared to the adult companies of Burbage's Theatre and the nearby Curtain, since both kinds of playhouse were staging plays for the entertainment of fee-paying audiences. One the other hand, the indoor boy companies were putting on a rather different kind of drama. Their plays, including those by the leading writer John Lyly such as his 1584 *Sappho and Phao*, were often extremely learned, aiming themselves at the wealthy and influential playgoers of Elizabeth's court and at the nearby Inns of Court, since law students frequently took time out from their studies to take in a new play. In the 1570s, at least, there is nothing to suggest that

the boy actors were sharing plays or dramatists with the larger 'public' outdoor Theatre and Curtain playhouses, or the smaller playing spaces of the four inns. From very early on this new theatrical industry was able to branch out in a number of directions, to reach spectators belonging to different social orders.

From 1599 a second boy company was performing, again in competition with the Blackfriars, and introducing high quality plays by the likes of Ben Jonson, George Chapman and John Marston. For the next seven years the boy companies were therefore very much back in contention as players, bringing to the last years of Elizabeth's reign and the beginning of James's playing that was even more professional and successful than that seen in first generation of boy actors from the 1570s. These new indoor playhouses adopted a distinctly innovative style with new plays by new playwrights that included John Marston's *Antonio and Mellida*, and Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*. Soon the new boy companies became known for playing both challenging political satire and works that put sexualised innuendo into the mouths of the young players. These playhouses also put on the new plays of Ben Jonson, a rising star who would later become King James's leading poet at court. Jonson's own new brand of acerbic comedy had already been played by the Chamberlain's Men in the late 1590s with *Every Man in his Humour* and *Every Man out of his Humour.* This was before he brought his satiric wit before boy player audiences while at the same time continuing his success with adult companies, his *Volpone* being premiered at the Globe by the King's Men in 1606.

The boy companies were viewed as respectable, they played less frequently than the adult companies, and they also had little or no reputation for accompanying crowd trouble. It was largely owing to their status as children that the boy actors slipped under the radar in terms of the kind of dramatic satirical attacks the plays written for them were able to put before their audiences, some of them quite openly mocking the court of James (though Paul's

boys were less blameworthy in this respect than those of Blackfriars). Although the plays at the Blackfriars and St Paul's could be highly erotic and homoerotic in content, the boy players were seen as relatively harmless, and the kind of entertaining wit this produced allowed the normal dramatic boundaries to be extended.

But the boys were under pressure. Firstly, there was the issue of the 'pressing' of boy actors, the companies being criticized for literally forcing boys off the streets to become actors. Furthermore, controversial plays were put on that caused a stir at court and started attracting the serious ire of the censor Sir Edmund Tilney. For example, in 1605 the Blackfriars company was reprimanded for performing *Eastward Ho!*, an authorial collaboration by George Chapman, Ben Jonson and John Marston, which gave offence to the court because of its anti-Scottish sentiment. Then in 1606 John Day's *The Isle of Gulls* was seen as contentious for its use of political satire against the government. Sir Thomas Edmondes wrote that 'at this time there was much speech of a play in the Blackfriars where, in the Isle of Gulls, from the highest to the lowest, all men's parts were acted of two divers nations.' The boy players evidently found it easy to parody London's courtly newcomers by adopting Scottish accents. Eventually, things came to a head. Angered by the accumulation of political satires, James banned the boy companies at Blackfriars and St Paul's from further playing.

St Paul's and the V&A Collection

The image below (courtesy of the V&A Museum) is taken from one of the collection's title pages for a revenge tragedy by John Marston entitled *Antonio's Revenge*, acted by the children at St Paul's towards the end of the Elizabethan period. Although the collection houses many important play texts, this one is particularly important as we have very few surviving title pages that name the playhouse at St Paul's as the place of performance.

ANTONIOS REVENGE.

The Second Part of the Hiſtorie of ANTONIO and MELLIDA.

As it hath been ſundrytimes acted by the Children of *Pauls.*

Written by I. M.

LONDON,
Printed for WILLIAM SHEERES.
1633.