

## Professionalization of Acting in Shakespeare's England

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### Abstract

The Elizabethan common players had a humble beginning. The 1572 Act for the punishment of vagabonds classed masterless and unlicensed "fencers, bear-wards, common players in interludes and minstrels" etc. as rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars. Nevertheless, by the 1590s when Shakespeare started writing his major plays for the Chamberlain's Men, acting, at least what was done by the two officially licensed adult companies in London, was a bona fide occupation.

Although the word "profession" has been freely used to describe the job of Elizabethan common players, the appropriateness of this usage is not certain since the word can only be applied in its broadest sense. We therefore need to begin by examining the meanings of "profession" in the context of the early modern period. This examination is then followed by a look at the history of the emergence of commercial theatre in the early sixteenth century to see how the common players' professionalism evolved. Finally, concepts of profession will be used to discuss Shakespeare's treatments of players and play-acting in his dramatic works.

Shakespeare's representation of players' dependence on aristocratic patronage lags behind the reality of the commercial success of licensed companies. Yet, in suggesting players' unique license to change identities and create theatrical illusions, pointing out the skills required to create such illusions, and not to mention composing psychologically complex characters for lead actors of his company, Shakespeare affirms that acting was on its way to become a profession.

Professionalization involves division of labour and specialism in a society. The rise of the common players should be seen as part of the dynamics of occupational specialization in early modern England as a result of economic, social, and cultural changes of the times.

**Keywords:** acting, common player, profession, Shakespeare

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## 莎士比亞時代英國演員的專業化

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### 摘要

在十五到十六世紀之間，英國社會還無法承認演戲是一種可以和其他行業平起平坐的全職工作。然而，演員這一行背後有至少兩百年的娛樂表演歷史。英國戲劇在十六、十七世紀之交顯著地蓬勃發展；演員的社會地位也於此時開始提升。儘管因演戲而致富的仍是少數，但已證明演戲確實是一種可以謀生的工作，足以吸引新血加入。

演員社會地位提升的意義不僅僅在於生活條件的改善，更重要的在於演戲成為一項被認可的職業。而擺脫了與乞丐、流浪漢同類的命運之後，演員就和其他行業一樣，在現代化的過程中，要朝向專業化 (professionalization) 發展。各行各業專業化的過程和速度並不一致。演員專業化的進度也受到經濟、社會、文化等因素影響。本文所要探討的是，從中世紀到文藝復興時期，演員這一職業的社會意義如何因為諸多因素，如工作與休閒的新定義與市場經濟的發展，而產生重大改變。

莎士比亞劇本人物中的演員角色，多以依賴權貴贊助、巡迴流浪的形象出現，與莎士比亞劇團的實際運作情形很不相同。然而，莎士比亞經常在劇中傳達演戲乃是需要技術的行為，而演員則是有社會的默許，可以變換身分，扮演與自身完全不同的人物。莎劇一方面促使演員施展演技，也間接地為演員這個職業定義了其專業範圍，這是演戲走向專業化的重要發展。

**關鍵詞：**演戲、演員、專業、莎士比亞

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## Introduction

Elizabethan theatre is an undisputed success story in the narrative of Western theatre history. The development of the commercial theatre is narrated as an almost unstoppable progress. The protagonists are the enterprising theatre managers, skilful players, and talented playwrights (with Shakespeare towering above everyone else). The villains are the interfering civic authorities, puritans, and government censors. Navigating the dangerous waters of political and religious controversies and judiciously allying themselves with powerful patrons, the ever-resourceful theatre troupes managed to produce works that not only appealed to contemporary audiences but also fascinated later generations of theatre practitioners and literary scholars alike. Elizabethan theatre seems to demonstrate the virtue of a competitive commercial environment in fostering professionalism. The success story is so brilliant that it is sometimes considered a model for theatrical excellence.

Besides the achievements of Elizabethan dramatists, the rise of the common players is another familiar aspect of the golden age of English theatre, a rags-to-riches story. To emphasize the humble beginning of the players, historians often draw attention to the 1572 Act for the punishment of vagabonds, which classed masterless and unlicensed “fencers, bear-wards, common players in interludes and minstrels” as rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars. With the construction of permanent playhouses in London from 1576 on, so the story goes, players prospered to such a degree that in the early seventeenth century some of the most successful of them applied for or assumed coats of arms, symbols of the gentry. Though only a few players eventually became property owners, many more managed to support themselves and their families with earnings from performances in public places and private houses. Indeed, in the fifteenth century acting in interludes was becoming a financially viable occupation; and the players of interludes may be described as “professional actors” in the sense that they made a living from acting. Professional acting dominated Elizabethan theatrical scene in contrast to the mainly amateur-based medieval theatre.

As presenters of epoch-making dramas of Marlowe and Shakespeare, the Elizabethan common players are also seen as a new breed of performers, distinct from other entertainers, such as minstrels, mummers, dancers, and jugglers. The occupation of acting was so new, argues M. C. Bradbrook in *The Rise of the Common Player*, that the Elizabethan society initially had difficulty conceptualizing the social position of the actor: “Having no place in the scheme of things, he had no place in society” (40). Moreover, as Glynne Wickham remarks, “at no time during the fifteenth or the sixteenth century was society at large prepared to admit that acting should be recognized as a full-time occupation on a par with other crafts or professions” (188).

Nevertheless, by the 1590s when Shakespeare started writing his major plays for the Chamberlain's Men, acting, at least what was done by the two officially licensed adult companies in London, was a bona fide occupation. No longer social outcasts, members of the licensed troupes went about their business just as everyone else in other trades. They had come a long way since the days of travelling players. Yet, they did not have an organization to set standards of their work or define qualifications for entry into the occupation: Elizabethan common players were not only very different from modern professional actors who are trained in drama schools and have union membership; they were also different from their contemporaries whose work was regulated by guilds or professional bodies.

Since Shakespeare was himself an actor, his view on this profession should be of great interest to us. In *Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing*, Meredith Anne

Skura notes the rarity of professional actors in the *dramatis personae* in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama despite the profusion of metatheatrical devices in many plays. Even when a plot calls for professional actors, they tend to be seen in a great lord's house rather than on a public stage. Shakespeare's portrayal of professional actors cannot be more low-key:

Although his own experience lay primarily on the up-to-date public stage in London, Shakespeare's players all conform to the outdated antitheatricalist's image of the player as itinerant, a proud beggar living on alms. In a period when players were moving away from aristocratic patronage to commercial theater, Shakespeare accentuated the displacement and social inferiority implied by the former. (85)

Perhaps our imagination of the origin of Elizabethan common players has been strongly coloured by the wording "rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars" in the 1572 Act; studies of players' professionalization have tended to focus on the question of their social status. Yet, professionalization means more than a rising social status: it involves division of labour and specialism in a society. The rise of the common players should be seen as part of the dynamics of occupational specialization in early modern England as a result of economic, social, and cultural changes of the times.

Although the word "profession" has been freely used to describe the job of Elizabethan common players, the appropriateness of this usage is not certain since the word can only be applied in its broadest sense. We therefore need to begin by examining the meanings of "profession" in the context of the early modern period. This examination is then followed by a look at the history of the emergence of commercial theatre in the early sixteenth century to see how the common players' professionalism evolved. Finally, concepts of profession will be used to discuss Shakespeare's treatments of players and play-acting in his dramatic works.

### **Meanings of "Profession"**

Division of labour is one of the most fundamental social processes. And terminology of work becomes more varied as work itself becomes more specialized. In the sixteenth century a variety of words were used to refer to the colloquial term "job." In the opening scene of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, a Roman tribune halts some commoners on the street and reproaches them: "What, know you not, / Being mechanical, you ought not walk / Upon a labouring day without the sign / Of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou?" (1.1.2-5). In this example, "profession" and "trade" are used interchangeably. However, early modern people were aware of the hierarchy of jobs and of the nuances of synonyms. A Jacobean pamphleteer writing in 1616 remarked:

Now I cannot tell what I should call the study of law, whether I should term it to be a profession, a science, or an art; a trade, I cannot call it, yet there be some that do think it to be a craft. . . . But I think it may rather be called an occupation. (qtd. in Prest "Introduction" 13)

Apparently this pamphleteer could not decide easily the relative prestige of the study of law in occupational ranks. But he was sure that "trade" was low on the hierarchy, and that "profession" was high, with "occupation" in the middle. By the mid-seventeenth century anti-professional critics would use "professions" to refer to lawyers, clergy, and medical men, but not to tradesmen or artisans, and they could expect this distinction to be understood (O'Day 14).

It remains a fact that the word 'profession' in the English language has many contradictory denotations and connotations. In his *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalization of Formal Knowledge*, Eliot Freidson summarizes a semantic history

of “profession,” beginning with meanings of “declaration, avowal, or expression of intention or purpose” which originated in the practice of taking consecrated vows by the clergy of medieval universities. As early as the sixteenth century, the term was used to mean the three traditional learned professions of divinity, law, and medicine as well as, conversely, any occupation by which people could make a living. The related word “professional” and its antonym “amateur,” too, carry reversibly positive or negative connotations. In certain contexts, “professional” would suggest an ungentlemanly, profit-making motive for undertaking an activity, whereas a gentlemanly “amateur” is unconcerned with earning a living and therefore can pursue an activity just for the love of it. This opposition contrasts the landed classes’ economic independence with common people’s dependence on their own labour for any income. However, a “professional” job implies good quality of work, but an “amateurish” job is poorly done. For professionals can be seen as dedicated practitioners, cultivating special skills, so they deserve being paid for their work; amateurs, on the other hand, lack the same kind of dedication to refine their skills (21-24).

American sociologist E. C. Hughes uses license and mandate as the two key terms in his thoughts on the professions. He thinks of “license” as something much broader than the specific legal permission to carry out certain activities: “Society, by its nature, consists in part of both allowing and expecting some people to do things which other people are not allowed or expected to do.” Then, if members of an occupation have any sense of community, “they will also claim a *mandate* to define—not merely for themselves, but for others as well—proper conduct with respect to matters concerned in their work.” Furthermore, when practitioners of an occupation collectively “presume to tell society what is good and right for it in a broad and crucial aspect of life” and when society accepts that presumption, a profession in the full sense of the word comes into being (25-26). Modern medical and legal professionals, for instance, define the terms of our thinking on matters such as health and justice.

Harold Perkin defines a professional society as one “made up of career hierarchies of specialized occupations, selected by merit and based on trained expertise” (2). Professional society in this definition is a logical continuation of industrial society and did not come into being until after the First World War. Yet, the basis of the professional ideal, selection by merit and trained expertise, was already evident in early modern professions. The early modern English physicians and lawyers were beginning to claim expertise and monopoly based on their esoteric knowledge acquired at universities or, in the case of common lawyers, at the Inns of Court. Formal academic qualifications were what distinguished them from both laymen and lower-status practitioners. However, in terms of professional activities, the difference between qualified and unqualified practitioners was not absolute. Legal services were provided by not only the institutionally affiliated lawyers but also by a host of semi-professional or para-legal practitioners (Prest “Lawyers” 69). Medical care involved an even broader range of practitioners, from physicians, barber-surgeons, and apothecaries, to women practitioners, immigrant practitioners, midwives, clerics, and schoolmasters; in the countryside the cunning men and women would use ritual, magic, and prayer to treat patients (Pelling 101, 109). On the other hand, the professionals themselves did not always practice full-time but combined their professional work with other activities. In short, the world of the early modern professional and that of the layman still shared a lot of common ground.

If early modern concepts of profession were still fluid regarding legal and medical practices, they were doubly so concerning the theatrical profession. For one thing, Elizabethan common players did not have a monopoly on dramatic entertainment: amateur civic dramas were still produced in the mid-sixteenth century, and students of



grammar schools and universities were called on to perform plays before the monarch. Moreover, although common players obtained licenses to tour towns and aristocratic estates with their shows, they had to maintain the fiction that they were some noblemen's household servants rather than professional actors. There was no trade guild to set standards of performance practices, regulate members' conduct, or oversee newcomers' training. Therefore, it was not possible for the players to speak as a community; they claimed no *mandate* to define the nature of their work.

### Professionalization of Acting

One factor set the players' job apart from many other occupations: acting was so bound up with traditions of leisure that some religious people even had difficulty considering it "work". We may look at the professionalization of acting in sixteenth-century England in terms of a cluster of related concepts: work, occupation, leisure, and entertainment. For the common players, acting was work, a set of activities they did in exchange for money and/or other forms of reward. They worked when others were off work, giving the latter entertainment to while away some leisure hours. The professional actors came into being around the time when a new work ethic was introduced following the Reformation, and their place in the society was fairly established by the turn of the seventeenth century when the shift in the culture of entertainments in England became more and more conspicuous. In the controversies about the common players and their profession can be found competing visions of how people should organize their everyday life.

In his influential study on the relation of Protestantism to Capitalism, Max Weber observes how work was elevated by Protestants to be "a positive thing to be done well for the glory of God and the preservation of the individual's soul" (Anthony 42). Protestant ideology dignified work and taught believers to think of their work as a calling willed by God. This new ethic contrasts with not only the ancient Greek view of work as slavery, ideally to be avoided by cultured citizens, but also the medieval sense of necessity of working to ensure survival and to fulfil one's duty to the lord. In the premodern world a long work day of twelve or more hours was normal. Yet, "there could be little point in working harder or more productively because, as the market economy was rudimentary, there would be nothing to do with a surplus" (Anthony 30). The new discipline of work helped solve economic and social problems facing England around the seventeenth century. The ethos of diligent work pumped human resources into the economic life of the country to power a burgeoning market economy. At the same time, the work ethic stressed self-discipline and order, conducive to an orderly society.

Leisure, too, was redefined. As Protestant preachers praised the morality of work, leisure came to be seen as a trap that would endanger the human soul. Traditional leisure such as dancing, drinking, or gambling diverted people from serious work to sexual promiscuity and self-indulgence. Physical exercise was fine if it strengthened one's body for work, but sports might encourage the sin of vanity when a person became proud of his athletic expertise (Cross 27). There was also an economic argument against traditional leisure. In a predominantly agricultural society, the pace of peasant life was dictated by a rhythm of natural cycle, and a craftsman's work was paced by demand. Work stopped when the time of day or the weather did not allow it to continue. Religious or folk festivals also meant days off work. In general, the characteristic of preindustrial labour was "its preference for leisure over increased income." When the economic situation was favourable, artisans "often responded with working less and playing more rather than attempting to accumulate wealth" (Cross 13). Unless the population changed its mindset,

productivity could not rise. Protestant reformists managed to abolish many traditional holidays and saints' days and warned believers against idleness. However, the leisure ethic proved rather tenacious among the masses, even after the industrial revolution.

Where there is leisure time to spend, some form of entertainment would be needed. The Elizabethan common players, though lacking any fixed social status in the middle of the sixteenth century, had behind them a history of "at least two hundred years of scenic entertainment in English," "with their inheritance of traditional skill in mounting shows, singing, reciting" (Bradbrook 17). In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there were mystery plays as well as civic and royal pageantry in cities, and minstrels' shows in noblemen's households, college halls, and royal courts. These performance traditions later were absorbed by the commercial theatre of the sixteenth century. However, unlike Elizabethan professional theatre, the late medieval entertainment was closely connected with seasonal festivities and major ceremonies: it was sponsored by the royalty, nobility, landed gentry, or civic corporations and offered free to the spectators.

The sixteenth-century common players broke with medieval traditions. They began by travelling around and offered their shows whenever and wherever a venue was available, whether in a lord's house or in an inn yard. After the building of playhouses in London in the 1570s, performances could be held any day of the week, for several months a year. To those who believed dramatic entertainment should be tied to festivities only, the common players performing regularly "were living in a state of perpetual holiday" (Bradbrook 45). The transformation of dramatic entertainment from an occasional to a regular event was a function of the changing meaning of time. Leisure in preindustrial societies "was closely tied to the agricultural cycle and was far more irregular than in our rationalized industrial society" (Cross 20). However, in the towns where trade was the main activity a different pattern of work and recreation could develop; the rhythm of six days of work followed by one day of rest was more regular and yielded more work days a year. Even puritans recognized the necessity of balancing work and rest (Cross 29). From the point of view of professional actors, though this new pattern meant fewer days set aside for rest and recreation, it indirectly severed the tie between festivities and entertainment, which was a positive change for them. They, too, could work more regularly. Indeed, some troupes even performed on Sundays.

The commercial activity of common players also broke the connection between entertainment and patronage by the rich and powerful. Traditionally, entertainment was "the private 'Offering' to a superior from his servants or dependents" (Bradbrook 46). The servants could expect largesse from their lords in recognition of their effort, but they should not think of their offering as a money-spinner. Indeed, the concept of patronage continued well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the professional theatre troupes remained nominally the household servants of their noble or royal patrons.

For these powerful patrons, entertainment was part of their hospitality programme, an obligation to provide food, drink, and amusement for their guests and inferiors especially during festive periods. The hosts might not be personally interested in the kinds of entertainment provided. Queen Elizabeth presided over shows by players, acrobats, bear keepers, and dancers; she watched a performance by the Chamberlain's Men on the eve of Essex's execution. King James watched a series of plays during the New Year celebrations of 1613 even though he had just lost his son and heir less than two months before. The two monarchs were indifferent to what they watched; they were simply adhering to the "sense of the condescending obligations of magnificence": holiday rituals had to go on whatever the circumstances (Barroll 97-98). It was a privilege and an obligation for those in power to provide hospitality and patronize entertainers. However, when common players charged the spectators for seeing their shows in a commercial

setting, they made every paying customer their patron.

Dramatic performance, originating in festivities and associated with days off work, was naturally disapproved of by puritans. Consequently, the players' work—the preparation for and the actual presentation of entertainment—was regarded as idleness rather than work, however arduous it might be. Worse, they were said to induce idleness in the audience, drawing people away from honest work to indulge in pleasure. From idleness it was a short step away from sin. The spate of antitheatrical writing, first in the 1570s and 1580s and later in the early seventeenth century, testified to the anxiety felt by the deeply religious when the masses were not at work.

We do not know how many people in early modern England shared the antitheatrical polemicists' sentiments. But local authorities' opposition to dramatic performances is well documented. The lord mayor and aldermen of the City of London made several attempts to restrict theatrical activities in London on various grounds, not all religious ones. Their arguments won the approval of the Privy Council, which led to the restriction of public performances to two adult companies in the capital in the 1590s. In some regions in the province the officials also tended more and more to pay travelling troupes to go away, especially after the 1620s. Some of the reasons were moral and religious, involving puritans' hostility to both playing and the players. There were also practical reasons for restricting performances: for instance, to prevent the spread of diseases and public disorder. During the economic depression of the 1620s local authorities not only cut down on payments to players but were also concerned to protect the poor from wasting money on entertainment (Keenan 179-80).

The vehemence of antitheatrical diatribes may give us the impression that players were singled out as society's scapegoats: their very visibility made them the easy targets of criticism, not unlike today's celebrities whose every move is watched and commented on by the media. Indeed even today being an actor is still seen as somewhat outside the normal way of life. E. C. Hughes observes:

[The occupations of artists and entertainers] seem to require, if they are to produce the very things for which society will give them a living of sorts (or, in some cases, unheard-of opulence), at least some people who deviate widely from the norms more or less adhered to and firmly espoused by other people. Their license is, however, periodically in a parlous state, and there seems no guarantee that it will not, at any moment, be attacked. (30)

The Elizabethan common players had to obtain an official license in order to perform. The formal license also implicitly licensed them to do certain things that others were not allowed. The players were permitted to pretend to be someone else and to dress as their roles required. Thus they were constantly flouting sartorial rules of the time, albeit only on the stage: commoners put on aristocratic or even royal outfits and men wore women's clothes. In addition, as Hughes remarks, "many occupations cannot be carried out without guilty knowledge." The priest, for instance, must become an expert in sin to be able to hear confessions and give penance (26). The players, too, must possess sufficient knowledge about the minds and manners of princes, tradesmen, criminals, and madmen so as to represent them convincingly on the stage. Of course, it was understood by all that the pretence and disguise was framed within the theatrical presentation. But all the criticism of players and playing proved that their license was often found suspect, resented, and attacked.

By 1594 when the Chamberlain's Men and the Admiral's Men were given a quasi-monopoly of performing drama in London, the common players were an established presence in the English society. Professionalism developed as a result of changes in the conditions of playing. The strolling players of interludes in the early Tudor period had to



be much more versatile than the amateur players of medieval religious drama. As they gave performances more than occasionally, they needed a variety of technical skills from dancing, fencing, and acrobatics to mimicry and declamation. Because of the small size of the troupe of normally four players, each of them had to be able to play several roles. The most important skill that marked their professionalism was the ability to manage their audiences: "how to obtain their attention in the first instance, how to maintain it thereafter, knowledge of how to make them laugh or cry, knowledge of what would distract or bore them, how not to lose their sympathy and how to avoid arousing their active displeasure" (Wickham 190). Itinerant players learned to adapt their shows to the demands of different playing spaces, occasions, and audiences.

The appearance in London in the 1570s of permanent playhouses furthered the quality of stage performance by first improving the lives of common players: "For the players London meant living in one place instead of travelling and more important, enjoying a steady income" (Gurr 28). The troupe could also enlarge its membership, which meant less doubling of parts, and use more elaborate props than was practical for touring. When Henry Carey, the Lord Chamberlain, decided in 1594 to tighten the control over playing troupes in the capital, he created two companies, allocated to each of them half of the best players and plays then available and a playhouse close to the city, and banned the rest of the players from working in London. Thus the top players of the time were given the security to develop their business, free from the pressure of cutthroat competition with rivals.<sup>1</sup>

The Chamberlain's Men, of which Shakespeare was a sharer and principal playwright, did not waste their privileged position in the theatrical business. Like their chief rivals the Admiral's Men, they adopted a commercially effective repertory system, paying attention to theatregoers' changing tastes. On the whole, they played more comedies than tragedies. But when a type of tragedy was in vogue, e.g. the revenge tragedy, they produced similar items. A dramatic formula or a subject that proved popular would generate serials (Knutson 7). They scheduled a daily rotating programme, combining new plays and revivals. This practice made good commercial sense. New plays were more lucrative but more expensive to stage; doing revivals allowed the players time to rehearse a new offering.

As theatre companies became better organized, they also took on more responsibility of training young recruits for the job. It is not clear where famous Elizabethan clowns like Richard Tarlton, William Kemp, and Robert Armin learned their skills. When Tarlton performed with early companies, he was already an accomplished clown. Kemp moved from one company to another and often performed as a solo comedian, famous for his morris dance. Armin, who played many fool roles which Shakespeare wrote for him, including Feste in *Twelfth Night* and Fool in *King Lear*, was a goldsmith's apprentice before taking up acting. However, some members of the King's men, such as John Heminges and John Shank, did undertake the training of boy players. Heminges was a freeman of the Grocers' Company, and Shank one of the Weavers' Company. The apprentice system was apparently quite flexible so that a freeman of a company could actually train his apprentices in a different trade. The apprentices of Heminges and Shank were, technically, trainee grocers and weavers, but the training they received was in acting (Aston 77-78). Boy companies, such as Children of Paul's and the Children of the

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<sup>1</sup> The two companies' quasi-monopoly of London theatrical scene turned out to be rather short-lived. In the first decade of the seventeenth century, they were joined by a third adult company, Worcester's Men, and then a fourth, the Duke of York's. The decade also saw the temporary popularity of two boy companies, Paul's Boys and the Chapel Children. See Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, 49.

Chapel Royal, were another training ground for young players, trained by the choirmasters in singing and acting. Former boy company members might later join adult companies. The lead player in the Children of the Chapel Royal, Nathan Field, joined the King's men in his late twenties; he played Face in *The Alchemist* opposite Richard Burbage's Subtle (Astington 197). Apprenticeship in acting provided the companies with a supply of young players to succeed older ones; skills and knowledge could be passed on to a new generation.

### Shakespeare and the Players' Profession

As a member of the Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare was working in a financially secure environment, relatively speaking. A steady job could mean that one could better afford to invest time and energy in improving skills. As mentioned earlier, early modern physicians and lawyers were beginning to assert their prestige by claiming trained expertise; it is possible that licensed players could also seek distinction by emphasizing their specialized skills. Commercial theatre had to persuade the society that its product was of a higher quality. This was not necessarily easy to achieve for the players: civic and private theatrical entertainments were still popular, and acting was regarded as within everyone's ability.

*Theatrum mundi*, the medieval notion that "God and Lucifer viewed mankind's brief struggle in the theatre of mortal existence as audiences watched actors strut and gesticulate upon the stage" (Wickham 65), came down to the Renaissance and was famously summarized in these lines: "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players" (2.7.139-40) from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Early modern dramas feature plenty of characters who see themselves as players on the stage of life. Coriolanus realizes towards the end of his career the hollowness of his role: "Like a dull actor now / I have forgot my part, and I am out, / Even to a full disgrace" (*Coriolanus*, 5.3.40-42). In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the heroine, believing that her husband and children are all dead, loses the will to go on living: "I account this world a tedious theatre, / For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will" (4.1.84-85). Allusions to playing, especially in tragedies, tend to portray the activity as something indiscriminately imposed on individuals right from their birth. As the grief-stricken Lear remarks on the heath, "when we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (King Lear, 4.6.182-83).

If all the men and women are players, then playing cannot be an occupation. For, according to E. C. Hughes, an occupation "consists in part in the implied or explicit license that some people claim and are given" to do certain things that others are not expected or allowed to do (25). Society does not need or allow everyone to do the same job. However, the principle of division of labour does not apply when playing is seen, not as a form of work, but as a metaphor for a condition of human existence.

Unlike the reluctant players on the stage of life, some characters in Shakespeare's dramas do voluntarily choose a role to play in the way ordinary people take up a trade. Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Viola in *Twelfth Night* all don male clothing temporarily and pass themselves off successfully as boys. They do not seem required to seek anyone's permission first. Given the strict Elizabethan sumptuary laws, these heroines enjoy a degree of liberty beyond ordinary people's wildest dreams. Their success in inventing a different identity for themselves is so apparently unreal that it can only happen in a fiction. In real life, only actors are allowed and expected to assume different identities, which is the license of their occupation. The cross-dressing heroines and other characters skilled in

disguising themselves, by the sheer artificiality of their actions, remind the audience of the theatre and players.

The abundance of metatheatrical devices in early modern plays has often been interpreted as a method of reinforcing the ancient notion of *theatrum mundi*, making the audience see their real life as transient, insubstantial, and illusory as a stage play. At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck suggests the audience consider the whole play "but a dream." And Prospero in *The Tempest* dismisses his actors as "spirits" and the spectacle he produces as "baseless fabric," "insubstantial pageant." A play is a dream, and players are shadows: the playwright highlights the ephemeral nature of theatrical performance. Such a nature stands in contrast to a solid, income-generating occupation. Yet, it is the creation of temporary illusions that marks the players' work, a service recognized by the society. The metatheatrical devices in plays could be seen as the theatre industry's self-advertisement, drawing attention to the peculiar nature of its product.

Although "all the men and women" are players, it does not follow that all are equally competent. Clearly some skills are required if a disguise is to be successful. The cross-dressing heroines are knowledgeable about male apparel and body language and capable of a good imitation. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* even boasts that she has up her sleeve "a thousand raw tricks" (3.4.77) that she can practice like a bragging young man. The success of Portia and others in their disguise is unbelievable because where they might have acquired the skills is unknown: the technique seems to come naturally.

However, in several instances Shakespeare does show that performing before an audience requires practice. Viola in *Twelfth Night*, ordered by her master to deliver a speech in praise of Olivia, tells the lady: "I took great pains to study it" (1.5.160). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there is even a rehearsal of a play; we can see the amount of work that goes into preparing for a performance. First, a script is written and the actors are given their "parts." Then they need to learn their lines in private while the leader of the troupe prepares a list of the props they will use. Finally, they gather for a group rehearsal. Each actor also needs take care of his own costumes. Philostrate, Theseus's master of the revels, reports to the duke that the Mechanicals "have toiled their unbreathed memories" (5.1.74) with a play which they "conned with cruel pain" (5.1.80) in order to perform it at court. The Mechanicals' performance may be ridiculously crude; yet, even such a simple show cannot be mounted without the players' investment of time as well as mental and physical labour.

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare gives us a glimpse of what professional players of his days were capable of. At Hamlet's request, the First Player agrees to give a performance the following day of a play in his troupe's repertoire, with some dozen additional lines devised by the prince. The adaptability and readiness only comes with experience and marks the difference between professionals and amateurs.

Another skill noted with amazement by Hamlet is the professional tragedian's ability to coordinate his physical features to express imagined passion:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
That from her working all his visage wanned,  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit? (2.2.503-09)

The skill is extraordinary because the cause of tears, broken voice, and contorted face is only a fiction. Coming from a person who insists that he does not know how to "seem," this description of the professional player's technique may sound a criticism of the

pretence, deceit, and insincerity involved in acting. Nevertheless, Hamlet does not confuse, as antitheatricalists often do, the techniques of a profession with the moral principles of the professional. If acting requires feigning an emotion, then the actor must feign it. He has confidence in the professional competence of the players. The “seeming” that Hamlet abhors is in the non-players who hide the truth from him.

Though Hamlet is amazed by the player’s ability to feign an emotion without real causes, we may doubt whether Shakespeare’s audiences were equally amazed. What the First Player does is no more than what Renaissance rhetorical theories taught orators to do. Quintilian, the ancient Roman author who remained the dominant authority on rhetoric down to the seventeenth century, advises orators to feel the emotions themselves if they want to stir the emotions of others. And the orators can be moved by visions, “fantastic . . . daydreams . . . whereby things absent are presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes.” When an orator strongly identify with the emotions, “his spirit has sufficient power over his body to alter its physical states, inwardly and outwardly” (Roach 24-25). In other words, the First Player’s tears, originating in vivid imagination, come close to a product of genuine feeling. As Quintilian’s rhetoric was taught in schools and universities, anyone with a little education in Latin would have some knowledge of this discipline. Therefore, Shakespeare’s educated audience would probably not find the First Player’s performance “monstrous”: rather, if he failed to weep convincingly, his professional competence would be seriously questioned.

Hamlet’s advice to the players to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action” and not to overstep “the modesty of nature” has been taken as indicating a turn toward a more naturalistic style of acting. In the sixteenth century “acting” referred to the orator’s use of gestures; what the common player did was “playing.” By the beginning of the seventeenth century a new term, “personation,” was coined to describe the players’ art of individual characterization as opposed to orators’ art of declamation. The change in terminology suggests that by the turn of the seventeenth century characterization became “the chief requisite of the successful player” (Gurr 99-100). Judging by Shakespeare’s many psychologically complicated characters, perhaps the playwright was nudging his fellow players into “personating,” encouraging the audience to notice the character more than the actor.

In his book *Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice* Robert Weimann sees the shift of Elizabethan performance practice toward “personation” and the King’s Men’s move into the Blackfriars theatre as manifestations of a process of social stratification and cultural differentiation which began in the sixteenth century in Western Europe. The process was marked by the withdrawal of the upper classes from popular culture. The emergence in London of the more exclusive private theatres provided the educated theatregoers a place to watch a performance away from the masses. In dramatic writing, the scripted characterization imposed discipline on the player’s performance, confining his self-display to the impersonation of a character. The presentational mode of the minstrels, strolling players, and famous clowns was challenged by “an increasingly dominant and ultimately more exclusive regime of literacy in dramatic representations” (Weimann 109).

Upper-class theatregoers did not stop visiting public theatres. Nor did the naturalistic style of personation become the only acting style. But theatres gradually developed their “product identity” in the early seventeenth century (Shepherd 63). The Blackfriars was known for satirical comedies; those who wanted an old-fashioned heroic play could go to the Red Bull, for instance. Hamlet may dislike clowns who speak “more than is set down for them” and players who “tear a passion to totters,” but these kinds of performers can certainly find a welcome audience at some venues. Instead of aiming at versatility as early

strolling players did, players in the seventeenth century might find it useful to be known as specialists of particular styles in order to attract target audiences. Specialism is a criterion of professionalization. Common players were turning into theatre specialists.

### Conclusion

The common players of sixteenth-century England turned an occasional, communal act of recreation into an occupation. The time was ripe for such a transformation: the rhythm of work and rest was becoming more regular, and, increasingly, leisure was spent individually. Those living in cities and especially in the capital did not need to wait for the Christmas season to see a show, paid for by their superiors. There was no shortage of occasional spectacles sponsored by the Court or civic authorities such as royal processions and the lord mayor's shows. However, commercially based pastimes, including theatregoing and bearbaiting, provided people additional choices of entertainment. Unless interrupted by official bans (often because of the outbreak of the plague), these pastimes were regularly offered.

Though an official license gave players a legal status, they did not have a monopoly of theatrical entertainment. Private theatricals continued at Court, great men's houses, universities, and the Inns of Court. Nor were players the arbiters of dramatic excellence: they must submit to the audience's judgment. Acting was recognized as a skill that improved with practice, and some people were deemed more skilled than others. However, players could not claim esoteric knowledge about acting since they shared the principles of acting with orators.

Shakespeare's representation of players' dependence on aristocratic patronage lags behind the reality of the commercial success of licensed companies. The continuation of the medieval *theatrum mundi* motif also goes against the trend toward playmaking by professionals. Yet, in suggesting players' unique license to change identities and create theatrical illusions, pointing out the skills required to create such illusions, and not to mention composing psychologically complex characters for lead actors of his company, Shakespeare affirms that acting was on its way to become a profession.



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